



Before they hit the road ...

Getting a food truck fit for service

BY KRIS CORONADO

It's hard to get Lee Campbell to sit still. In his Manassas warehouse, the 54-year-old is constantly on the move, checking on an electric generator being lifted into one truck and greeting a customer who drives up in another. After he launched East Coast Custom Coaches with a silent partner in 2006, business was steady for the retired firefighter, who typically did custom work on RVs and military vehicles. Then came the area's food truck boom: "It's gotten so big ... I'm having another shop installed on my lot," he says.

Today, East Coast outfits 45 to 50 food trucks a year (mostly used FedEx trucks), with 60 percent of those heading to the D.C. area. Past clients include Borinquen Lunch Box, D.C. Empanadas and Curbside Cupcakes.

Campbell is less concerned about a truck's menu than he is about making sure the vehicle is up to code. Here, Campbell details the ins and outs of not only making a food truck, but also making it safe.

Converting a used truck into a **food truck** can be cheaper than buying a new one: "The new trucks are \$20,000 to \$30,000 just to buy the truck," Campbell says. "These are under \$9,000 used." Outfitting can take several weeks and cost \$17,000 to \$40,000.



When converting trucks, Campbell installs a **Plexiglas serving window**, which is safer than one made of plate glass (as the red truck below originally had). The awning doubles as a window cover.



An aluminum polished diamond plate **floor** is safer than a smooth surface because "it has grooves," Campbell says. "... If there's water underneath, you can't slip."



Campbell replaced the truck's construction generator with a **commercial-grade model**. Unlike a construction generator, this one produces electricity on a closed loop, helping to prevent electrocution.



Liquid propane tanks with only one exterior shell are prone to explosions, Campbell says, so he generally equips trucks with a **dual-chambered propane tank**.



This Siamese **valve**, which can hold three fire hoses, was on the front bumper of the red truck but was moved to the roof. According to regulations, a food truck must be no longer than 18½ feet. This one was 22 feet long, "so we had to ... take the front end off," Campbell says.

Manuel Alfaro of Fairfax bought this vehicle, which had been a food truck in Connecticut, last summer and brought it to East Coast for an overhaul. The firetruck-themed **El Fuego** began service in Tysons Corner and the District in October.



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