

# Wheel of Fortune

By Juli Nessett-Wilcoxon

A Road Well-Traveled with Mobile Kitchens



Stewart's Mobile Concepts, Huntington Station, N.Y.

Caterers have come a long way, baby, and not just in terms of improved style and quality. Those learned in the art of food gratification are making their way to off-premise events with full kitchens in tow, which allows for consistency and better time management, permitting caterers an opportunity to take on larger jobs they may not have attempted. Now, they have a chance to increase profit margins.

Officials from Stewart's Mobile Concepts in Huntington Station, N.Y., Carlin Manufacturing in Fresno, Calif. and OK's Cascade Co. of Bellevue, Wash. recently shared some finer details of the mobile-kitchen concept.

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## MOBILE kitchens

Each company agrees that mobile kitchens allow for added flexibility in terms of where an event takes place and what can be prepared.

Carlin's Director of Marketing Bob Farrar says nontraditional food service events have paved the way for the growing popularity of mobile kitchens.

"Now people may want to be at a historical monument, and you can't change the historical monument to build a kitchen there, so you need mobile," he says.

Stewart's Director of Sales Keith Futerman adds that flexibility is key. "[Mobile kitchens] offer you the flexibility to do events at pretty much any remote site or situation. For simplicity, caterers don't want to have to bring all the individual pieces of equipment for every function, so this way, you can bring the whole kitchen instead of delivering separate ovens, separate stovetops and cooking under a tent. This way, you're working out of a professional kitchen."

OK's Director of Events Lee Stoll says mobile kitchens allow caterers to grab those bigger event bids at off-site venues. "It allows you to cook right onsite with all the appropriate equipment. The thing that makes them great is you're able to use them in a remote location, because they are self-contained."

While each company has a different design for the kitchens it manufactures and/or rents, some basic components exist in nearly all remote kitchens, such as sinks, gas ranges with hoods, ovens, refrigeration units, storage space and prep tables.

What is essential in a mobile kitchen differs from caterer to caterer.

"What I try to find out from a caterer is what type of parties you are going to cater," says Farrar. "If you are doing everything from casual barbecues up to weddings, you will need fairly sophisticated equipment."

Futerman says he views sinks as the most important equipment on board,



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## MOBILE kitchens

OK's Cascade Co. of Bellevue, Wash.



although he agrees caterers have their own needs. He adds, however, that health and fire codes, sinks and fire suppression systems are essential.

Stoll agrees that sinks and fire suppression systems are important, especially in areas of the United States where health regulations are more rigorous.

When building mobile kitchens for clients, Farrar says he assists in the design process and his company tries to mirror an existing kitchen in a mobile reproduction. "We just did a trailer for Panda Express, and it's specifically made with the equipment they use. So, an employee can come out of a Panda Express out of

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Fresno, Calif., if the [mobile] kitchen is up here for an event and say, 'Hey, this is just like the kitchen in my restaurant.'"

Futerman says he works along the same lines during the manufacturing process. "We definitely can build a kitchen to [the client's] specs," he says. "If they want a kitchen dedicated to making pizzas, we can do that."

OK's deals strictly with leasing mobile kitchens, but Stoll says that with enough lead time, his company will work with caterers to accommodate special equipment needs.

Futerman and Farrar say they follow state health standards for the client's respective state. "Health departments are being very tough on your ability to cook

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## MOBILE kitchens

out in the open today," says Farrar. "They are terrified of food-borne illness, and I think they are justified. So, all of our kitchens are health-code compliant for the specific area they are in."

Futerman adds he wants his kitchens to be compliant to the most rigorous health codes. "Typically, I will look at the most difficult codes in the country and build to the most stringent of those rules so I can make sure it will pass within whatever state I'm going to bring the trailer into."

Some mobile kitchens are designed to be completely self-sufficient wherever they are. Others may require a refrigerated truck to accompany them.

Power sources also can vary. Certain kitchens are manufactured to run on a combination of generators and propane, while others are designed to obtain power from landlines.

Some kitchens are equipped with water tanks, while others need to be connected to a water source.

Futerman says his kitchens are designed to work either as a self-sufficient unit or as one that needs supplemental power, refrigeration or water. Farrar says his company has designed a mobile kitchen for U.S. Army use, and it runs completely on generated power. OK's kitchens generally use propane, although some contain generators for refrigeration, lighting and hood fans.

Cost for a mobile kitchen can range anywhere from \$100,000 to \$300,000. On average, Farrar says Carlin's kitchens will run about \$147,000; Futerman says Stewart's range between \$150,000 to \$200,000.

If the price tag is at the lower end of the average, the buyer can expect to receive a smaller step van or a 20-foot towable trailer, while the high end of the price range would secure a 53-foot semi-trailer kitchen with all the bells and whistles.

In terms of rentals, Carlin's will rent its Special Events Kitchen, which can be



pulled by a high-performance SUV, for roughly \$1,700 a month. Carlin rents for a minimum of three months through its affiliate company, Kitchens to Go ([www.k-t-g.com](http://www.k-t-g.com)). This kitchen is designed to serve approximately 350 people. Its

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sides open up for caterers to work around the outside, rather than internally.

OK's generally rents with a one-month minimum, and the costs range from \$6,000 to \$10,000 per month.

If you don't need a mobile kitchen that long, Stewart's will rent on a daily and a weekly basis, with offerings that range from \$1,200 to \$1,500 a day and \$3,600 to \$5,000 a week.

Equipment found in mobile kitchens generally is commercial standard, which allows for high use during a longer period of time. "We try to build our kitchens for durability because we want them to last," says Futerman. "I'm flexible and build to [caterers'] needs, and you have a big range in terms of equipment."

Farrar adds that Carlin uses [name brands] that caterers know, but it is willing to change at the buyer's request. "Some people, will say, 'How do we cut the price down?' Well, you can buy cheap equipment, but there is a trade off to that," Farrar cautions. "In five years, depending on use, it may not be worth much."

He adds that buying a mobile kitchen is a good investment for consistency, which can translate into volume. "I think the most important thing it does for caterers is it allows them to give a consistent product out," Farrar explains. "Every chef in the country will tell you, 'If I can cook in a consistent environment, that



Stewart's Mobile Concepts, Huntington Station, N.Y.

product will be the same Dec. 21 as it was on Dec. 4,' and that's what gives them more jobs.

"I also think caterers who have a mobile kitchen are going to do a much higher volume," he continues. "If you're going to do something outside or at a building without a kitchen, you are limited as to what you can do. A caterer who comes along with a 36-foot fifth wheel, who can crank out 1,000 four-star, four-course meals, he's going to get the job."

Futerman adds that mobile kitchens are a throw back to the idea of flexibility

in catering. "It gives them the ability to pull off an event they wouldn't have been able to pull off if they didn't have a mobile kitchen," he says. "It gives them the ability to prepare food in a clean and safe environment, and gives them the ability to produce food of unmatched quality in any type of situation because you are able to prepare it onsite."

For information about Carlin Manufacturing, go to [www.carlinmfg.com](http://www.carlinmfg.com); Stewart's Mobile Concepts, visit [www.stewartsmobile.com](http://www.stewartsmobile.com); or OK's Cascade Company, go to [www.oks.com](http://www.oks.com). ◻