



Street Savors of Thiruvananthapuram: Unveiling the Tapestry of Urban Food Culture through Food Wagons

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Abstract: Food is a fundamental aspect of human life and culture. It provides nourishment, sustenance, and pleasure to people around the world. Food is deeply intertwined with culture. Different regions and communities have unique culinary traditions, ingredients, and preparation methods that reflect their history, values, and identity. Food is not only a vital aspect of human life but also a significant commercial item in a complex and multifaceted industry. The commercialisation of food involves a wide range of activities, from production and processing to distribution and marketing, and consumer preferences, regulatory standards, and global trade dynamics influence it.

Urban food culture is a dynamic and ever-evolving aspect of city life, reflecting the diverse culinary traditions, social interactions, and economic activities of urban areas. In recent years, food wagon eateries have gained prominence in many cities worldwide, contributing significantly to the urban food landscape. This study comes under the interdisciplinary field of Urban Studies, and this paper investigates the role of food wagon eateries in Thiruvananthapuram, shaping urban food culture, focusing on their impact on culinary diversity, social dynamics, economic development, and preserving culinary traditions.

Index terms: Food wagon, urban food culture, nightlife, lifestyle.

I.INTRODUCTION

Urban Food Culture and its Significance

Urban food culture is a city or metropolitan area's unique cuisine and culinary traditions. It is shaped by a variety of factors, including the city's history, geography, economy, and demographics. Urban food cultures are often characterised by their diversity, reflecting the many different cultures and cuisines in cities. Cities are home to people from all over the world, and this diversity is reflected in the available food. Urban food cultures are often characterised by a wide range of cuisines, from traditional to fusion to experimental. They are typically very accessible, with various dining options available at all prices. This includes restaurants, cafes, street food stalls, and food wagons. Urban residents are often busy and on the go, so that they can demand convenient food options. This has led to the rise of fast food, delivery services, and prepared meals. In recent years, they are increasingly focused on sustainability. This includes using local and seasonal ingredients, reducing waste, and supporting ethical food production practices.

Some examples of urban food cultures include cities like New York, which is known for its diverse food scene, with everything from Michelin-starred restaurants to hole-in-the-wall ethnic eateries. The city is also home to several iconic food items, such as bagels, pizza, and cheesecake. [See Figure 1] Tokyo is another city with a diverse food culture influenced by both Japanese and international cuisines. The city is known for its sushi, ramen, takoyaki and tempura, and unique street food scene. [See Figure 2] Mexico City is home to one of the

wealthiest and most diverse food cultures in the world. The city's cuisine is influenced by indigenous Mexican cultures, as well as Spanish, African, and Asian cuisines. Popular dishes include tacos, burritos, and mole poblano. [See Figure 3] London has a long and rich culinary history, and its food culture is constantly evolving. The city is known for its traditional British dishes, such as fish, chips, and Sunday roast. However, London is also home to many international cuisines, reflecting the city's diverse population. [See Figure 4]

Urban food culture is a dynamic and ever-changing landscape. It is shaped by the people living in cities and the global trends influencing our eating. Urban food cultures are essential in our lives, providing nourishment, enjoyment, and a sense of community.

II. Historical Evolution of Food Wagon Eateries

The history of food wagon eateries dates back to the ancient world. Street vendors selling food from carts and stalls have been around for centuries. Some of the earliest evidence of food carts comes from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the Middle Ages, food carts became increasingly popular in Europe. They were often used to sell food and drinks to pilgrims and travellers. Food carts were also used to sell food to people living in cities with fewer traditional restaurants. The food truck as we know it today emerged in the United States in the 19th century. One of the earliest known food trucks was the chuck wagon, which fed cowboys and other workers on the American frontier. Chuck wagons were typically horse-drawn and carried various food supplies, including beans, bacon, coffee, and flour. In the late 19th century, food carts appeared in American cities. These carts were often used to sell ice cream, hot dogs, and other simple foods. In the early 20th century, food trucks became more sophisticated and offered various food options. (Nightingale. 2014)

Food trucks became even more popular in the United States after World War II. Many people had become accustomed to eating on the go during the war. We can see the character Mother Courage with her food truck moving along the battlefield in the play "Mother Courage and Her Children" written by Bertolt Brecht. After the war, this trend continued, and food trucks became a popular way for people to get a quick and affordable meal. In the 1970s and 1980s, food trucks experienced a decline in popularity. This was due in part to the rise of fast-food chains. However, in recent years, food trucks have made a comeback. This is partly due to the growing popularity of gourmet food and the desire for people to have more food options. Today, food trucks are a famous and essential part of the food industry in many countries worldwide.

III. Food Wagon Phenomenon in Urban Settings

Food wagons offer a variety of food options, from traditional to exotic, and are typically affordable and convenient. There are a number of factors that have contributed to the growth of the food wagon phenomenon in urban settings. One factor is the rise of the gourmet food movement. Food wagons are often at the forefront of this movement, offering innovative and unique dishes that cannot be found in traditional restaurants. Another factor contributing to the growth of the food wagon phenomenon is the demand for convenience. Food wagons are a convenient way to get a quick and affordable meal. They are often located in busy areas, such as office parks and downtown areas. They offer a wide variety of food options, from traditional to exotic. Food trucks are also known for being affordable and convenient. Finally, the popularity of social media has also helped to promote food wagons. Food wagons often use social media to announce their locations and menus, which helps to attract customers.

IV. Urban Food Culture in Thiruvananthapuram

Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, has a rich and vibrant urban food culture. The city is home to a wide variety of restaurants serving traditional Kerala cuisine and Indian and international cuisine. However, what makes Thiruvananthapuram's urban food culture unique is its street food scene. Thiruvananthapuram's streets are lined with food carts and stalls selling delicious, affordable snacks and meals. Thiruvananthapuram's most famous traditional food items include Chaya, Pazhampori, Vada, Samosa, Idli, Dosa, Appam, Puttu, beef, chicken, etc. Regarding the youth's favourite menu, Shawarma, Momos, Shawai, Meat grills, noodles, etc., rank high.

V. Mapping Food Wagon Locations

Thiruvananthapuram's street food culture is not just about the food itself. It is also about the experience of eating on the streets. Street food stalls in Thiruvananthapuram are often crowded and bustling with activity. The location of these food stalls and food wagons is lined based on the site of the city landscape. We can see them near museums, art galleries, parks, educational institutions, and IT parks. People from all walks of life come together to enjoy a delicious meal and socialise. Street food is an integral part of Thiruvananthapuram's urban food culture. It allows people to connect with their community and experience the city's unique culinary heritage.

For this study, I have selected four densely populated and food-wagon-rich locations in Thiruvananthapuram. By using the word 'food wagon,' I'm implying trucks which serve food.

1. **Kowdiar Route:** Kowdiar is one of Thiruvananthapuram's most expensive and cleanest localities. Kowdiar is also home to several other important landmarks, including The Raj Bhavan, the official residence of the Governor of Kerala, Christ Nagar School, Trivandrum Golf Club, Trivandrum Tennis Club etc.

2. **Kuravankonam Route:** Kuravankonam is a densely populated residential area in the heart of Thiruvananthapuram city, which is well-connected to other parts of Thiruvananthapuram city by public transportation. Due to these factors, there are several food wagons in this area where people buy food from these eateries after work, school, gym, and others by public transport to taste recommended items.

3. **Vellayambalam Route:** Vellayambalam is a residential neighbourhood with a mix of old and new houses. It has several government offices, including the Kerala State Archives, the Kerala State Museum, and the Kerala State Library. Vellayambalam is also home to the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple, one of Kerala's most important Hindu temples.

4. **Vazhuthacaud Route:** Vazhuthacaud is a commercial and educational neighbourhood. It is home to several schools, including the Government College for Women, the Cottonhill Girls Higher Secondary School, and the Tagore Theatre. Vazhuthacaud is also home to the Kerala Forest Department headquarters. The Vellayambalam-Vazhuthacaud Road, a major thoroughfare in Thiruvananthapuram, connects the two neighbourhoods.

The study will be based on the responses collected from food wagon owners and customers through interviews and surveys.

VI. Analysing the Food Wagon Offerings

The trend of 'kitchen on wheels', where food is prepared live and sold using a vehicle such as a modified truck, has been in the cityscape of Thiruvananthapuram for about five years. According to the manager of Istanbul Rolls and Grills, a popular food wagon in Kowdiar, they were the first in Thiruvananthapuram to open a food wagon. [see Figure 16] When the pandemic struck the city, almost every restaurant was forced to shut down. The dine-in option was unavailable, remaining the only option for take-outs. This paved the way for the two brothers to open a moving food delivery business parked on the roadside so the customers could buy them and leave quickly, adhering to the COVID-19 protocol.

Following the success of Istanbul Rolls and Grills, many food wagons started businesses in different parts of the city. Another food wagon named Turkish Ottoman Rolls and Grills is on the same road in Kuravankonam. They also focus on shawarma rolls, which are easy to eat while standing or in a car without producing food waste. Their menu differs from Istanbul Rolls and Grills with Turkish masala mix. [see Figure 17]

While mapping the food wagon-rich locations, I could understand that most are situated near schools, offices and residential areas. This particular food wagon was opposite the Muthoot group apartments. A gym was next to it, and the main road connected to other residential areas. This Kowdiar- Kuravankonam main road connects with other major cities like Palayam, Vellayambalam, Peroorkkada, etc.; thus, people who pass this road are tempted to stop and try their evening snacks by the lights and mouth-watering aroma.

The next destination was the Vellayambalam route. A line of food wagons started from the Police headquarters to the Government School for Girls, Cottonhill. Unlike the Kowdiar- Kuravankonam route, we can see modern and traditional food options here. Rolls Shack's wagon provides charcoal shawarma, an authentic and healthy cooking style compared to fire-grilled shawarma. [see Figure 18] They also have three homemade sauces, which are both healthy and varied from the usual ketchup and mayonnaise.

Tattukada, a food wagon that offers traditional menus like Appam, Puttu, Porotta, Chicken Curry, Beef Roast, Chicken Thoran, Tea and Coffee, is operating next to Rolls Shack. [See Figure 19] When I observed the types of customers, Tattukada had more middle-aged people coming to try these traditional food items. For some of them, this could be their dinner. Some customers were workers from other states who came to get a budget-friendly dinner. The customers of Rolls Shack, Istanbul and Turkish Rolls and Grills were primarily youths, office workers, students and a few middle-aged people.

The newly opened Manaveeyam Veedhi at Vellayambalam is an icon of urban culture and nightlife. It is a cultural hub of Youths, writers, music bands, skaters, painters and public speakers. They gather around and engage in different programs like debates, band performances, speeches, skating performances, magic shows, etc. These activities last from three to four in the morning. Therefore, this is a perfect space for a food wagon business. Irani Food Truck, Payasakkada and other small street food stalls are lining the road. Irani Food Truck offers heavy food items like Biryani, Fried Rice, Chicken and Beef curries and fries as their programs are held late at night. These food items take the role of their dinner. The wagon owners are smart enough to plan their menu for heavy meals as these programs need more energy to participate. Like me, people with a sweet tooth can have different types of Payasam from the Payasakkada as dessert.

Lebanese Rolls and Grills at Vazhuthacaud had Chicken and Beef shawarmas like Istanbul and Turkish Rolls and Grills. This wagon is next to the Cottonhill School, opposite the Church and an apartment complex. There was another wagon selling traditional menus like Tattukada. This was close to the bus stop and Sri Mulam Club.

From the responses of the customers and food wagon owners, I could appreciate that Shawarma is the most sought-after dish, and that's what these wagons sell the most. When asked about the diversity of food offerings in food wagons, they responded that they provide different types of shawarma. Regarding the traditional side, Porotta and Beef Roast is the best-selling item on the menu. For Keralites, Porotta and Beef Roast are considered as their state food. No other food items can beat this combination. As a Keralite, I can guarantee to that statement.

Thus, we can confirm that Thiruvananthapuram is rich in its diverse food culture. Customers from every part of the city and social conditions are finding a home in food wagon offerings. With quality food available at affordable rates, students, especially hostellers, are daily consumers of such eateries. [See Figures 13, 14 & 15]

VII. City Food Culture and Nightlife

The capital city of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, serves as a popular cultural hub of the state. With developed and developing IT parks, educational institutions, residential areas, entertainment centres, leisure parks and other institutions, people travel daily through the city. Since food is an inevitable part of any living organism, spaces like restaurants, cafes, street vendors, etc, bring people from different levels of society together under one roof.

The concept of street food is familiar per se and has been a part of everyday life worldwide. Food wagon is such an entity. From the survey, 83.3% of the participants agree that food wagons contribute to the city's cultural diversity. [See Figure 8] 58.3% of them showed that they might prefer food wagons over restaurants. [See Figure 5] When asked about the factors that influence their food wagon choices, 66.7% of them voted for the type of food offered by the wagons. 50% of them agreed on the accessibility of these wagons from their home. Location, reputation, social media influence and rate of the items were also considered. [See Figure 6] More than half of the customers are happy with the quality and authenticity of the food offered. [See Figure 7]

VIII. Community Formation

If we look back at the food culture of Kerala, especially Thiruvananthapuram, we can see that the local teashops served as the cultural hub of that locality. It was a space where news was shared. People come to teashops to sniff a piece of rumours and gossip around the town. If you want to know the current state of the city, the latest movie and its review, market prices, politics, matrimony, you name it, everything can be collected through these teashop discussions. These teashops formed a community that shared and accepted each other without prejudice.

Food wagons are acting as the cultural hubs of urban life. Needless to say, those political debates, business ideas, movie talk, etc, remain in the teashops of the past. People these days rely on social media platforms to comment behind a screen. Most of them are refined from sharing opinions in public. In the survey, when the customers were asked if this food wagon acted as a place to form communities where they could talk and share general views on various topics while waiting for food, 66.7% voted negatively, and 16.7% showed uncertainty. On the other hand, when the same question was asked to food wagon operators, 60% gave an approving nod. [See Figures 9 & 10] The wagon owners also mentioned having a union called the Fast-Food Truck Association. They coordinate their working time and location and also fight for their rights.

IX. Major Concerns

From the field observation, they maintain a clean and sustainable waste management system. Since these wagons are operated within the city, the corporation's waste collection system collects all types of waste. None of the wagons I've interviewed faced any regulatory or license issues. When I asked, 'What changes or improvements, if any, would you suggest for food wagon eateries in Thiruvananthapuram to enhance their contributions to urban food culture?' the survey participants replied with concerns about food quality and hygiene. The names of the participants are replaced with alphabets to ensure confidentiality.

A: Ensure hygiene in cooking and serving food

B: No suggestions

C: They need to improve the quality of food they give to customers, and also, the rate must be affordable to every person dining in the food wagon

D: Accessibility and hygiene

E: Hygiene is a must

G: I know hostellers who r fans of street foods and food wagon eateries. It would be helpful for such people if food wagon eateries share their location via some online platform so that people could quickly locate

H: Improve hygiene

I: There are always limited options when it comes to food wagon eateries, especially for vegetarians

J: Nil

K: Ensure Quality food

L: As the wagons are parked alongside the roads, they should care about the dust, smoke and other street pollutants.

M: Arrangements for customers to eat while it is raining.

X. CONCLUSION

Future of Food Wagon Business

It is recurring news on social media platforms that graduated students, especially B.Tech graduates, are opening food wagons due to unemployment. Students are influenced to open a food truck in the evenings as a part-time job for pocket money. 100% of the survey participants agreed that the food wagon business has a high employment rate. They pointed out the blooming of new wagons with a variety menu. Unfortunately, the sad truth behind the food wagon business is the necessity. [See Figures 11 & 12]

The owners of Turkish Ottoman Rolls and Grills and Roll Shack shared their piece of misery behind this business. The COVID-19 pandemic locked most of their ongoing business down. They started this food wagon business by delivering food for those in need, hoping to move to different locations when the lockdown is confirmed. Constant traffic rules haunt them and make it hard to find a place to settle down. Their main issues were the need for more parking space, street lights, toilets for the workers, etc.

It is challenging to stand near the furnace for too long since the shawarma is grilled at high temperatures. Thus, Keralites are unwilling to do the grilling job. So, they had to hire workers from other states for this. Therefore, this is not an ideal job for the youths who want to start a long-term business. One owner emphasises the need for more support from society. He opines that most people are interested in something other than nightlife.

Despite the hardships faced by the food wagon owners, it is a silver lining among the clouds that the youths are ready to experiment with new food varieties and the joys of urban life. Therefore, the food wagon business will likely rise in the future.

The future scope of this project is to gain the attention of the administrators to provide laws and protection for the food wagon owners for a smooth operation and to solve their existing issues.

XI. REFERENCES

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5. Google Images. www.google.com/imghp?hl=en&tab=ri&authuser=0&ogbl.

Appendix

List of Figures

1. Figure 1



2. Figure 2



3. Figure 3



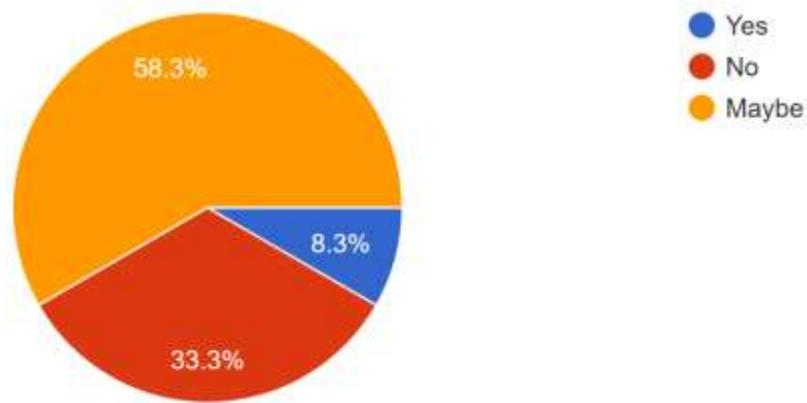
4. Figure 4



5. Figure 5

Do you prefer food wagons over restaurants?

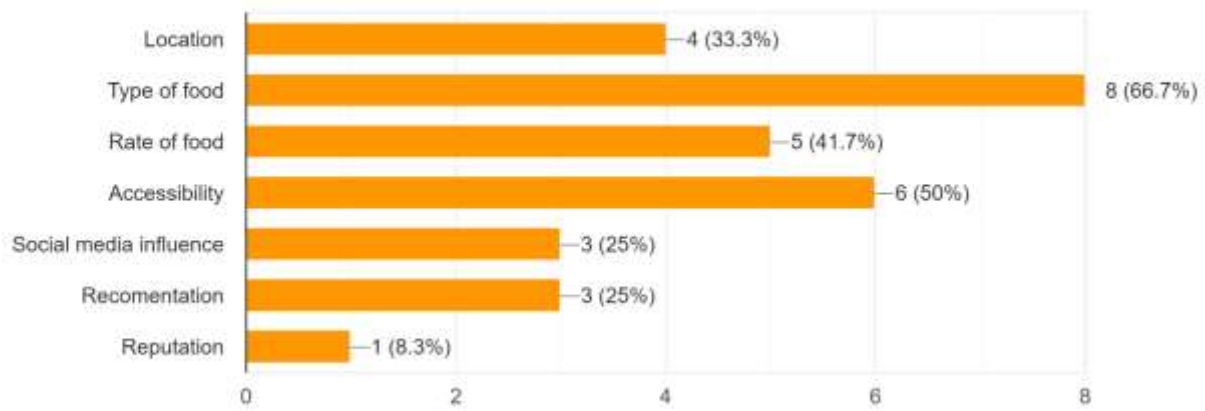
12 responses



6. Figure 6

What factors influence your choice of food wagon?

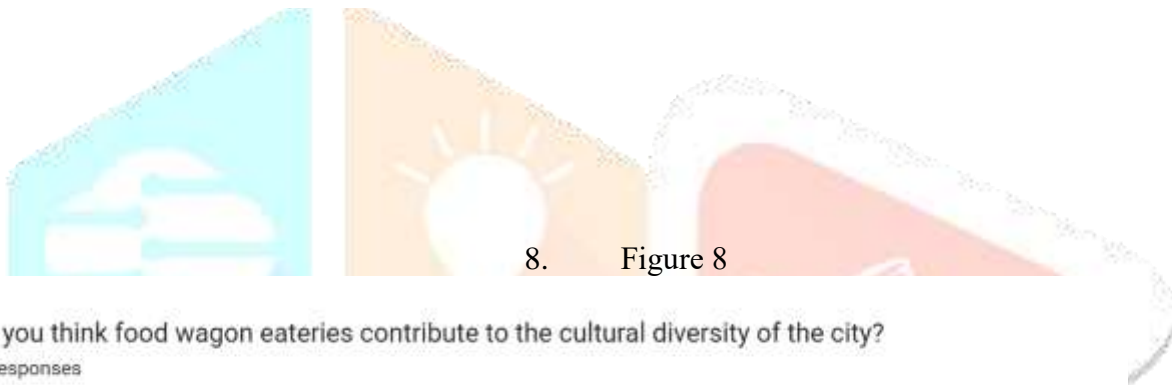
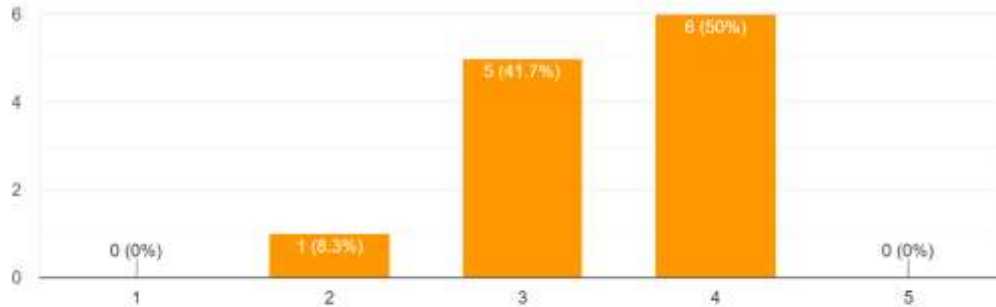
12 responses



7. Figure 7

How would you rate the quality and authenticity of food served by food wagons in Thiruvananthapuram?

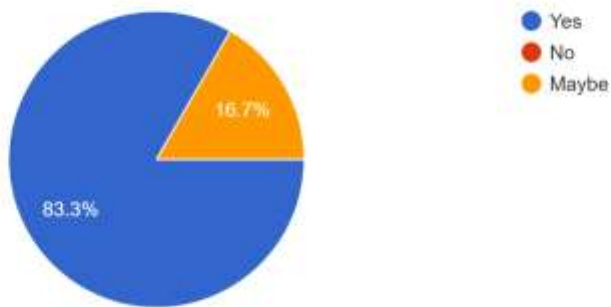
12 responses



8. Figure 8

Do you think food wagon eateries contribute to the cultural diversity of the city?

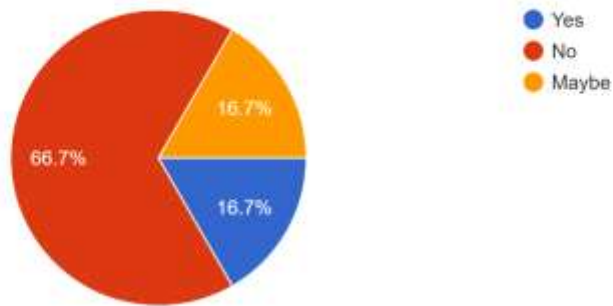
12 responses



9. Figure 9

Have you experienced any social interactions or community building when dining at food wagons?

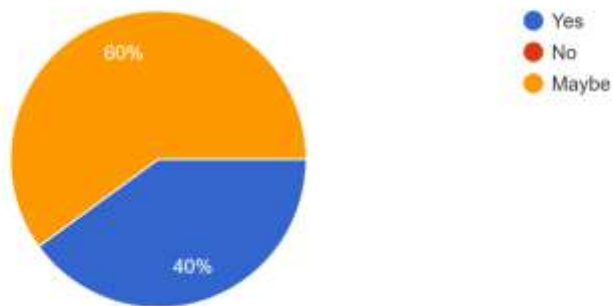
12 responses



10. Figure 10

Have you experienced any social interactions or community building through your food wagon activities?

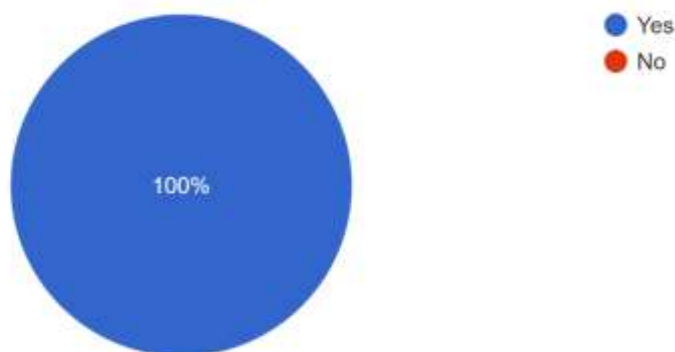
5 responses



11. Figure 11

Do you believe food wagon eateries positively impact the local economy and employment?

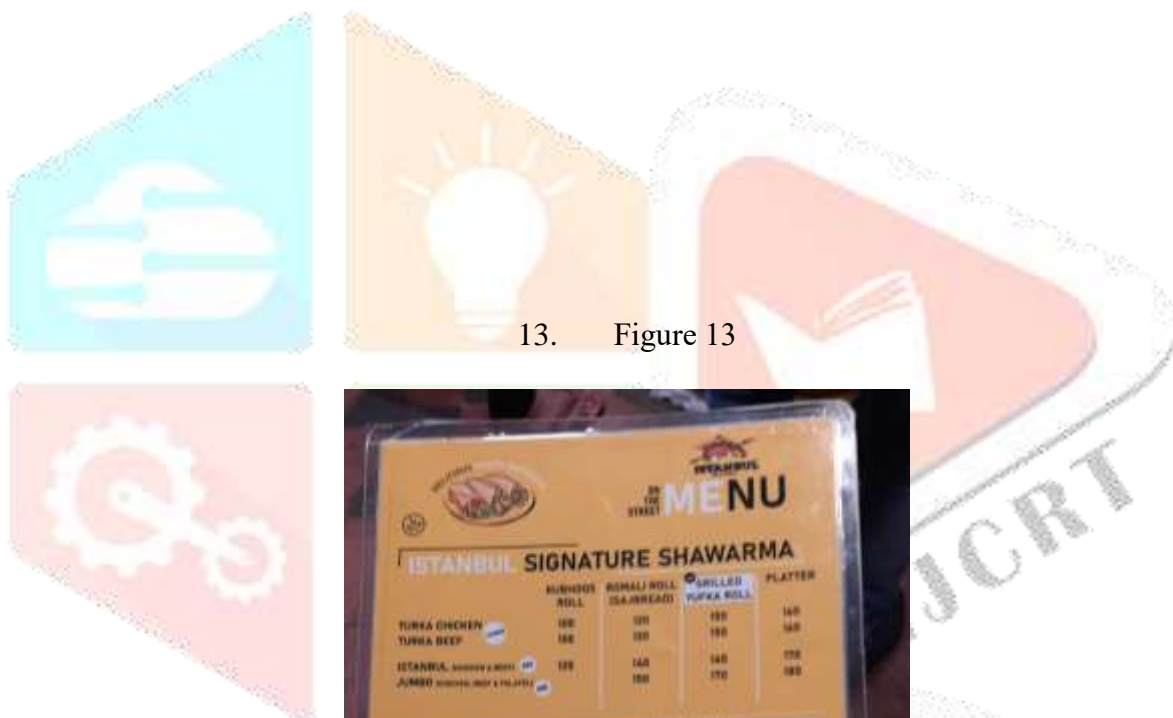
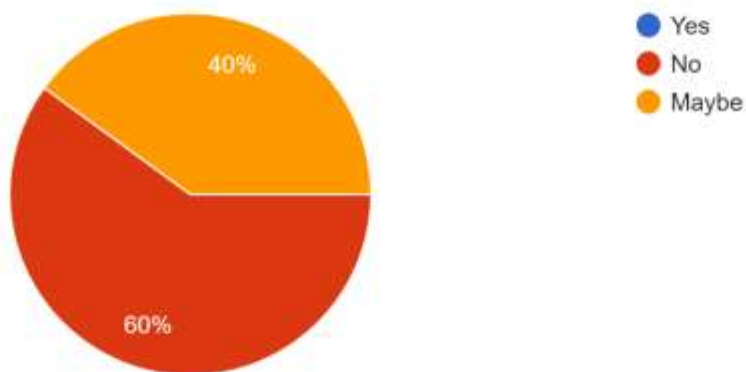
12 responses



12. Figure 12

Does this job have high employment rate?

5 responses



13. Figure 13



14. Figure 14



15. Figure 15



16. Figure 16



17. Figure 17



18. Figure 18



19. Figure 19

