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URBAN TACTICS

Decline of the Dog

By SAKI KNAFO

THE detail springs out at you from the laminated articles that practically sheath his pushcart on the corner of 45th Street and Avenue of the Americas: Mohammed Rahman, owner of Kwik Meal and maker of a widely touted lamb-and-rice platter, once worked as a sous-chef at the celebrated Russian Tea Room.

A native of Bangladesh whose pristine toque reaches nearly to the ceiling of his cramped stall, Mr. Rahman quit the restaurant business in 2000 after he noticed a pushcart near the World Trade Center selling platters of halal food. Intrigued, he ordered a container of chicken and rice. A few greasy bites later, he had concluded that he could elevate the plebeian dish to unprecedented heights of refinement.

"I'm a chef," Mr. Rahman recalled thinking at the time. "I can serve better food for people from the office. The suit-and-tie people — they will come."

Back then, the sight of a gourmet halal cart might have caused some passers-by to raise their eyebrows. But in recent years it has become increasingly common to see purveyors of \$4.95 lamb-and-rice platters displaying glowing reviews and drawing huge crowds. It's become increasingly common to see purveyors of \$4.95 lamb-and-rice platters, period.

Although the city doesn't collect statistics that distinguish between different types of street food, halal vendors generally agree that their ranks have swelled in the last five to eight years, prompting the obvious question: How did the halal platter become the city's new hot dog?

"The hot dog now is for tourists," said a rueful Chafik el-Mokhtar, office manager at 2M Friend Corporation, a hot-dog cart garage and supply store on West 47th Street near 11th Avenue.

"The people usually go for chicken and rice because it's good for hunger," he added wistfully.

Mohamed Abouelenein, an Egyptian who used to sell hot dogs, said, "Hot dog is not a meal." That's one reason he switched to gyro and chicken in 1992, becoming, he claims, the first peddler in New York to sell halal meat from a cart.

"We figured out that most of the cabdrivers are Egyptian, Pakistani," he said. "They suffered too much from no halal."

On some corners of Manhattan, halal carts outnumber hot-dog vendors by as much as three to one. Mr. Abouelenein's cart, named 53rd and 6th, after the Midtown corner on which it sits, stays open from 7 p.m. to 4 a.m., feeding throngs of clubbers, foodies and cabbies. Its success has been such that Mr. Abouelenein recently opened a new cart across the street, supplanting — yes — a hot-dog stand.

The term halal may be applied to any food prepared in accordance with the laws of the Koran, although in New York the term has taken on special connotations: oily chunks of chicken or gyro meat, yellowish rice, some scraps of lettuce, hot sauce and, of course, the mysterious substance known as white sauce.

The most obvious explanation for its popularity is that the city is home to many more Muslim immigrants than in the past.

Arthur Schwartz, a New York food historian who runs the Web site foodmaven.com, also suggests that a particular kind of customer has been instrumental to the success of halal carts. "You can always tell who the new immigrant group is by the cabdrivers," Mr. Schwartz said. "Most of the cabdrivers are now Bangladeshi, and the car service drivers are Egyptian. And they are good customers for the carts."

Sidewalk wisdom holds that Muslims took over the street-cart business in the 1990s from Greeks, who had themselves inherited it from Italians and Germans. Census data broadly supports this chronology. In an analysis of data from 1990, the [Queens College](http://www.queenscollege.edu) sociology department found that 306 first-generation German and Italian New Yorkers identified themselves as members of an occupational category that included the job "street vendor"; by 2005, that figure had dropped to zero. During that period, the number of Greeks in the field rose to 200 from 120, while the number of Egyptians, Bangladeshis and Afghans surged to 563 from 69.

Tony Dragonas, a native of Greece and a sidewalk chef on the corner of 62nd Street near Madison Avenue, vividly remembers many of his compatriots selling their carts to Muslim buyers in the 1990s. "A lot of people got old, a lot of people died," he said. Raising one leg of his denim shorts to reveal a skein of varicose veins, he added: "It's hard work. My kids — they don't want to do this. They want to get educated."

The son of a hot-dog vendor, Mr. Dragonas has succeeded by continually reinventing himself, supplementing staples like souvlaki and Italian sausages with black angus steak and prosciutto-and-mozzarella sandwiches. Some halal vendors have gone even further in adapting their cooking to the New York palate, which has itself grown more sophisticated as recent immigrants from places like Mexico and Thailand have redrawn the restaurant landscape. Halal vendors sell varieties of white sauce so far removed from any traditional food that no term less ambiguous than "white sauce" would accurately describe them.

X-Press Power Lunch, a chain with carts in Manhattan and Brooklyn, is one of many companies that cater to the city's less adventurous types with a white-sauce base of mayonnaise. At the other end of the spectrum is Mr. Rahman, whose quest for the sophisticated "suit and tie" market has culminated in the creation of what many consider Manhattan's white sauce par excellence, a mélange of yogurt, sour cream, cottage cheese and cucumber.

ALONG with culinary innovation, creative approaches to marketing may explain the popularity of halal food among non-Muslim customers. Asim Rafiqi, a 33-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, studied computer science for two years at [St. John's University](http://www.stjohns.edu) in Queens before going into the family business, Rafiqi's, in 1996. Since then, the pushcart chain that he owns with four of his brothers has stretched across Midtown and beyond, staking out no fewer than 11 spots with its signature red-and-black umbrellas.

Last winter, he and his brothers designed several new carts; their structures call for cooks and customers to

stand facing one another. This should prove especially advantageous for Mr. Rafiqi, a gregarious man with a gleaming smile. “You’re talking to the customer, you’re with the customer,” he said.

When it comes to innovation, few vendors have proved the equal of Mr. Abouelenein, the owner of 53rd and 6th. His employees wear uniforms of yellow — “We Are Different,” the T-shirts proclaim — and the business has a Web site, 53rdand6th.com, where devotees are invited to submit works of cart-inspired art.

Nine months ago, after a scuffle among customers spiraled into a stabbing. Mr. Abouelenein responded with yet another innovation, one that few hot-dog vendors have ever contemplated. He hired bouncers.

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