

HOW EASTSIDE 'OHANA GAVE THE BOX ITS WHEELS

BY DENISE SAKAKI // PHOTOS BY JULIA SUMPSTER



There is a popular and beloved word in Hawaiian that refers to family — ‘ohana. It can mean those who are related by blood, but it’s so often used to describe close friends, an extended tribe of loved ones. It’s the word Hawaii-born executive chef and owner **Reis Llaneza** uses to describe his close-knit team that works with him in the cozy space of his food truck, The Box on Wheels, aka, The Box. ‘Ohana can also be used to describe the community that has built up in the Eastside and Seattle in support of the little truck with big flavor.

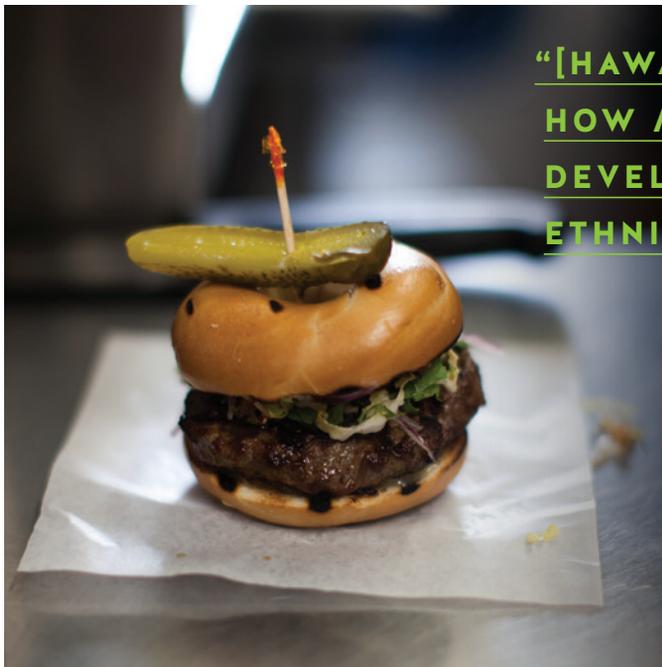
The Box has been a steady darling of local appetites in the six-plus years its trucks have been rolling through Kirkland, Bellevue, and Redmond,

presenting a menu of Asian-inspired cross-cultural dishes. Lines of hungry crowds quickly form in the business parks they regularly stop in. A familiar name on favorite food truck lists, The Box on Wheels has received top recognition by Cityvoter’s Seattle A-List, a finalist in ParentMap’s family-friendly Golden Teddy Awards, and most recently, chosen by 425 magazine readers as a Best of 425 winner for Best Food Truck. The accolades are encouraging, yet Llaneza says it’s the kindness and loyalty of sup-

porters that are their own reward.

“That makes me so happy, that guys who have been coming from day one are still coming,” he beamed, over the personal exchanges with regulars and the appreciative messages on the company’s Facebook page, thanking them for making such good food.

The journey of The Box begins nearly an ocean away in the small city of Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii, where Llaneza was born and raised. He attended culinary school in Kona and honed his



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skills in the kitchens of high-end resorts and popular contemporary sushi restaurants like Sansei. His wife, Joanna, was accepted at the University of Washington’s School of Pharmacy, giving them the opportunity to make the big leap to the Pacific Northwest, where Llaneza continued to build his culinary resume, working at Kirkland’s Yarrow Bay Grill and Bellevue’s FLO sushi restaurant.

Energized by the region’s enthusiasm for good food and eager to explore his creativity, Llaneza considered opening his own restaurant, focusing on fine dining. It was sitting in a living room with friends, casually tossing ideas around, when Joanna asked, “Why don’t you open a food truck?” A bit baffled by the idea, Llaneza demurred, “I don’t know ... it’s not my thing...” But his wife was insistent; she convinced him it didn’t have to be a typical food truck of boring sandwiches or greasy junk food. “Make it your own,” she encouraged him.

that’s all I need!” he said, to which his designer friend responded, “That’s a food truck; it’s a box on wheels!” And so The Box was born.

This sparked the chef’s mind with menu possibilities. For all his experience with refined dishes, Llaneza’s hometown Hawaii roots were where his heart lay. With a unique food culture, this small chain of islands is a combination of Native Hawaiian dishes, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Portuguese, and Filipino cuisines, all woven into a diverse mélange.

“[Hawaii] is a melting pot, so I think that’s how my whole background was developed, having all these different ethnic cuisines brought together,” he explained. “The influence was a huge part of what started me thinking about what I really wanted to do and how I wanted to start cooking.”

A tantalizing menu developed, incorporating Japanese ingredients, Korean seasonings and flavors, and most im-

portantly, the preferred meat of Hawaii. “I’m a pork guy, so the menu is about 70 percent pork,” Llaneza said. “Our burgers have pork in it — it’s a pork/beef mix. The salad has ham in it. I just love pork! If it doesn’t taste right, put pork in it!”

This richness is balanced with fresh and simmered flavors, featuring Llaneza’s own personal twists — crispy karaage (Japanese fried chicken) is glazed with a sweet and tangy garlic sauce. Korean kalbi beef skewers are given added dimension with a bright yuzu aioli. Chinese steamed buns, or bao, are filled with Llaneza’s favorites, braised pork belly or the Hawaiian classic, slow-cooked kālua pork.

Inspiration flowed, but The Box needed its wheels and at the time, there were no builders specializing in food trucks. Llaneza’s uncle, who works with RVs, remarked how food trucks have the same basic equipment as an RV, with generators, plumbing, and electrical work. This led Llaneza to a custom builder in Sultan who renovated old buses in wild, imaginative ways. The inventive builder and the creative chef clicked immediately. They took a retired government-issue delivery truck, stripped it down to its bare bones, and transformed it into a mobile kitchen.

“It was a lot harder than it is now,” Llaneza said of the early days. “There was a lot of research. I had to go to business parks, talk to property managers.

POPULAR FOOD-RELATED WORDS IN HAWAII

‘Ono Hawaiian for delicious. Often proclaimed loudly after eating something tasty: “Oh, man, this pork belly is so ‘ono! Melts in your mouth, it’s so good!”

Locomoco/Loco Moco Popular comfort food and guilty pleasure, consisting of a beef patty over rice, smothered with gravy and a fried egg. Reis Llaneza admits this would be his last meal on Earth: “Locomoco — that is my number one. It would be a Locomoco before I died.”

Kālua Traditional Hawaiian method of cooking meat (typically pork) wrapped in fresh banana or ti leaves and slowly cooked over fire-heated volcanic rocks in an earthen pit known as an imu, yielding a smoky, tender finish.

I had to ask them if it would be OK (to operate in their parking lot). I got turned down a lot! They didn't know what it was about."

Less than 10 years ago, the public wasn't as aware of specialty food on wheels, especially on the Eastside. A massive renovation of Microsoft's main campus cafeteria in 2011 was the big break for The Box and several other food trucks who were invited to set up on the company lots and started to grow a steady Eastside fan base.

Llaneza remembers being thrilled at getting 30 orders a day, but those numbers have more than tripled, with an ever-expanding catering service offering a more extensive menu. Phone calls trying to explain what a food truck is to confused property managers have been replaced with fielding calls from businesses trying to get The Box to make an appearance during a busy work week. Llaneza's mother would help out in the early days, but now The Box is a bustling mobile kitchen, with a crew that includes longtime friends who worked alongside Llaneza for years at restaurants. The food brings in Hawaii locals longing for a taste of home, as well as those curious to try something new. Llaneza says the public's reaction to the menu of intertwined cuisines is extremely gratifying. "They think it's awesome; they really enjoy it. I like that, when people are willing to try something different."

Popular food trucks like The Box put in a lot of miles, feeding a lot of people, yet it's the unseen journey to get from concept to reality that makes their success all the more triumphant. Llaneza is quick to credit his 'ohana, the friends and family who gave his dream wheels, and the community of Eastsiders who continue to keep The Box moving. ■



Denise Sakaki is a writer, photographer, and graphic designer. She is the creator behind the food/travel/cooking blog

Wasabi Prime, and her work has been noted in *New York Magazine's Grub Street*, *The Kitchn*, *Food News Journal*, and was featured in *Foodista's Best of Food Blogs Cookbook*.