

Halal Carts of New York City



Popular Halal Carts of NYC

Adel's Famous Halal Cart: Located at the SW corner of 49th Street and 6th Ave, they are well known for their flavorful meat, generous portions, and tasty sauces. They gained a lot of exposure and popularity from TikTok. Unlike other carts, they open at night from 6 PM to 4 or 5 AM daily, with lines ranging from 30 minutes to up to 2 hours

The Halal Guys was founded in 1990 originally as a hot-dog cart at 53rd Street and 6th Ave. However, they switched to chicken and gyro meat with rice and pita in 1992. Their signature is a “combo platter”, served with their famous white sauce. They expanded and opened their first brick-and-mortar store in 2014, but the original cart remains open. The Halal Guys expanded from a single cart to a global franchise.

King of Falafel & Shawarma: Located in Queens, originally in Astoria, they opened a second location in Bayside. It was founded by a Palestinian-American in 2002, and they are known for their authentic Middle Eastern Flavors; especially falafel, lamb/beef shawarma, and combo platters. It is recommended in “Best Halal Food Truck” lists for consistency, portion size, and flavor

History of Halal

Halal carts started appearing in the late 1980's and according to a Queens College sociology study, the number of food vendors between 1990 and 2005 that were of Egyptian, Bangladeshi, or Afghan descent increased to 593. This was a seven-fold increase over a span of merely 15 years. The spicy “red sauce” halal carts frequently use is thought to potentially be a variant of harissa, which is an Egyptian sauce made from roasted red bell peppers, dried red chilies, aromatics such as garlic and herbs, spices like cumin and coriander, and olive oil. Its milder counterpart, the “white sauce,” is considered to originate from zabadi, a yogurt dish that is comparable to the Greek tzatziki. Zabadi is a combination of plain yogurt, cucumber, mint, garlic, and a pinch of salt.



Behind the Scenes

Running a halal cart in NYC requires two things: a Mobile Food Vendor License and a Mobile Food Vending Unit Permit. Unfortunately, these permits are extremely difficult to attain due to the city's cap of around 3,000 full-time permits. Despite a 2021 law allowing the release of up to 450 additional permits each year, demand still exceeds supply, and seasonal permits have extremely long waitlists. To increase chances, some families submit multiple applications, while many others skip the process entirely by renting permits illegally for up to \$25,000 a year. Many of those who work under a permit are recent immigrants with limited job options and have to settle for long hours for thin profits.

To legally operate a cart, vendors must take a food safety course, pass inspections, follow location regulations, and use authorized commissaries in order to operate legally. To get around these restrictions, some people work under someone else's license, which puts them at risk both financially and legally. The industry also depends on unwritten rules regarding "claimed" street corners, particularly those close to subways and landmarks. The intense competition for profitable locations is seen in the frequent territorial disputes that can turn into sabotage, obstruction, or physical violence.

Because most halal carts operate primarily in cash, the business is able to have a more blurry business model due to under-the-table permit rentals, inconsistent pricing, underreported income, and informal work arrangements. Workers often work 12-16-hour shifts, just to make a living. Interviews with two vendors, Mohammad (who has worked since 2019) and Sultan (who joined through a family owned cart), show the human side of these challenges. Since Mohammad works under someone else's permit and often moves between different carts, he spoke about his fear of the police confronting him. In addition to the physical challenges of standing outside for up to 16 hours a day, the very cold winter was pointed out by both men as the hardest part.

Despite the challenges, both vendors said that the best part of the job is the fun and positive interactions with customers.

“Conversation and kindness make the difficult work feel worthwhile.”

-Mohammad (the vendor)

Legal vs. Illegal Halal Cart Permit System in NYC



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