

My 12-Hour Shift with an On-Set Catering Crew

BY: Maria Cristina Lalonde



Sunday

The evening before I am scheduled to accompany film catering professional Ed D'Orio and his crew on a 12-hour shift, he calls to make sure I haven't changed my mind. "You still want to do this?" he asks. "Really?" Ever since I contacted Ed and expressed interest in shadowing him to see what it's like—as he puts it—"in the bowels of the movie catering profession," he has been trying to dissuade me. The hours are long, the work is demanding, and most people can't handle the stress, he tells me.

"And at the end of the day?" Ed says, "I'm nobody. That's it. The caterer's nobody." But at [Fare Adventures Inc.](#)—a company that provides catering for the movie, commercial, and entertainment industries—Ed is the head honcho. He got his start catering at music festivals such as [Bonnaroo](#) and [Summer Camp](#) before falling into the film business three years ago. "The whole story is I know a guy who has a very fancy restaurant downtown," Ed tells me in his tie-dye-festooned office, as he swivels his chair around to light another cigarette. "I've known him for a long time, but he's not a big off-premise guy. When they shot [The Dilemma](#), Vince Vaughn asked him if he would cater the movie. And he came to me and said, 'Ed, you're the off-premise expert—can you do this?'"



He takes a drag and grins. "Well, I do anything! So I winged it and we pulled it off. And we've been going ever since."

Ed and his crew have gone on to cater on Chicago sets for feature films such as *Colombiana*, *Just Like a Woman*, and *Drinking Buddies*. They often begin their day-long before dawn and end well past midnight. Ed agrees to let me join him on a 130-person commercial production for a local hydroponic farming company. [Editor's note: we can't say too much about the commercial itself because of trade secrets and cabbages' rights to privacy] I'll join him at 2 p.m. and stay on until the job is finished—sometime after 2 a.m.

"Yes, I want to do this," I assure Ed. "I can handle it."

Monday 2 p.m.

It's a mercilessly hot Chicago summer afternoon when I hop into the shotgun seat of the Fare Adventures mobile kitchen at Ed's office. It's a hulking blue monstrosity of a truck complete with stovetops, ovens, and refrigerators, but—of course—no air conditioner. Hot air pours in as we speed down the road, the Violent Femmes' *Blister in the Sun* blasting. Ed, dressed in rainbow suspenders, is DJing. He plays a carefully curated selection of upbeat classics, insisting that for this job the right music is key for setting the right energy.

"Just one more hit and I'll be ready to go," he says.



4 p.m.

Within seconds of parking the truck in an empty lot just away from the set, we meet Ed's crew and they spring into action. We survey the chefs as they bustle about the cramped mobile kitchen, taking advantage of this time, when the actors, gaffers, audio engineers, and dozens of other specialists are busy shooting the commercial. They'll want to eat soon, though, so Ed makes his introductions quick. He identifies the tattoo-sleeved chef slicing up croissants as Josh—a black belt and former chef at French restaurant [Bistronomic](#). "A real prima donna," Ed adds, "but he's earned the right to be."

The 22-year-old manning the grill is Andrew. His father is in the film catering business as well, and Andrew himself has been working in the industry since he was 13 years old. "This business is in his blood," says Ed.

There's also Drew, who runs about outside the truck, setting up the food tent, tables, and ice-filled tubs of freshly made wraps and macaroni salad. Drew is friends with Ed's son, and he's been on the crew since the company's early days of working music festivals. They're a ragtag, friendly bunch, and they grin shyly as I take pictures of them chopping bell peppers and grilling sausages.



5:30 p.m.

At 5:30 on the dot, the first meal is ready to go. Recording a commercial is hard work. You can see that in the thousands of pounds of equipment that cross onto the set. You can also see it in the hungry faces of the actors and crew members as they begin queuing and placing their orders for burgers, italian sausages, and grilled chicken sandwiches through the truck's front window. A few burned dishes, and the whole show would grind to a halt.

Everything goes smoothly at the first meal, though, and when the line shrinks to a manageable length, the guys take breaks on the truck steps, smoking cigarettes and swapping stories.

Josh reveals the meaning behind his tattoos, and Drew chuckles about the colorful characters he served at music festivals. Andrew relays a list of film sets he's worked on—a list that includes the likes of *Transformers III*, *Youth in Revolt*, and *Saw 3D*.

The caterers are a crucial part of the production process, and they have a revealing vantage point that isn't shared by the cameramen, editors, or other technical experts. They see actors when they're vulnerable—when they're eating. At my urging, the chefs share stories about the quirky dining habits of various celebrities—one in particular would only eat spinach and grilled chicken sliced in a certain way, another had a taste for grilled cheese sandwiches with mayonnaise. Another would only eat greens blended with garlic and ginger twice a day, but consume a half a pizza come 11 o'clock at night. And egg whites are always a popular item.

"Thirty years in the business and I've never served so many egg whites," Ed muses. "I've served more egg whites in one month than I have in the previous 29 years."

8:30 p.m.

As the fellows ready the kitchen for the next meal, Ed offers me an out. He and Drew have to leave the set and head back into town to pick up some supplies, and he offers to drop me off—if I'm tired and have had enough. I glance at the time. At this point, my friends are probably on a patio somewhere drinking frosty Old Styles. "No," I say. "I'm in this for the long haul." Ed nods. "Good," he says, satisfied. "That was a test."

11:30 p.m.

When the cast and crew gather for the final meal, Ed and his team are ready. There's a sweeping buffet of beef tenderloin, grilled veggies, and poblano peppers stuffed with faro and goat cheese, as well as a salad bar and dessert station.

As the cast and crew eat, Andrew, Drew, and Josh linger in the warm night, sipping Heinekens and savoring a rare respite. After everyone has finished eating, they'll pack everything up and head home. Andrew and Drew will only have time to take a shower before heading out to serve breakfast at their next shoot at 3 a.m. Despite keeping grueling hours, the guys assure me they wouldn't want to do anything else.

"You're not sitting in one place the whole time," says Andrew. "That's the cool part about it."

"That's honestly what keeps me going," agrees Drew. "Going to different places every day. Getting to see new things, taking new routes, meeting new people."

"Sitting in an office?" Andrew considers. "I just couldn't do that."

2 a.m.

On the ride home, thanks to Ed's DJ skills, everyone is still surprisingly spirited when we make it back. After exchanging our goodbyes, Andrew gives me a bottle of his father's homemade hot sauce, and Ed tells me—with touching sincerity—that I can come back and join them on a job anytime I want. As I drive away, I chuckle at the thought of reliving the exhausting hours, blistering heat, and cramped quarters. But as I think of the sterile, overly air-conditioned office that awaits me the next morning and the far-off film sets that lie before the intrepid caterers, I can't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. *Photo: © María Lalonde, Groupon*