Wally Byam’s beret would spin in circles around his head if he dropped down from the Great Airstream in the Sky and saw the inventive and eccentric uses for today’s trailers. But one might suspect that Byam, always a man for forward-thinking, inspiration, and the powers of imagination, would quickly straighten that beret and lift a toast to the owners who have employed his invention in quirky, distinctive ways. The most natural place to raise that toast would be the Redwood Kitchenette and Bar, where you can belly up to a full bar made from a 1970 Ambassador.

The 30’ Ambassador isn’t a one-time sidewalk gimmick—it’s a completely stocked bar with beer and wine on tap, room for three bottle jockeys to fill your orders, and it’s smack-dab in the Chelsea district of New York, where the seen-everything patrons aren’t going to settle for a run-of-the-mill restaurant. The restaurant is built around the Airstream, but the trailer is the shiny center of attention. “It offers the most important thing that other bars don’t offer: a ‘Coolness’ factor. There is nothing else like it in New York City,” says John Yuder, the owner and main mind behind the Redwood concept.

Bringing a 30-foot trailer into an existing building in New York isn’t a task to take lightly. The trailer’s interior was gutted to the frame and cut from the chassis. Then it was loaded onto a flatbed and maneuvered into the restaurant (at 4 a.m. to avoid traffic), then cut down the middle lengthwise. The cut sections were then

Airstream Vice:
Less Naughty, More Nice

By Tom Bentley

After decades of traveling, this 1970 Airstream Ambassador has found its retirement job, serving cocktails at the Redwood Kitchenette and Bar in New York City.
buck-riveted back together around the bar frame, which extended the trailer’s length to 35 feet. You might suspect the workers were ready for a drink after that.

The Airstream fit both literally into the bar, and into the owner’s conception: “I chose the Airstream because it was a perfect fit to the type of restaurant/bar that I envisioned; classic American comfort food in a mid-century modern setting,” says Yuder. “Everyone wants a seat at the bar.”

After you’ve knocked back a few at the Redwood, you might seek something to lift you back on your feet. Shine Coffee is just the thing, and it might even come to you (as long as you’re in the Phoenix area). Shine doubles the cup count, with both a 1957 Flying Cloud and a 1963 Globetrotter in their fleet, and both Airstreams are fully outfitted mobile espresso bars.

Getting the trailers up and foaming wasn’t effortless: each had to have the chassis reinforced, electrical upgraded to 220 volts, new sinks, water and wastewater tanks, commercial grade equipment and even health-department code-regulation windows.

Equipment is one thing, but to make a memorable cup of coffee, whether an espresso, cappuccino or latte, you’ve got to work the beans. “What makes us special is our use of locally roasted, small-batch coffees: everything is roasted for our order. The flavor difference is substantial,” says Laryn Blok, Shine’s general manager.

According to all Shine customers, steaming caffeine is better served out of a shiny vintage trailer, but it’s not as simple as it sounds. “Water and power are the main challenges,” says Blok. “Sometimes we have an event where they want us for 12+ hours and it’s very hard to do in one shot. Espresso machines pull a lot of power. We use two 50-amp shore cords that connect to either two 50-amp outlets or our generator. We have very large water tanks, but had to add extra water capacity for our drip coffee—we go through 20-30 gallons during a busy day.”

The Shine team accelerates the heartbeats of attendees at various events, such as weddings and parties, bringing a custom touch that adds even more buzz. “We think that common products should not be sold in common ways. Coffee is about as common in America as air. Selling really delicious coffee from a vintage Airstream pleases all senses. My husband lived in an Airstream on a movie set many years ago, and he’s been in love with them ever since. They’re American, they’re part of our manufacturing history, and they are functional sculptures that continue to evolve into new things—like espresso bars,” says Blok.

Booze bars and espresso bars are fine things for folks in search of a little stimulation. But when the appetite is stimulated, few things more immediately satisfy the urge than pizza. Wood-fired pizza pushes that product higher on the desire scale, but wood-fired pizza out of a vintage Airstream? Sublime. And it’s not like you’re going to have to settle for a simple cheese-and-done pie from Wanderlust Pizza—this is one flavorful trailer.

“As a chef, I consider the brick oven the best tool to cook a great pizza,” says Erik Jacobs, the founder of Wanderlust. “I did extensive research and development on my dough recipe, because in my opinion, awesome pizza starts with a great crust. After that, I draw on influences from my travels around the world. That’s where the ‘Wanderlust’ name and the Airstream iconography really work together to convey my brand.”

Jacobs always sources his pizza makings to the freshest of produce and the most local of meats, so the pies he offers are seasonal. His year-round best-seller was the “Meat Meets Meat,” which mates crushed tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, Italian salsiccia, Spanish chorizo and smoked prosciutto. One restricted
to season (because he demands the asparagus be fresh) is the “Stinky Tinkle”—mascarpone cheese and shallot base, with fresh asparagus, black pepper, and prosciutto. Those seasonal offerings are sure to change, because he’s relocated his trailer from St Louis to the San Francisco Bay area.

Obviously, a trailer with a wood-fired stove needed some retrofits: a five-foot smoke stack through the roof of his 1973 Safari was a necessity, as were new electrical wiring, insulation and custom welding to support the brick oven. The kitchen needed new plumbing, sinks, sanitary walls and ceilings, and new lighting to pass inspection.

The trailer-oven concept has worked so well that Jacobs envisions a fleet of vintage Airstreams reflecting his desire to present authentic street food from around the world. He knows well that the Airstream adds something special to his work: “They are gorgeous pieces of functional contemporary art that reflect and represent an idea and period in American history. People love the curves, the polish of the aluminum and appreciate the hard work and creativity it took to transform it from a travel trailer to a mobile wood-fired pizza trailer. When they see the fire blazing in the oven, we get double- and triple-takes. Wanderlust serves pizza inspired by off-the-beaten-path travel, and the Airstream serves to reinforce that.”

Triple-takes are probably the norm for the 32’ 1968 International that often makes the rounds through the Colorado high country. It’s not that a beautifully polished vintage trailer is all that unusual—it’s more that the trailer is the mobile medical marijuana evaluation office of Colorado Medical Marijuana Assistance Program of America (MMAPA). The organization’s mission is to make alternative treatment accessible and affordable to disabled veterans, hospice patients, and the indigent community. As part of fulfilling that mission, the mobile medical marijuana evaluation office of the onboard doctors of MDARX (the Mobile Doctors of America) is to make health care evaluations accessible and affordable to underserved urban and rural communities. MMAPA ensures qualified patients receive 40–60% off herbal treatments and low- to no-cost medical marijuana evaluations.

For the most part, the public’s response to the trailer has been positive. “MMAPA and Mobile Doctors have actually been quite embraced!” says Vincent Palazzotto, MMAPA’s executive director.” When it comes to negativity surrounding the cannabis industry, MMAPA’s staff and volunteers have ensured patients considering an alternative to pharmaceutical solutions are provided the facts in a professional manner. At the end of the day, most Americans—as well as the majority of voters throughout the sixteen states and the District of Colombia that have legalized medical marijuana—don’t see cannabis as a threat to our communities. Regulation not only removes cannabis from our back alleys, but offers a safer model for patients, with the end result being jobs and tax revenue added to the bottom line.”

Remember, this is an exam room, not a dispensary, so you won’t find any baggies of aromatic green in the Airstream. The organization did a full remodel, which included the installation of granite countertops, bamboo flooring and tinted windows for privacy. Palazzotto says the greatest challenge has been Colorado’s weather, which includes high-country travel under alpine conditions. So far, it’s been smooth sailing (or snowing).

Besides providing examinations, the trailer is a mobile information center for medical marijuana events, such as the Kush Convention, recently held in Denver. Patients have been pleased that a vintage Airstream has been host to their examinations. “They love the Airstream,” says Palazzotto. “Our patients are delighted to see just how professionally the Mobile Doctor operation is run. For us, it’s a very distinguishable company mascot. Usually upon exiting, we can catch our patients snapping a shot or two in front of our silver bullet.”

One item that seems to be topping the charts with a bullet these days is bacon. You hear of bacon cocktails, bacon chocolate, even bacon gum. But there’s a topping that you can’t get just anywhere, only in an Airstream: bacon jam. It’s a spiced, simmered, pureed goo of holiness. The good folks at Skillet Street Food in Seattle say that people predominantly use the jam on burgers, but that it’s also fantastic on grilled cheese—and apparently a hundred other things, as the recipes on their website indicate. Since their 1972 Airstream Overlander sells the burgers right out of the trailer, you won’t have to put bacon jam on your hand to lick it off, though it sounds like some people do.

Bacon can get pretty heavy (especially with a burger wrapped around it), so the Skillet folks had to completely refab the trailer, by replacing the chassis with a heavy-duty motorhome chassis, adding a full commercial kitchen, a built-in generator and bigger propane tanks. Basically all that was left was the shell. According to Joshua Henderson, founder and Skillet partner, “I wouldn’t recommend building a kitchen in an Airstream as a general rule—they really aren’t meant to have that kind of weight or wear and tear on them. However, I wouldn’t change what we did for the world. I feel such a strong connection and
emotional tie to the Airstreams that we have used. I still think they are so incredibly beautiful and ruggedly elegant.”

Skillet supplies the original bacon jam, which was followed by black pepper and fennel bacon jam, and they’re working on a brown sugar and apple variety now. If you needed an extra pork lift, you could put the bacon jam on one of their other dishes, like pork belly and waffles. Skillet serves at events; one notable one included serving burgers and poutine to the clowns of a Cirque de Soleil troupe. Arthur and Kelsey (Kramer) King were so enthused by the Skillet trailer that they used it to cater their wedding with mini-burgers and garlic fries. As Henderson says, “The Airstream catches their eye, but the food brings them back.”

We’ve already discussed an Airstream bar, but not one that’s mobile. Never fear: there’s a 1968 International Overlander based in Austin that tours the land, even going as far as Chicago for the Lollapalooza music festival. That non-teetotaling trailer would be toting Tito’s Vodka from Tito’s Austin distillery. The trailer is a fully outfitted bar, where cocktails based on Tito’s brew are served and enjoyed.

According to Susan Stockman, Tito’s brand manager, “Tito’s is made from 100% corn, so it is naturally gluten free, and is distilled six times in old fashioned pot stills. Tito removes the heads and tails every time, resulting in a very smooth, pure vodka. The other thing that makes it so special is that we don’t rely on computers or machines to tell us when our handcrafted vodka is ready. Tito is at the distillery every day himself, tasting and testing to be sure every batch meets his specifications before it goes into a bottle.”

The trailer has a bit of a handmade aspect itself: the entire interior has been redone in reclaimed materials. The flooring is reclaimed barnwood, the ceiling is made of reclaimed metal signs, and the bar stools were junkyard finds. They also added a real bar to it at one end. The trailer makes for an eye-catching draw as a VIP lounge at events like Lollapalooza and Austin’s ACL music festival.

Stockman recognizes that Airstreams send a special message. “The classic airstream is iconic to all things American, and with the recent rise of the food truck in Austin, it’s also become well-known locally. We wanted an asset to bring to events and festivals that really showed people a taste of life in Austin, as that aesthetic really tells a lot about our brand in general, so getting an Airstream was a natural choice.” So natural, in fact, that they are outfitting another for event use in the Midwest.

Even if Wally B. might have first wondered about all of these edgy Airstreams, it would probably only take him a moment or two before he’d ordered up some cocktails, pizza, burgers and coffee. And at the very least, we think he’d have enthusiastically waved at the medical marijuana trailer making its rounds.