

**Tailgating parties now big business**

By Nancy Keates and Charles Passy

Last year, before Houston Texans' football games, Hector Galvan hung out in the parking lot with a few friends and a charcoal grill. And this year? He's spent nearly \$10,000 converting an old mail truck into a tailgating mobile, with wall-to-wall AstroTurf and a special grill-fridge combo. He's inviting not only dozens of friends to every game -- but clients, too.

"It's a great way to mix business and pleasure," says the Houston contractor.

The future of tailgating is here -- and it looks a lot like big business. With the NFL season kicking off next week, everyone from food conglomerates to camping suppliers is trying to get a piece of these ballooning pregame affairs. Coleman, which introduced its first tailgating grill last year, now has nine products in its RoadTrip line. A catalog just for this set, **American Tailgater**, features tailgate flags, tailgate tents, even a gas-powered margarita blender ( \$355). There are training camps by Ragu (hosted by John Madden) and parking-lot contests by Jack Daniels. The NFL itself says it sells \$100 million a year of tailgating merchandise, including keg-shape grills. "Tailgating, Inc." has become so big, some folks are buying \$75 scalped passes -- just for a parking space.

A survey sponsored by Coca-Cola last season showed 41 percent of tailgaters spend more than \$500 a season on food and supplies -- while Ragu found more than half prefer the party to the actual game. In all, those in the business estimate up to one-quarter of the 16.9 million people who attend NFL games are tailgaters, with some teams, such as the Houston Texans, saying it's closer to 40 percent.

The change hasn't come without controversy. Some cities have complained about public drunkenness and mountains of postgame trash, while teams stand to lose concession revenue as more people eat outside. But even then, the response has been, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The Buffalo Bills provide showers and changing rooms in the parking lot, while the Denver Broncos go so far as to pick a "most valuable tailgater" each home game. And in Houston, the Texans send out a quarterly Tailgating Times newsletter, sponsor "Tailgating 101" classes at a local sporting-goods store -- and run a Tailgate Village for big groups, starting at \$95 a head. "It's become as big as the game," says NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy.

Indeed, teams that years ago frowned on the events now view them as an added bonus to \$50 tickets and a way to keep the fans coming, win or lose.

Legend has it tailgating started in the 19th century, when football enthusiasts had little choice but to cook in their carriage after a long trip. The parties really took off at colleges around the country in the late 1970s, thanks in part to station wagons, and alumni wanting to reconnect at the games. Along the way it jumped to the NFL, and many tailgaters who've been going to games for years -- Detroit's Hot Tubbers, Minnesota's PurpleDawgs -- have become local icons.

Now, vendors are stepping in with gear that's, well, a bit over-the-top. About a half-dozen companies make big grills that tailgaters can hook to the back of their rigs; for \$3,500, Texan Tailgaters' model also features a generator, fridge and TV. Too much hassle dealing with the trailer hitch? California customizer Galpin Motors has a pickup truck just for tailgating -- with a huge grill, taps for two beer kegs, a blender and flip-down TV screen. (It seats six, and costs \$70,000.) Overall, **American Tailgater**, a catalog and Web site offering more than 100 items from tailgate grills to neckties, says sales have nearly tripled in the last year.

Food companies are tackling this burgeoning industry, too, with special promotions and tailgating events. After it lost its spot as official NFL cola, Coca-Cola decided that getting out of the stadium might be good for business. Beginning last season, it set up its own tailgating area at Atlanta games, and it's co-sponsoring a contest to give away a Coke RV and tailgating kit.

For the NFL, all of this has been a love-hate affair. Teams like the old Houston Oilers didn't allow tailgating, while even now some designate only a portion of the parking lot for pregame partying. And for teams that are run on a tight margin, concession sales are an important revenue center.

But teams and observers say the bashes help build loyal fans who pay in other ways, from boosting the league's TV ratings to buying season tickets.

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