



STRIVING TOWARD PURPOSE

Where do restaurants go from here?

BY PATRIC KUH

RESTAURANTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT MORE THAN THE CONSUMPTION of food. The clatter of dishes and the hum of a playlist serve as the backdrop to moments we carve from hectic lives. Perhaps that's how it's ever been. But the new conditions that were already transforming the business have been magnified by everything that has happened since March. Early in the month, at the Manhattan Beach, California steakhouse where I worked, we were washing our hands every fifteen minutes. We had new policies for table maintenance and customer distancing. By then, it was impossible to ignore the large-party cancellations and the drop-off in reservations.

On Monday, March 16, we ran our last dine-in shift. At the end of that uneasy service, Marcus, the waiter who closed, said, "Shall I strike the camp?" I answered yes. Instead of setting the tables for the next day, he cleared them. As I write this in late April, customers haven't sat at those tables since.

On the first day we offered takeout, I placed a bagged order through a back car window and locked eyes with an older couple who drank Martinis with us every Friday. I wasn't ready for their look: They were scared. Suddenly, I was scared for them. Restaurant closures have reminded me of the strong bond between restaurant workers and guests. This moment has made me realize how many important notions of community, things I thought were givens, were balanced on the single pillar of cash flow. Swiped card, gift card, split check, the crisp extra twenty left folded under the espresso: These represent the lifeblood of businesses sometimes barely getting by. Without money, nothing happens. We also now understand how critical restaurants are to our sense of ourselves, to our cities and towns. It will be hard to pull open a restaurant door without feeling flat-out sad about those doors that won't open again.

The coronavirus pandemic has cut through the industry like a scythe. Restaurants that were hanging on are gone; many that were vibrant have been reduced to GoFundMe links. We're left wondering what venues that celebrate togetherness will look like with distancing protocols

in place. Tables six feet apart mean half the customers. And half the staff.

Even for someone who's lived through quite a bit of change in restaurants, these operating conditions are new. I used to cook, then I worked as a restaurant critic. I've worked as a restaurant manager, and I've been furloughed as a restaurant manager. What I see is an industry at a threshold. The pay disparity between back and front of the house, historically weighted toward dining room, glares when survival is at stake. Technology's disruptive ability to shift business out of dining rooms is only going to increase. The expectations of guests will have to adjust to this new baseline. The fancy places that used to send you into the night with ribbon-wrapped goodies existed in a different historical era. Today, we look at any lit storefront selling seared carne tacos, peanut-scattered kung pao, lacquered barbecue-rib-tip sandwiches, or steaming meatloaf like a beacon of hope.

In this new landscape, we see very clearly the practical and the lyrical roles of restaurants, the two poles of the business. A chasm now separates them. Dictates of efficiency and cost control seem like the opposite of warmth, hospitality, community, and the greater good. *The greater good!* That's a term from pre-COVID-19 days when things weren't yet reduced to what was essential. As we shed the unnecessary, is it fair to expect restaurants to do more than serve good food? Isn't being open enough? Is a sense



of purpose even essential to a restaurant? Is there a way to remain together; to meet the divergent needs of stakeholders from landlords to owners, from crew to purveyors; and still, somehow, make the numbers work?

Access

In search of answers, it's important to examine our past. I was lucky to spend a few years living in France. That style of cooking and eating means a lot to me. The traditions of the French table represent a shared language of perfumed broths and finishing butters. In a crowded Lyon brasserie, a Paris apartment, or a Burgundian home, something beautiful and communal happens. This is my bias. In an earlier book, I surveyed the haute cuisine strand of French dining in American restaurants. I started with the arrival of Henri Soulé and a group of highly trained specialists who represented France at the 1939 World's Fair and went

on to open Le Pavillon on East 55th Street in Manhattan.

Soulé was the epitome of the man-in-the-dark-suit-guarding-the-door type of restaurateur. He was Basque, and he liked to eat flaked salt cod with warm boiled potatoes and chopped parsley. But he made his living with the haute repertoire, carving tableside, and also sizing up while never fawning over those who could afford it. Once, after he refused to eject a photographer who was harassing the Kennedy family from the dining room, Soulé fought publicly with Joseph Kennedy. The story goes that the entire Kennedy clan got up and marched across 55th Street to La Caravelle, a new restaurant opened by ex-Soulé employees.

In Soulé's world, couples ate side by side, a table was yours for the evening, and you paid with a house account and signed your check as you left. If you were a really big shot, Soulé signed it for you. Every summer, when Soulé's clientele retired to seaside estates, Soulé gathered

Jennifer Chase (this page and previous)



his cooks and waiters and set up a summer version of Le Pavillon at The Hedges Inn in East Hampton. It was a mid-twentieth-century version of the medieval ritual of moving with the court.

Let's be clear about the unspoken understanding between Soulé and his clientele. Granting a house account meant controlling the means of payment, which meant the customer had been vetted by income, gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class. Controlling the means of payment also reassured customers they would eat among their own.

When Diners Club introduced their first credit card in 1950, nothing suggested this new payment method would transform everyday life. Not wanting to undercut their traveler's check business, American Express took a pass. Department stores already had internal systems for allowing customers to purchase goods on installment plans; they didn't follow at first. The restaurant business saw the promise. *Gourmet* magazine, then barely

ten years old, launched its card in 1954. Third-party guaranteed payments revolutionized access to restaurants, bypassing the Soulés of the world.

From the plush platters and banquettes of the 1950s through the piston-driven energy of today's dining rooms, American restaurateurs have recast expectations of dining. Joe Baum of Restaurant Associates made the trappings of the restaurant the attraction. The Four Seasons boasted an exterior by Mies van der Rohe and an interior by Philip Johnson. At The Forum of the Twelve Caesars, barmen wore leather jerkins or smocks. (Think less Hedley & Bennett, more Ben Hur).

In Berkeley in the 1970s, postdocs with a thing for the works of Marcel Pagnol stepped into kitchens. By the 1980s, the best ingredients were no longer flown in. They were local. The focus of the restaurant veered from the maitre d' to the chef. And recipes no longer depended on the French canon. They were more interpretive and often personal.

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No matter the changes, access has remained a marker of exclusivity. Today, the wait is what's humbling. A customer may be a titan of industry, but the note a swamped hostess punches into the reservation system swiftly describes him as "baldie in a puff vest waiting at bar."

Math

Now, as we gradually reenter dining rooms, many of us vow never to take restaurant going for granted again. A server's cheery, "What will it be?" rings like an anthem of promise. But to stay open in this moment, restaurant owners will have to make hard calculations of hospitality versus efficiency. The quest to achieve quality with fewer steps is nothing new: A cook starts the braise first, then turns to breaking down fish. A bartender builds several tickets at once, putting the whiskey sour down last so the foamy egg-white head doesn't die in the well.

But the new efficiency is going to require cuts that get to the heart of the business. Restaurants reach the limits of automation more quickly than other industries. We may prefer the impersonality of an ATM machine at the bank, or the speed of a self-scan line at the grocery store, but in hospitality, it takes people on the clock to generate sales. In fact, from a budgeting point of view, labor and sales are inextricably linked.

In restaurant math, division is key. To determine a restaurant's food cost percentage, or what the wings in a chicken-wing basket cost the operator, divide the cost of the ingredient by the sale price. If wings cost you a dollar, and you sell the basket for ten dollars, your food cost is 10%. I'm leaving out the cost of the seasoning and the frying oil, but you get the point.

Labor works like this, too. Let's say I

run a hot-dog cart at a baseball stadium. I agree to pay Joe and Annie \$100 each to work the stand during a Saturday game. My labor is \$200. They park at the stadium on game day and they make \$600. That day, my labor cost is 33%. That's high for a place where there's no support staff, considering a full-service restaurant with bussers, runners and managers can average 35%. The next weekend, the stadium hosts a playoff game. More fans crowd in. My revenue this time is \$1,200. Joe and Annie still cost \$200 in labor, but now the math (200 divided by 1,200) comes in a little over 16.5%. Much better. In fact, it's now a business humming along efficiently.

Any increase in revenue lowers the labor percentage. That's why a chef high-fives a server who just sold a bottle of baller Napa Cab. Once it's all been entered into the cells of an Excel labor log, the extra grand is going to justify employing an additional cook on the line. That's also one of the reasons you hear the ping and see the flash of delivery-system screens in more and more kitchens: With every order that goes out the door, the labor percentage decreases.

The handoff isn't always easy. Drivers arrive without thermal bags to keep the food warm. I remember one who lowered the temperature even more by enjoying a beer at the bar. And have you seen what a stacked burger looks like after a few hairpin turns? Despite my misgivings, delivery is increasingly necessary. Added sales, as we know, lower costs. That difference can give a chef the wiggle room to raise the pay of an hourly worker or increase purchases from a local farmer, cheese maker, or miller. Delivery can also invigorate modest neighborhood restaurants. I'm thinking of two examples in a Los Angeles strip mall I frequent. Chubby Rice, a storefront on Inglewood Avenue, where the spicy wontons arrive on a layer

of chile oil, has marked off a dedicated line for DoorDash orders. Mi Zacatecas, the Mexican restaurant on the other corner, asks you to declare when you enter if you are there to sit down or pick up.

Ghost kitchens, a term for small units in dedicated buildings that execute food for delivery, take it further. They promise to get restaurant food to you without the horrible inefficiency of an actual restaurant. But they beg a question: How much of the restaurant experience can you cut out and still be in the restaurant business? A fraction of these places are now satellite kitchens, built for restaurants that don't want to-go orders to clog their operations. The ghost kitchens that prove successful will get people to download apps, market promotions directly to those consumers, increase their delivery radius, and scale up from there.

To lessen the coldness of that transaction, some people prefer the term "virtual kitchen." It doesn't really matter, for these businesses don't revolve around kitchens. They are about smartphones. Already, there's an app for every player and every stage of the restaurant experience. The customer need only type in "Italian restaurants near me" to get a reservation for her party size within seconds. She can adjust the number and time, make special requests, and cancel if necessary. After dinner, sometimes while still in the dining room, she can review the meal. By early this year, I'd grown used to the strange situation of talking up wine to a customer who'd be checking the retail price simultaneously on his phone. Crew members use their phones to check schedules, swap shifts, adjust availability, and direct message managers. Depending on the app, they can review their own shifts from a selection of smiley and frowny icons. From her phone, the manager can monitor service

timelines, modify schedules, check stock on bottle inventories, and track real-time sales as servers ring orders into point-of-sale monitors. Why would anyone think that the digital sale and in-person delivery of an order of meatballs and two Caesar salads (one hold the anchovies) would present a significant problem?

But extracting the kitchen from the restaurant begs the question: What's left when you've stripped place from food? If we return to that hot-dog stand, many

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interactions that have nothing to do with the hot dogs have been lost. The flirtation that goes into choosing a restaurant is absent—the drive by, the drop in, the decision to return.

A more significant loss is the purpose. Imagine the stand is making money, but I no longer want to pay a fee to park at the stadium. I'll make the hot dogs off-site and deliver them. Over the months, the stand has become a meeting place. Joe knows a customer named Oscar likes his dog with extra kraut, and now they have a friendly banter going on about whose team is going to win. One slow day, Annie got talking to Megan about the persimmon tree in her yard. The next Saturday, Annie brought her some. Personal connections, all those intangibles that make life rich: They fall away if I

merely heat the hot dogs in a satellite kitchen and deliver them to customers.

Has technology brought these changes on? Are these changes destructive? Technology made possible various American restaurant forms. Take diners, a restaurant type we often romanticize. At every stage, the development of diners required advances in technology. My friend, historian Richard Gutman, unearthed a patent application for a compact system of storage drawers, cutting boards, and cooking equipment from 1893, back when diners were still called lunch wagons. Train networks carried prefabricated dining cars from a handful of East Coast factories to destinations across the country. In the process, those stylized cars became iconic structures in the American landscape. Chrome and neon breakthroughs changed the look of diners. So did design materials like Naugahyde and Formica. Back then, spring-loaded plate dispensers were considered cutting-edge technologies.

From the pushcart to the food court,

American ideas about food have long skewed toward convenience. Private-equity folks are still placing billion-dollar bets that ghost kitchens will be the next system that delivers what we wish to eat when we want to eat it. I don't want to order from ghost kitchens, but I have no problem with them succeeding. If the best part of a person's day comes out of a recyclable clamshell, then making the food within that shell is a worthwhile effort. If a chef is able to crack the code, create a brand, and scale up her business, that chef may be able to get home to tuck her kid into bed instead of saying "I love you" on FaceTime.

But can this model deliver hospitality? That's the broader question. Are a dining room, a hostess, tables, and commotion not only conducive to but requirements of hospitality? I'm going to get a little mystical here. I think that there's an exchange of energy involved in hospitality that has little to do with the buzz of a room. I've experienced this fleeting-yet-real sensation in Starbucks lines,

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when I feel taken care of by a cheerful tone. I won't put it beyond the food app folks to figure out how to train, coach, and reward their workers to imbue packaged food handoffs with the positive feelings that restaurants take several hours to create. My hesitation is a little more personal.

A few years ago, I worked at a kebab takeout in LA's Koreatown. The magazine business was reeling from loss of adver-

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tising dollars, and I needed extra income. I donned a logoed shirt and cap, pulled on gloves, and worked the late shift. Music in the karaoke club next door played so loud that we could hear it in the walk-in. (When sung by enough people, the chorus to "Welcome to the Black Parade" permeates walls.) I realize now I was hiding out in the restaurant. No one expected a working restaurant critic to be dishing up food as the clubs let out. I also came to understand how powerful it is to be accepted by members of a crew. When my carving hand flinched from the heat of the broilers, Parish, a Cleveland native who had come to LA to

deejay, taught me how to angle the side flaps and use them as shields. One of the cashiers told me that she sometimes dreamed about the pinging sound Uber Eats orders make when they flash on a wall-mounted tablet. When her shift ended at 3 A.M., she'd take a seat on a stack of crates in the kitchen to wait for the first bus that would get her back to South LA. The irony struck me then. It hits me harder now: She could not afford to use the very service she spent hours processing orders for.

In moments like that, I ask: Has eating out become a hollow transaction? What greater benefit can come from the exchange of money in restaurants and via ghost kitchens? Do staff earn health coverage after a certain quota of hours worked? Is there a system for learning skills that will lead to higher income? I'm blue-skying here—in this new landscape, why not?—but is there a way to match dollars earned by restaurant workers with the dollars they owe on student loans? What other ideas have I not entertained? Hundreds, probably.

Until now, American restaurants have been able to manage the weird amalgam of efficiency, cost control, and purpose. Transactions that rely on extreme efficiency but don't support purpose no longer feel sustainable. We see now that they were sustainable only if you were willing to concede everything that can be uplifting about restaurants. The pang we all felt when restaurants closed proved they were more than about food or about numbers—the challenge is going to be keeping that flame nurtured as we learn to run and inhabit restaurants in a new way.

People

Toward the end of Le Pavillon, Soulé fought with his staff over hours and

wages. In 1960 his chef, Pierre Franey, quit, arguing that Soulé had already cut crew hours too short. "You cannot shave eggs," Franey told *Time* magazine. None of the three key factors were working: haute service was inefficient; food cost and labor percentages were out of balance; and, in an age of growing openness, exclusivity had lost its purpose. Ultimately, Soulé closed because he was no longer able to juggle the three interdependent parts.

Restaurants today are entrusted with everything from invigorating our downtowns, to maintaining links to traditions, to creating jobs. In this moment, as restaurants reopen under conditions no one imagined, I have more questions than answers. Will people gravitate to counter-service restaurants or will being greeted and served by an individual gain a new value? Will we develop a system that addresses wage disparities between front and back of the house? Can apps become restaurant partners? Can happy-hour models extend to delivery pricing, so that the price of a dish depends on the time it is ordered? Will workers have a say in what comes next? Will the young woman I saw smile at the elderly couple in face masks in the fast-food drive-through earn a wage that can support her? And what of the furloughed waitress who has been delivering boxed lunches to our hospital workers? Will the people who served America in a dark hour have voices to speak when this difficult moment has passed?

People are where the magic, the spark, and the warmth start. When restaurant doors closed in March, we did not just

lose the opportunity to order our favorite dish. What saddened us was the fraying of bonds between people, the loss of relationships that we felt helpless to protect. Always demanding, restaurant work can also be uplifting. I've seen hostesses use flashcards to memorize the molecular structure of organic molecules as they prepare to take the MCATs.

I've watched dishwashers send drafts of high school essays from the office computer during breaks. I've charted my days based on the rhythms of my colleagues in kitchens—starting with the cinnamon roll a pastry chef might allow me to grab from a speed rack when I get in. Prep cooks are already there, starting the stocks, sending back the fish that doesn't look great, maintaining the walk-in temperature log. As the clock moves forward, the number of people increases. Here, a barback makes the big ice cubes for the single-barrel bourbon someone will enjoy hours later. There, a chef shows a novice cook how to turn vegetables that will glisten on the short rib special. And there, a waitress runs a rack of glasses through the machine a second time because, after she's done polishing them, she wants them to gleam on the table.

Guests are the final piece. With them, it's a restaurant. Without them it's a dark room, eerily lit by point-of-sale screens. When we sit at what poet Thom Gunn called "the neat arrangement of the cloth," we conjure our better natures. We gain renewed appreciation for excellence. We become aware of our community. We display a heightened civility. Well, so long as the wait isn't too bad. 🍷

Patric Kuh is the author of The Last Days of Haute Cuisine and Becoming a Restaurateur. He lives in Los Angeles. He began writing this essay as a talk for the SFA Spring Symposium on the Future of the Restaurant, which was scheduled for March 28, 2020. Then things took a turn. We thank Patric for adapting—and we believe that restaurants will, too.