MENU

CANADA'S FOODSERVICE MAGAZINE

ON THE PLATE/ HOLDING THE LINE: Restaurants Canada Intelligence presents a playbook for the year ahead. **COFFEE IN A PULLBACK ECONOMY:** From camera-ready cups to human experiences, and **ZEN AND THE ART OF FERMENTATION:** Chefs Chris Locke and Imrun Texeira on the unexpected benefits of slowing things down **/& MORE**

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The Conversation:

with Janet Zuccarini

Founder & CEO of Gusto 54 Restaurant Group and RC Show Women in Hospitality Day Keynote

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[1]Environics Analytics (September 2025), Egg Consumption Omnibus survey [unpublished data]. Prepared for Egg Farmers of Canada.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

It's nearly spring, and with it comes a fresh new look for MENU. You'll still find the same national industry stories and reporting you count on, but you'll also notice a few new features we're genuinely excited to share. One is **The Ledger**; a practical financial column built for operators navigating real-world pressures. Another is **The Drop**, a quick-hit edit of the equipment, tech, food, and drink our editors and contributors can't stop talking about. We hope both become instant favourites.

RC Show 2026 is also just around the corner, and this year it's headed to its new home at **The International Centre in Mississauga**. If it's been a while since you've made the trip—or if you never miss it—consider this your warm nudge: **members receive free Show passes**, and I truly hope I get to see you there.

One moment I'm especially looking forward to is my fireside keynote conversation with **Janet Zuccarini, Founder and CEO of Gusto 54 Restaurant Group**. Janet is one of the industry's most successful and captivating women restaurateurs—brilliant, direct, and deeply thoughtful about what it takes to build restaurants that last. You'll also find a fantastic, candid interview with her in this issue, and I hope it stays with you the way it did with me.

This edition is full of stories that reflect the realities—and the heart—of hospitality right now. ***A Quiet Emergency*** explores the growing momentum of **The Burnt Chef Project** in Canada, and why moving the mental health conversation forward isn't just the right thing to do—it's essential to the strength and success of our industry. We also have ***Holding the Line in 2026*** by Chris Elliott, a grounded look at what operators are up against this year and what it will take to stay steady through it. ***The Sustainability Imperative*** by Jillian Rodak, Restaurants Canada's VP, Sustainability, traces how sustainability has shifted from aspiration to business imperative—shaped by evolving policy, changing priorities, and more practical, operator-focused conversations.

If you love a great Canadian hospitality story, don't miss ***The Fi & Chi Dynasty*** by Gabby Peyton—a must-read look at **Ches's Famous Fish & Chips** in St. John's, Newfoundland, and the legacy behind one of the country's most beloved institutions. And if you're craving something a little more experimental (and deeply useful), ***Zen and the Art of Fermentation*** with chefs Chris Locke and Imrun Texeira is both inspiring and practical—plus, it's a preview of their live fermentation lab at RC Show.

Finally, I want to flag that this issue's edition of The Ledger, ***Cash Isn't Going Anywhere***, features Anna Hardy from the **Bank of Canada**, outlining the continued threat of counterfeit bank notes and what restaurants can do to protect themselves. It's the kind of operational reality that's easy to put off until it lands in your hands at the worst possible moment, and this article offers a clear, helpful path forward.

As always, thank you for everything you do—especially in seasons like this, when the days are still a little short, but the industry keeps moving at full speed. Here's to a hopeful stretch ahead, and to seeing many of you soon in Mississauga.





Kelly Higginson
President & CEO

MENU



ON THE COVER:
Janet Zuccarini,
Founder & CEO of Gusto 54 Restaurant Group

Get Menu on the go!

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[1] Technomic Ignite Consumer Crosstabs, Q3 2024-Q2 2025

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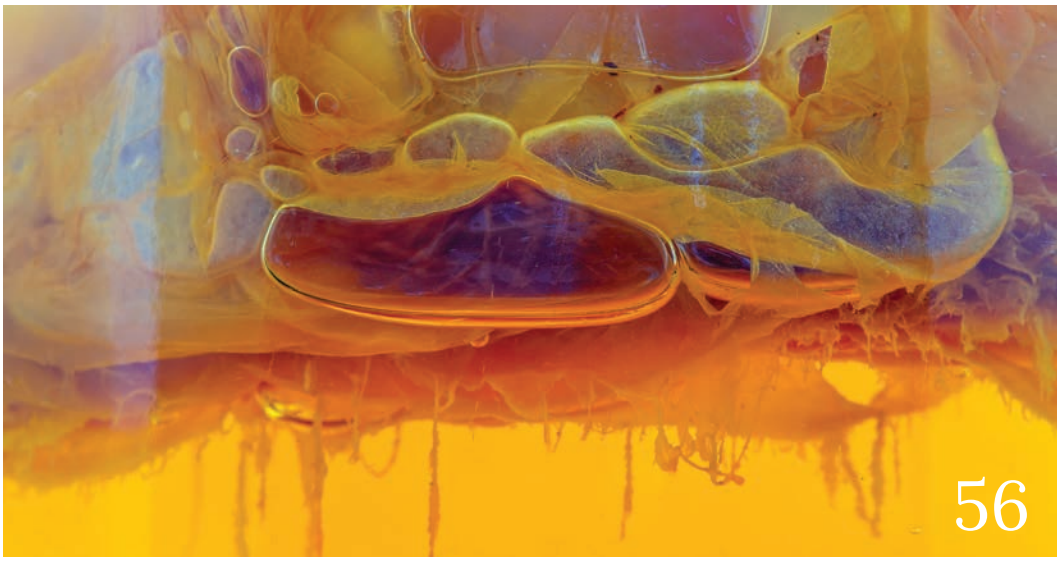
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READY FOR WHAT'S NEXT.

Restaurants Canada recently strengthened its Government Relations bench with three strategic hires—an investment in the kind of focused advocacy the industry needs right now.

As costs, labour pressures, and geo-political and regulatory change continue to reshape the operating landscape, Restaurants Canada's work on their members' behalf has never been more essential: showing up where decisions are made, translating real-world operator challenges into clear policy priorities, and pushing for outcomes that protect the viability and competitiveness of Canada's foodservice sector.

"Advocacy is only as strong as the people driving it, and I have enormous confidence in what this team can deliver for members," says Kelly Higginson, President and CEO of Restaurants Canada. "These are seasoned leaders with the experience to navigate tough, fast-moving policy priorities and the judgment to focus on what will make a real difference for operators. In challenging times, expectations have to be high—and mine are. I'm excited about the impact we can make, together, for our members and for the future of our industry."

With expanded leadership in Ottawa and a strengthened presence in Western Canada, this team brings new capacity, reach, and fresh perspectives to the files on the top of the industry stakeholders' minds.



Anthony Polci
Executive Vice President,
Government Relations and Public Affairs
Ottawa | E: APolci@restaurantscanada.org

In early January, Anthony Polci joined Restaurants Canada as Executive Vice President, Government Relations and Public Affairs, bringing more than two decades of national leadership in government relations, advocacy, public affairs, and association management.

For members, that means a focused, pragmatic voice on the files that shape day-to-day operations. With a career built on steering legislative and regulatory agendas—leading national advocacy strategies, mobilizing members, and representing organizations to Parliament, regulators, industry partners, and the media—Polci brings the experience to turn member priorities into coordinated government relations that advances high-stakes files.

Polci's longest chapter was at the Canadian Bankers Association, where he spent nearly 20 years in roles including Chief Strategy Officer, Head of Government Relations, and Vice President of Government Relations. During that tenure, he helped steer national advocacy across jurisdictions, shaped federal financial-sector legislation through multiple statutory reviews, guided regulatory renewal following the global financial crisis, and built integrated advocacy and member-mobilization campaigns—while also serving as a national spokesperson to Parliament, media, regulators, and industry partners.

Most recently, as President of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport in North America (CILTNA), Polci positioned the organization as a national platform for supply-chain and transportation collaboration—leading policy modernization, expanding partnerships, and advancing regulatory reform with government and industry stakeholders.

Earlier, he held senior roles in the Office of the Minister of Transport—including Chief of Staff, Director of Communications, and Senior Policy Advisor—working on major files such as the Canada Transportation Act Review, airline restructuring, and the Union-Pearson Express project, and directing federal crisis communications following 9/11.

Recognized for many years as one of Canada's Top 100 Lobbyists, Polci is known for strategic judgment, coalition-building, and disciplined, measurable advocacy. He'll be based in Ottawa, Ontario, joining the team leading Restaurants Canada's high-level Government Affairs work.



Matt Triemstra
Vice President, Federal Affairs
Ottawa | E: MTriemstra@restaurantscanada.org

Matt Triemstra, Restaurants Canada's Vice President, Federal Affairs, brings more than 20 years in government relations, public affairs, and political communications, paired with a reputation in Ottawa for moving complicated files from conversation to action.

For members, that translates into a practical approach to federal engagement: clear framing that resonates with decision-makers, steady management of policy work, and senior-level stakeholder outreach designed to keep priorities advancing.

Triemstra has built his career around helping organizations show up in government with clarity and purpose, with particular strengths in complex public policy, corporate social responsibility, and high-level stakeholder engagement.

Most recently, he served as Associate Principal at Navigator, leading the firm's Ottawa government relations practice and supporting work tied to Early Learning and Child Care, MAID legislation, and environmental policy related to recycled content mandates.

Previously, he held senior leadership roles at Ensight Canada (including Vice President and General Manager), consulting roles at NATIONAL Public Relations, and worked on Parliament Hill, including as Manager of Caucus Services & Operations for the Conservative Resources Group. Recognized as one of Canada's top lobbyists by Maclean's and The Hill Times, Triemstra also brings a strong record of community involvement through not-for-profit and philanthropic board service in Ottawa.



Cheryl Maitland Muir
Vice President, Western Canada
Vancouver | E: CMuir@restaurantscanada.org

Cheryl Maitland Muir has stepped into the role of Vice President, Western Canada, bringing more than 20 years of leadership in public affairs, government relations, and strategic communications, along with a track record of building partnerships that strengthen competitiveness across industry and government.

For members in Western Canada, she brings a regionally anchored perspective—an understanding of restaurants' role in local economies and community life, and the ability to translate on-the-ground realities into effective engagement with governments and stakeholders.

Muir's experience spans senior roles both regionally and nationally. Most recently, she served as Vice President, Communications & Public Affairs at DIGITAL (Canada's Global Innovation Cluster for Digital Technologies), where she led government relations, communications, and stakeholder engagement and secured $17 million in new federal program funding.

Before that, she held multiple senior roles with the Business Council of British Columbia, including Senior Vice President, Public Affairs & Communications, directing advocacy campaigns and coalition-building and advising executives and the Board on political and policy strategy.

Her earlier work includes leading public affairs and communications for Western Canada at Canada's National Brewers, advocating on issues in a highly regulated environment—from taxation and distribution to labour policy and sustainability frameworks—while building relationships across B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. She also held various roles with the Government of British Columbia.

Muir began her career in the restaurant industry, giving her firsthand insight into the sector's day-to-day pressures. In this role, she will lead Restaurants Canada's advocacy, government relations, and stakeholder engagement across Western Canada, helping strengthen a competitive and resilient foodservice sector.

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Stay on top of government relations and member news in the Member Portal on restaurantscanada.org.

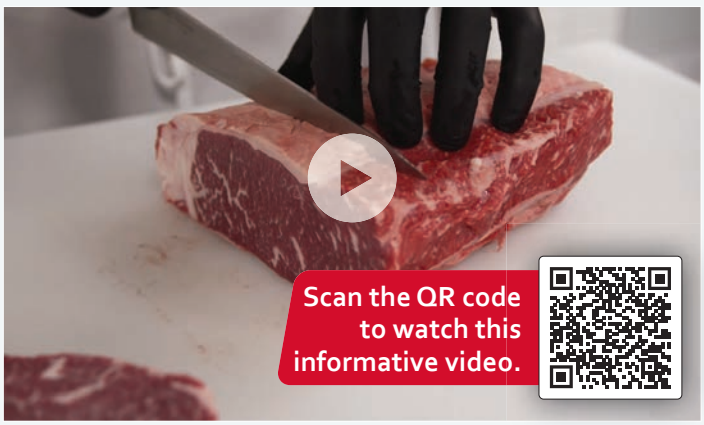
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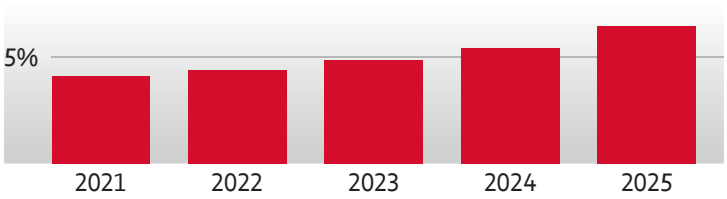
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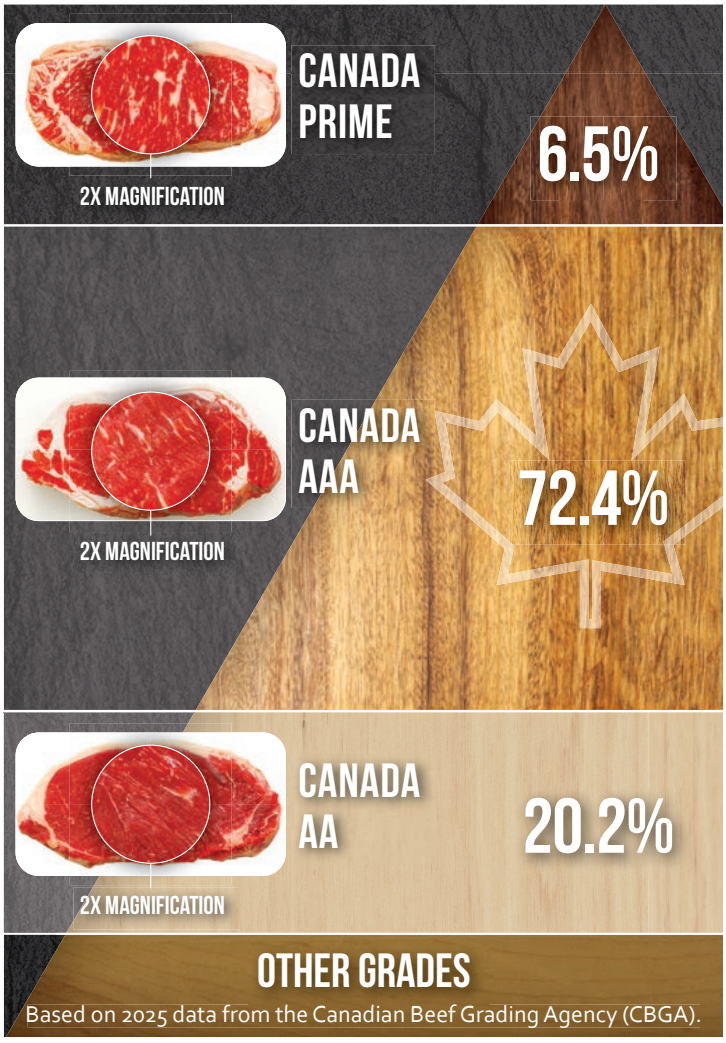
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CANADIAN BEEF

Holding the Line

A steady playbook for the year ahead.



BY CHRIS ELLIOTT,
CHIEF ECONOMIST
& VP, RESEARCH,
RESTAURANTS CANADA

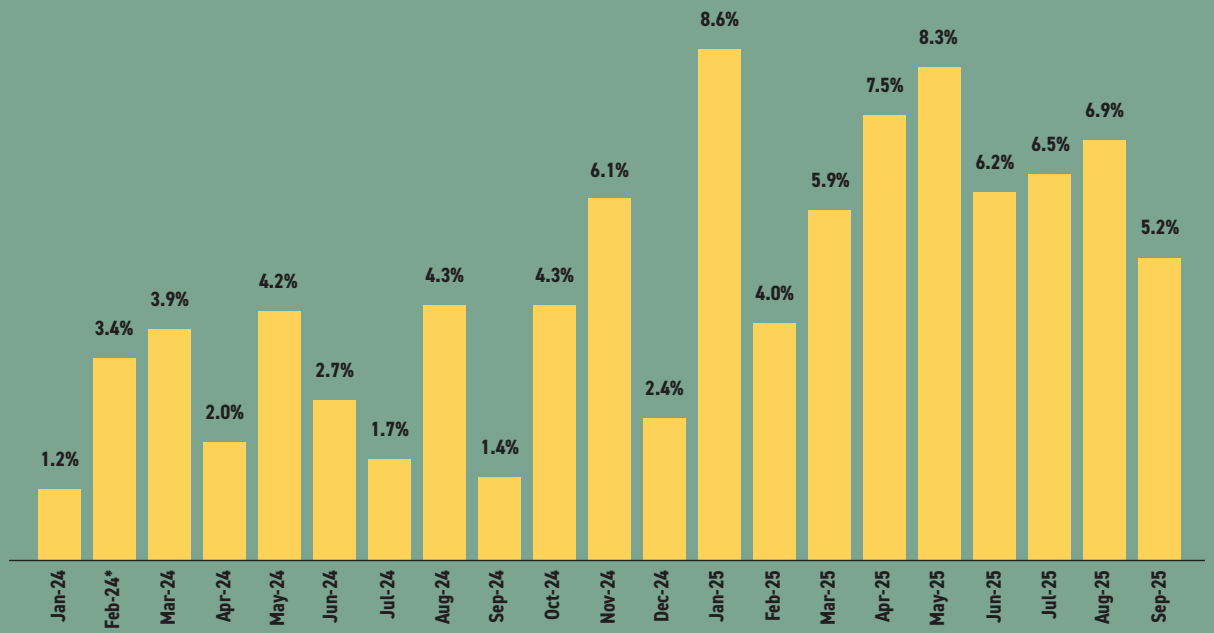
I'm not going to pretend there's something magical about the calendar turning over—restaurant owners are frankly exhausted with "fresh start" narratives. Most have been operating in survival mode for years—absorbing cost shocks, rebuilding teams, adapting to shifting consumer behaviour, and doing it all while trying to protect their standards and their sanity.

What operators could use is a clear-eyed read on what's coming, and a practical set of moves that can help them stay stable—financially, operationally, and emotionally—through a year that's shaping up to be pivotal.

After a surprisingly strong 2025, 2026 will likely feel different. Canadian consumers proved far more resilient than expected last year, buoyed by a wave of patriotic spending and a sharp increase in domestic travel. One of the biggest drivers of that surge was a 30 per cent decline in the number of Canadians travelling to the United States.

The result was a meaningful boost to foodservice sales, which rose by six per cent or more in six of the first nine months of 2025. That performance is remarkable given the broader macroeconomic climate: a trade war that has pushed consumer confidence to its lowest level since the Conference Board of Canada began tracking the data in 2002, and an ongoing affordability crisis. According to a recent Angus Reid survey, nearly eight in ten Canadians have cut back on non-essential spending in an effort to save money.

COMMERCIAL FOODSERVICE SALES – CANADA
(year-over-year nominal change)



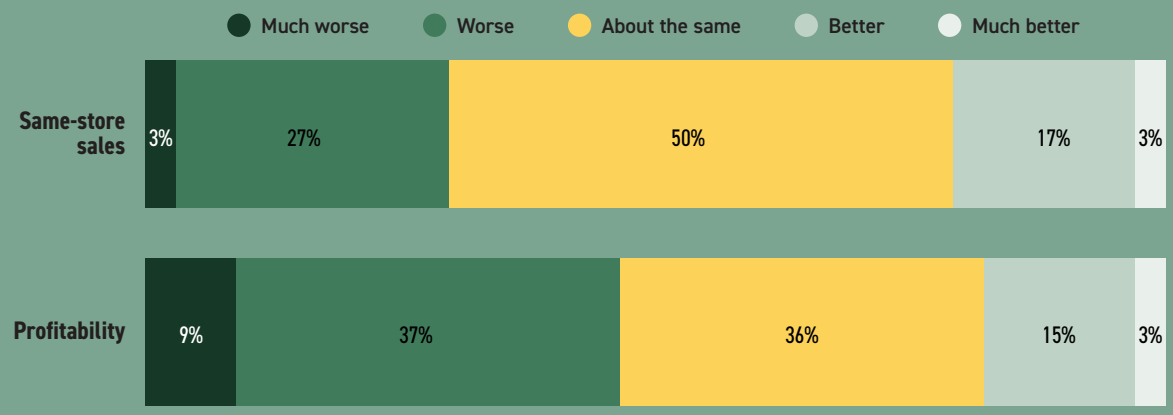
Source: Restaurants Canada and Statistics Canada
*leap year effect removed for February 2024

Yet restaurant spending can only defy gravity for so long. Many of the forces that propelled foodservice sales in 2025—such as the GST/HST holiday and the surge in domestic tourism—won't be here in 2026. Population growth, which also provided a meaningful lift to demand in recent years, is expected to stall. Against that backdrop, it will be difficult for the industry to match last year's robust sales growth rates in the current economic climate.

Operators see this coming and are bracing for a tougher year ahead. Our latest Restaurant Outlook Survey shows that 30 per cent of operators expect same-store sales to be worse in 2026 than in 2025, compared with just 20 per cent who expect an improvement. More concerning, nearly half of respondents anticipate lower profits. In an industry already operating on razor-thin margins, any further erosion could trigger a wave of business closures.



Looking ahead to 2026, how do you expect each of the following will compare to 2025?



Source: Restaurants Canada's Restaurant Outlook Survey

So rather than delivering a pep talk, I want to offer something more useful: five priorities that can help restaurants protect what they've built—and make decisions with a little more control, even in a volatile year.



Priority 1: Treat labour planning as risk management.

With labour shortages still affecting service levels—and wages now a much larger share of operating costs—labour planning in 2026 needs to be treated as a risk management strategy, not just an HR function. In an environment where replacing an employee is both costly and time-consuming, retention is often the most effective way to protect margins and maintain consistency for guests.

Simple, intentional steps can make a meaningful difference. Predictable scheduling, clear paths for advancement, and regular feedback go a long way in keeping teams engaged and reducing unnecessary turnover.

Practical actions operators can take include:

- Auditing scheduling and staffing patterns to improve predictability and fairness.
- Investing in cross-training and upskilling to increase flexibility and reduce burnout.
- Implementing stay interviews, not just exit interviews, to identify issues before employees walk out the door.

Several restaurant companies are already demonstrating how thoughtful labour strategies can support both retention and performance. Chipotle, for example, has invested heavily in in-person, "shoulder-to-shoulder" training, helping new hires build confidence quickly and feel connected to their teams. The company also emphasizes internal career pathways, with many managers and senior leaders having started as hourly crew. Beyond wages, Chipotle offers well-being supports, including a healthcare concierge to help employees navigate mental health services—recognizing that retention is influenced by more than pay alone.

Other operators are taking similar approaches. Some national and regional chains have expanded cross-training programs to allow staff to move between roles, improving schedule stability while creating development opportunities. Others have introduced more transparent promotion criteria and structured training milestones, giving employees a clearer sense of what progression looks like within the organization. A growing number of operators are also experimenting with more predictable scheduling practices, acknowledging that work-life balance is increasingly important in attracting and retaining staff.

Managing labour costs while keeping teams engaged will be critically important in the year ahead. For many operators, the most achievable gains in 2026 won't come from cutting hours or chasing constant hiring—but from building a more stable, motivated workforce that can carry the business through a challenging year.

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Priority 2: Watch expenses like a real-time dashboard.

Over the last two years, restaurants have faced double-digit increases in costs—from food and labour to rent, utilities, and insurance. But we've reached a tipping point: operators can't keep passing these higher costs on to guests. As one owner told us, "We're seeing fewer visits and rising costs, with no room to raise menu prices."

Our surveys show how operators are responding:

- 53% are changing suppliers
- 50% are streamlining menus
- 32% are reducing operating hours

Even small adjustments—like revising portions or removing low-selling items—can have a disproportionate impact on profitability. Benchmarking performance can also highlight where efficiencies can be gained. Restaurants Canada members can access the **Operations Report** on the Member Portal to see how their business compares and identify areas for improvement.

The key takeaway: controlling costs requires vigilance. Regularly reviewing expenses, testing small changes, and understanding performance metrics can make the difference between staying profitable or falling behind in 2026.



Priority 3: Deliver unmistakeable value through guest experience.

With economic uncertainty expected to persist through 2026—particularly given the lack of a U.S. trade deal—consumers will remain cautious about discretionary spending. People are more likely to dine out when the experience feels special, consistent, and worth it. That's where the "value equation" comes in: guests weigh price against quality, service and atmosphere.

In a competitive market, loyalty hinges on memorable experiences. Operators can make meaningful improvements by:

- Training staff to provide consistent, attentive service.
- Listening to and acting on guest feedback.
- Making small, targeted enhancements to ambiance or service flow.

Even minor changes—like improving lighting, optimizing table layouts, or refining order accuracy—can transform the guest experience. A welcoming, reliable atmosphere encourages repeat visits, positive reviews, and word-of-mouth referrals, which are critical in a tighter economy.



Priority 4: Reduce friction with thoughtful technology.

Technology can be a gamechanger for restaurants, helping reduce labour strain, capture better data, and improve operational speed. But the key isn't adopting every new platform—it's choosing the right tools that deliver tangible benefits.

Well-selected technology can:

- Reduce errors and manual work.
- Streamline routine tasks.
- Provide actionable insights for better decision-making.
- Enhance convenience for both staff and guests.

The best approach is thoughtful integration. Digital tools should simplify operations without overwhelming teams. Examples include automated inventory tracking, online ordering systems that sync with the kitchen, or scheduling platforms that reduce last-minute staffing headaches. When used strategically, technology becomes a force multiplier, helping operators run leaner, smarter, and more efficiently in 2026.



Priority 5: Strengthen community ties that drive loyalty.

Restaurants that actively engage with their communities build loyalty and gain a local edge. One example I heard about recently concerned the U.S.-based, fast casual chain CAVA, which has grown successfully even as other chains struggled. A key factor in their success is a genuine commitment to community—beyond branding—delivered in real, mission-driven ways.

Some of the initiatives CAVA has implemented include:

- ***Community Days:*** When opening a new restaurant, CAVA hosts events with free meals and donations to local nonprofits, often in underserved neighborhoods.
- ***Food Bank Partnerships:*** The chain collaborates with food banks to serve meals to those in need.
- ***Reducing Food Waste:*** Pilot programs in nearly 50 restaurants with Too Good To Go redirect surplus food to customers, helping reduce waste.
- ***Paid Community Leave:*** Hourly employees receive two paid days annually to volunteer or participate in activism.

Canadian operators don't need to replicate these programs to see benefits. Even small, authentic acts of engagement—like supporting a local charity, hosting a community event, or volunteering with staff—can foster stronger guest loyalty and boost local brand recognition. The principle is simple: when a restaurant demonstrates it cares about the people and neighborhoods it serves, customers notice, remember and return.

The Takeaway: It's all about staying steady.

If 2026 is a tougher year, the answer isn't a grand reset. It's a set of practical operating habits that protect what matters: your people, your costs, your guest experience, your systems, and your place in the community.

The principles are familiar, but they're worth stating plainly—especially in a year where energy and bandwidth are limited:

- Set specific, manageable, actionable goals rather than vague ambitions.
- Avoid taking on too many changes at once, which can lead to burnout.
- Treat improvements as small habits or routines—not "big transformations"—so they're more likely to stick.

2026 will undoubtedly be challenging. But by staying steady on the fundamentals—labour, costs, guest experience, technology, and community engagement—restaurants can do more than protect profitability in the short term. They can build the kind of control and predictability that's been in short supply for years: more stable teams, clearer cost visibility, tighter systems, and a more reliable guest value proposition. Those gains compound. And when the storm clouds eventually clear, the operators who used this period to strengthen their fundamentals won't just be relieved—they'll be positioned to grow with confidence.





RC Show Restaurants Canada

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Presented by:

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The Sustainability Imperative:

What comes next for foodservice?

BY JILLIAN RODAK,
VP, SUSTAINABILITY,
RESTAURANTS CANADA

2025 was an interesting year for sustainability. The predominant message in the media was that CEOs and their investors were pulling back their resources dedicated to reducing climate change impacts, DEI initiatives, ESG reporting, and more. It felt like a perfect storm—an economic slowdown, and the Trump administration's rollback of climate legislation—seemed to give businesses permission to deprioritize the work.

What I've observed is the media perpetuating a narrative that is based on partial truths. It is absolutely true that many major companies have peeled back their climate commitments or removed their DEI programs. But it's also true that many have not. I've had two top Canadian executives (outside the food industry) share directly opposing views on the current global state of sustainability—proof that the answer to "What's happening to sustainability?" is more nuanced than it seems. Still, I'd like to offer my take.

As a sustainability professional who has worked in this space for sixteen years, I've had a front row seat for the evolution of this field. When I left business school in 2010 with a fire in my belly to use business tools to drive progress, this thing called "sustainability" was not part of the Canadian lexicon (save for a group of folks

who had already been building it out for years). My parents were concerned about what I was doing with my life because they had no idea what I was talking about when I shared my ambitions with them. As the 2010s rolled along, momentum grew around sustainability. Millennials were asking for "eco-friendly" product choices, climate science was gaining more credibility, Europe was making headwinds with regulation, and Canada signed the Paris Agreement.

In January of 2020, Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock (the world's largest asset management firm) declared in his annual letter to CEOs that climate risk is investment risk. This 2020 letter marked a turning point for the financial industry and had a ripple effect across the corporate world. It signalled that the world's largest asset manager was aligning its investment approach with sustainability principles, a signal that kicked the sustainability portfolio into overdrive. For me, it meant I no longer needed to stare into blank faces when I explained my profession. Almost every large company was building out sustainability strategies, making bold commitments, and reporting on progress. Even COVID didn't decelerate the momentum. The slowing of the world to a near stop heightened our sense that we are not fully in control of our biosphere and are more aware of the scale of human impact on our ecosystems.

Fast-forward to the beginning of 2025, and we saw the pendulum swing: rising costs, President Trump's retreat on climate policy, regulatory complexity in Canada, increased scrutiny of the ROI for sustainability initiatives, and greenwashing fears. For many major corporations, these factors built a case for a priority shift away from sustainability. As someone very passionate about their line of work, a natural reaction to this narrative might be frustration and disdain, but actually I believe we are living in an expected—and ultimately necessary—chapter in the sustainability story.

Leaders *should* be scrutinizing the ROI of their investments in sustainability. CEOs *ought* to be thinking about sustainability as a business enabler. Executives *must* consider the truth behind the environmental claims they make. Sustainability can't survive as a siloed cost centre that constantly needs to advocate for its importance. It has always needed to underpin the way we do business.

I think this moment is a reality check—both on how we got here, and on what needs to change moving forward. We're entering a normalization period, and it will likely take a few years before sustainability feels fully "business-as-usual" again. Perhaps oddly, I find that energizing. I believe we'll land where we need to be.

At the start of 2026, the global food system is in a highly vulnerable state. Climate change is the most significant and expansive threat to global food production systems. While the dominant approach to farming—monoculture—increases productivity in the short term, it accelerates soil erosion and reduces system resilience, increasing dependency on global markets and vulnerability to external shocks. The full value chain of players in the food industry has begun to feel the effects of this vulnerability, from farmers to food courts. World leaders, entrepreneurs, large corporate groups, and others are working on sustainable solutions to rebuild resilient food systems, with some great innovation at play already—but more on that later.

"Leaders *should* be scrutinizing the ROI of their investments in sustainability. CEOs *ought* to be thinking about sustainability as a business enabler. Executives *must* consider the truth behind the environmental claims they make. Sustainability can't survive as a siloed cost centre that constantly needs to advocate for its importance. It has always needed to underpin the way we do business."

The long-term survival of our global food system, and consequently the foodservice sector, will rely on these sustainable solutions, so this industry has little choice but to continue to invest in sustainability. Accordingly, the aforementioned "sustainability dip" has not been as prevalent in foodservice. In fact, I've noticed a reverse trend: many major foodservice businesses are hyper-focusing on the most material sustainability issues for their companies.

Dusting off my old consulting hat, this is precisely what I would have advised them to do. Sustainability is having an awkward coming-of-age moment—with uncertainty and some poor short-term decision-making in the mix—but we can expect a more refined, confident way of doing business on the other side.

CANADA'S POLICY LANDSCAPE

Canada's policies on sustainability have been an important catalyst for the way restaurants are thinking about and prioritizing resources on these issues. In the latter half of 2025, Canada's liberal government rolled back several climate policies put in place by then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in favour of large, industrial emissions activities. Prime Minister Carney's Climate Competitiveness Strategy aims to unite economic growth with climate action, working to position Canada as a leader in clean technology and innovation. As broad strokes are painted at the federal level, for our members at Restaurants Canada, regulations covering plastics, recycling, and organic waste are what remain most top-of-mind.

The federal plastics ban, introduced in 2022, is now before the courts on appeal—and we've been waiting more



> I emphasized earlier the vulnerable state of our global food system, and alluded to the work underway from a cross-section of leaders to repair this vulnerability. This transformation is all about building back resilience, and it is happening in a multitude of ways."

than a year and a half for a decision. This decision matters because it could impact the way provinces and cities design future regulations on plastics. In the meantime, the ban holds and we are closely monitoring for a decision. The Federal Plastics Registry (FPR) is in its second reporting year, and Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) announced that they will be delaying the reporting requirements for Phases 2 and 3 of the registry. Phase 1 reporting will remain in effect with an expected September deadline, and ECCC has committed to further consultation with Restaurants Canada this year on the future phases of the registry.

With extended producer responsibility (EPR) in a major transition phase for several provinces, we are working to advocate for more cost mitigation, transparency, and harmonization between regions. At the municipal level, by-laws aiming to reduce single-use items continue to arise in a variety of formats across the country. While RC's monthly Sustainability Tracker helps members stay updated on these bylaws, we are working on approaches to keep these bylaws as consistent as possible to ease the operational challenges many restaurants are facing. Given the current climate around sustainability (pun intended) and the ever-shifting Canadian regulatory context, restaurant operators are working to prioritize the areas that will keep the lights on and guests happy.

THE FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

I emphasized earlier the vulnerable state of our global food system, and alluded to the work underway from a cross-section of leaders to repair this vulnerability. This transformation is all about building back resilience, and it is happening in a multitude of ways.

One major priority is a focus on food loss and waste. It's an area that's back in full force, having taken a bit of a backseat to greenhouse gas emissions reductions over the past five years or so.

At the global level, coalitions of executives like Champions 12.3 have formed to accelerate action on food loss and waste prevention. Last November at COP30 in Brazil, the United Nations Environment Programme launched the Food Waste Breakthrough, aiming for a 50 per cent reduction in food waste by 2030.

Then, in fall 2025, the EU approved legislation introducing binding food-waste reduction targets to be met by the end of 2030—including a 30 per cent per-capita reduction across retail, restaurants, foodservice, and households, relative to the 2021–2023 average. The law will be published in the EU Official Journal, and countries will have 20 months to transpose the rules into national legislation.

Canada often looks to Europe as its north star in sustainability regulation, and I expect we will see more focus on food waste coming down our regulatory pipeline. Over the past year in Canada, the CSA Group published a draft standard on food loss and waste to create consistent guidelines across the country. This effort is complemented by the Circular Innovation Council's recent report on organic waste diversion in Canada, which includes a focus on restaurants.

Canadian restaurants are looking closely at their food waste impacts too. Operators have a double incentive: cutting waste directly adds back some margin while reducing unnecessary harm to the planet. Many operators are getting better at optimizing their inventory management and estimating portion sizes to prevent food waste from the outset. At Restaurants Canada, we're seeing some members repurpose surplus foods into new menu items, or work with food rescue organizations to find a new home for food that is still safe to eat.

The momentum is clear, and I think this is great news for foodservice. I see

this traction in our sector as an opportunity to demonstrate initiative and leadership, moving the needle on an area of sustainability embedded in our business that we can directly help influence.

Way up the value chain, regenerative agriculture is playing an important role in the global effort to re-build food system resilience. Regenerative agriculture is more than a buzzword—it's a blueprint

for long-term resilience in our food system. At its core, regenerative farming focuses on restoring and improving soil health through practices like reduced or no-till farming, cover cropping, and

crop rotation. These methods help sequester carbon, reduce erosion, and boost biodiversity, creating healthier ecosystems that can sustain food production long-term.

Scaling these practices to meet

global demand remains a challenge, but the underlying approach offers a promising path forward. For the foodservice sector, understanding this shift matters because major suppliers and brands are already investing heavily in regenerative agriculture.

McCain Foods, for example, has committed to engaging 100 per cent of its potato acreage in regenerative practices by 2030, using the McCain Regenerative Agriculture Framework. A&W Canada and Cargill have also made significant commitments through the Grazing Forward Initiative to advance regenerative practices across Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. PepsiCo, meanwhile, has set ambitious targets as part of its broader Positive Agriculture agenda.

Embedding regenerative solutions at scale will take participation from every part of the food system. For foodservice operators, sourcing already involves tough trade-offs—balancing cost with quality, logistics and values.

Some major food companies are starting to make procurement decisions with regenerative farming in mind. As that momentum builds, access and options are likely to expand for smaller operators, too. This isn't about changing menus overnight. It's about recognizing a shift that will shape sourcing strategies, strengthen reputations, and influence competitive advantage in the years ahead.

Sustainability isn't disappearing — it's evolving. Climate pressures are mounting, and regulations and consumer expectations are shifting and intensifying. For foodservice, this is both a challenge and an opportunity. For me, 2026 is about affirming foodservice's role in the transformation of our global food system and taking action in ways that are feasible for operators.

We are in this for the long game, and I look forward to what comes next.

Have more sustainability questions? Reach out to Jillian Rodak at: JRodak@restaurantscanada.org

RC Show Restaurants Canada

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Business Hub for Restaurants – Grow Stage

Sustainability regulations are complex and fast-changing, but this session breaks them down in plain language—covering what today's rules mean for foodservice, where compliance risk is rising, and what operators need to know about Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) now and next. Then, the focus shifts to real-world results, with operators and sustainability leaders sharing tested ideas, lessons learned, and clear, actionable steps you can use to move your own sustainability goals forward.

From Loss to Leadership: Tackling Food Waste in Foodservice

Sunday, March 8 | 3:00 PM – 4:00 PM
Business Hub for Restaurants – Grow Stage

Cutting food waste takes more than good intentions—it demands coordination across the entire value chain. This candid, solutions-focused session brings together sustainability leaders to unpack the toughest friction points and share clear, actionable tactics and real-world examples so suppliers, operators, and food-rescue partners can collaborate for the biggest wins.

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THE CONVERSATION:

with Janet Zuccarini

On the merits of chasing sunshine, and finding clarity in the storm.

Janet Zuccarini has spent nearly three decades building restaurants that don't just feed people—they take them somewhere. In Canadian restaurant circles, she's a rarefied presence: a hospitality superstar with an instinct for experience, design, and the hard mechanics of making restaurants work. Since opening Trattoria Nervosa in 1996, the founder and CEO of Gusto 54 has grown a roster of Toronto standouts—Gusto 101 and 501, Pai, Chubby's—then crossed the border to take her biggest swing yet: Felix, a Venice Beach trattoria on Abbot Kinney Boulevard that became a national obsession and was crowned #1 on Esquire's Best New Restaurants in America list.

But Zuccarini's story is as much about staying power as it is about ascendance. The soaring success of Felix sits in sharp contrast to the heartache of closing Stella, her ambitious West Hollywood venture with Rob Gentile, a reminder that even the best operators are navigating a harsher, more volatile era. That tension between triumph and tough calls is exactly why the industry is watching her so closely. As restaurateurs search for higher ground, many see Zuccarini as a bellwether for what comes next: how to protect quality, build culture, and evolve the model when many of the old rules no longer apply.

Today, the Gusto 54 restaurant family spans two countries and two very different dining cultures. In this conversation, Zuccarini reflects on what she learned the moment she landed in L.A.—from the "service gap" she couldn't ignore to the operational realities of building across a border—and why, even after a few hard knocks, she's still chasing the work, the challenge, and the next evolution of hospitality.

> I was always escaping winter, so I decided to kill two birds with one stone. I'm going to move to where there's sunshine and add in a challenge—because I personally need to always have challenges. I fight boredom. That's my theme in life."



L to R: Janet Zuccarini and her late husband, Robbie Robertson, Martin Scorsese, Evan Funke at Felix.

MENU Magazine: What first influenced your decision to jump into the U.S.?

Janet Zuccarini: Hmmm... I would like to invite you to walk outside your door right now... It's 75° F and sunny today—that's really it. I mean, this is my company, and I wanted to grow in a way that I wanted to grow. I was always escaping winter, so I decided to kill two birds with one stone. I'm going to move to where there's sunshine and add in a challenge—because I personally need to always have challenges. I fight boredom. That's my theme in life.

So, go to a different country, open a new restaurant, and do our best work. I had all these boxes I wanted to tick off, and that became Felix. And we are, as a company, very proud of Felix.

MM: What hit you right away when you opened in L.A.—what was different, and how did you have to adapt?

JZ: There's a real difference in the level of service. Culturally, it's a surf town. Nobody's in a rush here. And as a diner, it can be annoying. I saw that service gap and thought, okay—we can bring some *Toronto energy* into the service. And when I say, "Toronto energy," I also mean New York and Chicago—East Coast energy. That was the first thing I learned.

Then I met somebody working in a big restaurant group here in Los Angeles and he told me it was going to be very hard to find managers that get that East Coast vibe. So, I look for people coming from New York, Toronto, Chicago—anything on that side. That was my first lesson, and that was the first gap that I saw.

MM: So, the gap is in the pace of service?

JZ: It's what everyone who's never lived here imagines: slow and relaxed.

No one walks fast. No one seems to be going anywhere fast. When I was living in Venice Beach, I kept thinking: does anyone have a job? Everyone's out in the middle of the day – doesn't anyone have anywhere to be?

MM: Once you adjusted to the pace, what did you focus on or refine to stand out?

JZ: You look for the gaps you can fill and do better, and people will appreciate that. Nobody likes slow service or servers forgetting your order—nobody likes that. And it was culturally accepted here. I just saw opportunity and so, I leaned into excellent service.

We got one of our first serious reviews—it might've been *Esquire*—and it said something like: you know how some restaurants open and you feel like they might be in kindergarten and they need time, so you cut them a break? Felix opened with a PhD.

So, I knew this was needed in Los Angeles.

MM: What "East Coast hospitality" practices proved most valuable at Felix?

JZ: Hardcore training. You feel very uncomfortable in any job when you're not trained properly. We have a whole team, and we brought a whole team. In our company, you may start as a server, but then you get "certified" to be a coach. Once you're a coach, you can fly down. We had a team fly down to Los Angeles—everyone stayed in Airbnbs close by in Venice—and you coach on the floor with our new hires.

It's a lot of training, but it's also a lot of respect. You want to treat your team well. You want to feed them well. If you sit at a restaurant and your server is kind of nasty or short, you know what's going on above. You have to make your team happy, and that comes from the leaders. Everyone up here has to be really happy, treated well—it trickles down.

When I started off in the business, I was only ever fed carbs at my own restaurant. I can't survive on a plate of pasta six days a week—I need protein. I learned, by being a server, that we have to treat people well. Happy people make people happy—that's another saying in our company. Then they come to your table happy to work for the company. A server with a smile on their face—that's the most important thing in service.

When we open a restaurant, I'll work the floor, I'll work the door, and I just keep telling people:

> We're all asking how we're going to survive the changing times, and I'm embracing it. AI—how are we going to use it? I love AI. Let's go. Figure out everything. You have to move with the times or you're a dinosaur and you're done."

keep smiling. Mistakes can happen during service, but if you have a nice person serving you—actually caring—it feels great.

MM: How do you keep your cross-border teams united?

JZ: The office and leadership team are in Toronto, and they will fly to Los Angeles and spend time here when needed. I don't think it's ideal, but it's what we have to do.

There are a lot of meetings. We got comfortable over Zoom, and once in a while we do longer stays. Demetrio Bianco, our head of operations—he's been with me for 30 years—just spent three weeks in Los Angeles at Felix and boy did I notice the difference. The team just stepped it up.

We need that regular injection—a presence of leadership—and we're constantly fine-tuning how we're operating here. Whatever's needed, we fly people down. It's an expense we take on.



L to R: Janet Zuccarini and Katie Couric at Felix.

Also, our leadership team is unchanged. We're very proud of this: there's not been one leader that has been replaced. Head of operations: 30 years. Our president has been here 12 years—but I didn't have a president prior to finding her. Our team stays. When you treat people well, and pay them well—people stay with you, and that helps operations.

MM: So, you don't see U.S. versus Canadian operations as distinct—it's one family. Gusto is Gusto no matter where you are?

JZ: Yes.

MM: What's your big preoccupation right now in your career?

JZ: Managing lawsuits is number one.

Our lives in hospitality were very different pre-COVID. I was on easy street for about 20 years. We were making money. I felt like I could not fail at anything. We were doing so well—then Covid hit, and it changed how we operated. We went from thriving to surviving. It was terrible timing: 2020 was our big year—we had five restaurants under construction—after growing the company so slowly. And I'm still paying for that today.

We survived by getting into debt. We were very proud that we self-funded every project—every project in my group was funded with revenue from existing restaurants. Then 2020 happened. Revenue went to zero. But we had millions and millions owed on construction sites. Disastrous. It's been almost six years since COVID. When it started, I said it set me back 10 years—and I was right. We were set back a decade. Before the pandemic, it was, "Let's open restaurants. Let's go." Now, I'm focused on paying down debt.

I'm excited to get back into thriving. I think 2027 is going to be a turn for us. Hospitality has changed a lot. There are so many factors that make it more challenging than pre-2020. It was easy. People used to say, "You're in a challenging industry," and I was like, "Well, I'm always making money. Our profit margins are huge. I don't understand why everyone says it's difficult." It really wasn't for us. But now, you have to be astute in business. You have to figure out this new terrain—because we're definitely in new terrain.

People aren't drinking—especially in L.A. —and where do we make our money? Alcohol. Who's your best diner? The person drinking a lot who orders a lot of food. And now people are on GLP-1s. They're ordering less and sharing mains. People are also worried about the economy and aren't spending as much or dining out as much. Now that you can order in nearly anything, people are staying home.

So, we're looking at ways to exercise economies of scale and manage tighter. We have 13 restaurants, but independents have an even harder time. We're all asking how we're going to survive the changing times, and I'm embracing it. AI—how are we going to use it? I love AI. Let's go. Figure out everything. You have to move with the times or you're a dinosaur and you're done.

MM: Your grit and resilience are impressive. Do you still love this business as much as you did earlier in your career?

JZ: Oh my god, yeah. It's the only thing I've ever done, and I absolutely love it. But I see times are changing. I'm looking out: what are we going to do? I recognize restaurants have to offer some entertainment now. To me, that means: if your restaurant does not have a vibe, you're missing out. There are many areas we can move into, and I'm excited about it.

I'm not going to be a victim in any part of my life. I recognize it's harder now. Food costs are up. Labour costs are up. Operators are settling on slimmer and slimmer margins, and at a certain point you're like: why are we doing this? But we have to find our way. And this becomes another challenge that I, in a way, get excited about. At this stage, I wish I was a little more on easy street, but we're not. So—suck it up, buttercup.

MM: As a Canadian operator in the U.S. right now—are your sourcing pipelines fully separate, or is there crossover?

JZ: For food product—it's California. There's nothing better. Everything is sourced very locally. If we can, we get everything local. Tariffs are an issue for sure—we bring in some Italian products—we look for substitutes. But we manage our supply chains separately.

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L to R: Janet's brother-in-law Edward Menicheschi, sister Jennifer Zuccarini, Janet Zuccarini, and Robbie Robertson at Felix.

MM: What were the biggest hurdles opening in U.S., coming in with Canadian regulatory, labour laws, and real estate experience?

JZ: When I came here 11 years ago, I saw lots and lots of opportunity. A huge population. There weren't that many Italian restaurants, other than old-school Italian restaurants—which I have a lot of respect for—but this was something new and fresh.

Felix has been our greatest success. At that point, I was bringing 20 years of experience to L.A. and wanting to do our best work. In Toronto, a lot of our restaurants are neighbourhood restaurants, and that's a model I really like—becoming a fixture in a neighbourhood. Nervosa is going to be 30 years old in June. We've become a fixture in Yorkville.

And I had a dream of a location on Abbot Kinney, one of the coolest streets in North America. I wanted a chef-driven restaurant, incredible food, incredible design. I wanted to train and open with service that was memorable. We were going to bring our best work, and it's been our best work. Our best accolade in 30 years was *Esquire* naming us best new restaurant in America three months after we opened. That was like...I could retire after that.

Because there were a lot of naysayers: "Who do you think you are—Toronto—going to L.A., the big leagues?" Nobody really cares about restaurants if you own one in Toronto. It doesn't carry the same weight, and that's sad. Toronto is a fabulous town for restaurants, but the world doesn't care. You have to open in New York or L.A. to become somebody. Nobody was interested in me as a restaurateur until I opened in L.A. Then it was: "Hey, can we interview you? You're kind of a somebody now."

Twenty years in Toronto—nobody was interested. Zero interest. And I'm fine. I'm just saying: kind of like, you have to go to the States and do something.

MM: That's so real—Canadians need third-party authentication.

JZ: Yeah. I had the honour of sitting beside Lorne Michaels at a dinner—he was a very good friend of my husband's—and I said, "What is it about Canadians needing to make it in the United States to be acknowledged in Canada?"

He said, "Canadians have an inferiority complex. They're not going to believe it until you go somewhere "hot" in the United States." And strangely, I agree with that. There is some kind of inferiority complex, because Toronto is fantastic for restaurateurs. As a restaurant city, I think it's unbelievable. It's so great.

MM: Working with U.S. talent—were there big differences with chef personalities?

JZ: They're just different individuals. Finding Evan Funke—he's a phenomenal chef, and a verifiable superstar now.

After Felix was so successful—we had a 300-person wait list every day for probably two years—it was impossible to get into. We opened with such a splash. I recognized his talent and I wanted to open exclusively with Evan. We had plans to bring Felix to Toronto and New York, and then COVID hit. I put the brakes on. Evan said, "What are we doing?" and I had to tell him, "I can't—financially—I can't do anything." Another restaurant group scooped him up, and now he's got other restaurants and he's a mega superstar.

And by the way—we only have Felix left, right? I've had two failures here. L.A.'s kicked my ass—legit kicked my ass. It's a regret—there was nothing I could have done about it—but I saw the opportunity.

Back in Toronto, we're in a partnership with Nuit Regular—a mega talent. Unbelievable superstar. Jeff and Nuit are an amazing couple. So, every restaurant has a different story. Some are neighbourhood restaurants where we hire an executive chef. In others, we're building a brand around a chef. With Jeff and Nuit, we're building a brand around them, and we're supporting them.

With Stella—which we closed—we brought Rob Gentile from Toronto to L.A. He had left his restaurant group and was available, so he came here—another Toronto person coming over.

MM: If you were to open a new restaurant in L.A. now—what would you do differently, or would you wait?

JZ: It's very difficult right now in L.A. I'm trying to get to politicians to advocate for reform because I think it's on the verge of unworkable.

Stella was a nine-million-dollar investment. The first year, we did close to nine million in revenue and we still lost money. I was like, "What is it going to take to make money in this town?"

And then we were sued by employees—unpaid break time, was essentially the complaint. These PAGA lawsuits here only exist in California, and PAGA was created to make sure employers wouldn't be bad employers, but it's so hard to defend. There are all of these ambulance-chasing lawyers, and they came after Stella. Most restaurants just write a cheque, but we start defending ourselves. We got a lawyer, and then we closed down Stella. Now they've moved all the lawsuits to me—and then piled on ten more. I don't want to operate in L.A. anymore.



L to R: Janet Zuccarini, Leonardo DiCaprio, Al Pacino, and Robbie Robertson at Felix.

So, I'm trying to get to politicians for reform. I have some great restaurateurs gathered together and we're saying it's just not workable right now.

MM: How has the mix of soaring success and crushing defeat changed you as a leader?

JZ: It hurt me a lot to close the first restaurant—another Covid story. There was ego attached because we've never closed a single concept down. That was a badge of honour.

Now? I have no ego. I'm leading the company in a way that says: if we have a restaurant that isn't making money, we're shutting it down. I'm not here for the glory. We have to have successful restaurants. If they're not working, we close them—or we work at it to figure it out. I have to get back into thriving, and that means making money. My background is business. So, let's have profitable businesses.

Stella had a big splash. We were on every list—top new openings. Leonardo DiCaprio celebrated his 50th birthday at Stella just before we closed. And it still wasn't enough for this town. It's freshly closed, so people are like, "What happened?" We couldn't make it. We couldn't do it, couldn't make money, so we had to shut it down. It's as simple as that.

Zero ego. You win some, you lose some. You take away lessons.

Right now, to open in L.A., it would have to be an absolute sweetheart deal—meaning somebody wants me, they're the landlord, they become a partner, they put money in. I'm not financing restaurants anymore. I've been at this for 30 years. I've been in the hamster wheel. So, I've said to my leadership team, "If we never open another restaurant again, we have 13—we're good. We have enough work to level up what we already have."

RC Show Restaurants Canada

DON'T MISS:

Women in Hospitality Day Keynote: Fireside Chat with Janet Zuccarini

Tuesday, March 9 | Speaker Stage | Hall 5
3:30 PM – 4:30 PM

In this wide-ranging conversation with Kelly Higginson, Restaurants Canada's President and CEO, Janet Zuccarini reflects on what it takes to build resilient, future-ready hospitality companies: navigating shifting market dynamics, fostering inclusive and people-first cultures, and harnessing technology and design to meet evolving guest expectations.

LEARN MORE AND REGISTER NOW AT: RCSHOW.COM

About Janet Zuccarini

Janet Zuccarini is the founder and CEO of **Gusto 54 Restaurant Group**, an acclaimed hospitality company behind restaurants including **Trattoria Nervosa**, **Gusto 101** and **501**, **Pai Northern Thai Kitchen**, **Chubby's**, and **Felix** in Los Angeles. Since launching Trattoria Nervosa in 1996, she has built a reputation for transporting guest experiences—pairing standout cuisine with inspired design and warm hospitality. Felix was named Esquire's #1 Best New Restaurant in America, recognized by Eater L.A., and honoured with James Beard and Michelin Guide recognition.

Zuccarini is also a resident judge on Top Chef Canada and has been recognized with multiple leadership awards, including honours from Canada's 100 Best, Foodservice & Hospitality, and the Italian Chamber of Commerce.

Zuccarini is the first Canadian woman to become an AVPN (Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana)-certified pizzaiola and is proud to be counted among the roughly seven per cent of women restaurateurs worldwide.

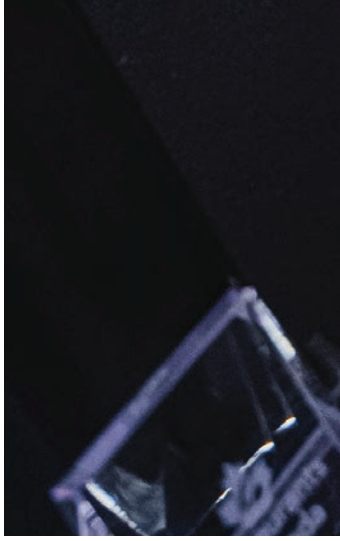
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Restaurants Canada

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PEER NOMINATIONS OPEN NOW.



LEADERSHIP AWARD

Recognizing visionaries who lead with purpose and passion.

This award celebrates a foodservice trailblazer who isn't just managing—they're inspiring. Whether they're running the business, championing new ideas, or lifting others up to help them grow and reach their potential, this leader is driving meaningful change across the industry and their community. They lead with heart, integrity, and a clear vision for a better, more connected future in foodservice.

The Leadership Award is open for peer nominations.

Presented by:

pepsico
Food. Drinks. Smiles.

EMERGING LEADER AWARD

Spotlighting the rising stars.

This award goes to someone who's just getting started—but is already making waves. Whether it's bold ideas, fresh energy, or a knack for bringing people together, this emerging leader is stepping up and taking initiative to help shape the future of the foodservice industry. They're not waiting for change—they're creating it.

The Emerging Leader Award is open for peer nominations.

CULINARY AWARD

For the chef who brings passion, innovation, and flavour to every plate.

This award recognizes a culinary professional whose creativity, skill, and dedication to their craft make them stand out in kitchens and communities alike. Whether they're reinventing menus, championing local ingredients, or mentoring the next generation, this chef is making food that matters—and making a difference along the way.

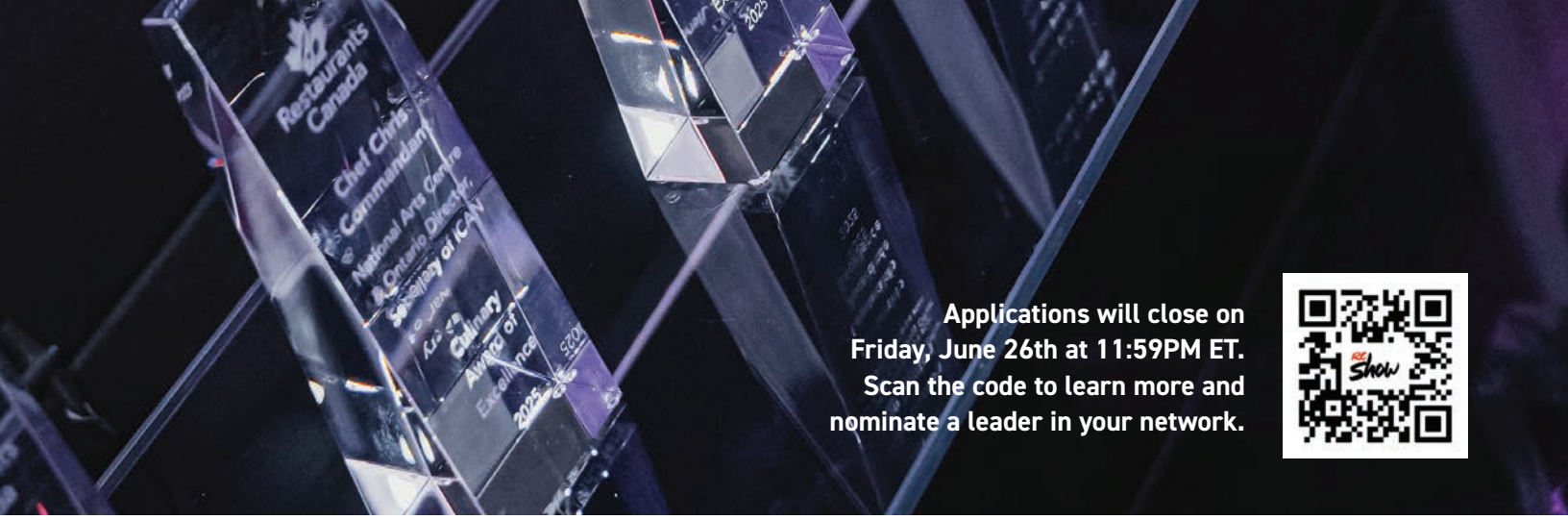
The Culinary Award is open for peer nominations.

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Honouring those who nourish more than just appetites.

This award is for the changemakers using food as a force for good. Whether through community meals, education, outreach, or inclusion efforts, the recipient of this award is making an impact beyond their walls. They believe food is a connector—and they use it to bring people together and build stronger, more supportive communities.

The Social Impact Award is open for peer nominations.

LEGACY AWARD

Celebrating a lifetime of leadership, generosity, and impact.

Selected by Restaurants Canada, this award honours an individual whose influence and contributions have left a lasting mark on the Canadian foodservice industry. Through decades of dedication, innovation, and community-building, this leader has paved the way for others and continues to inspire the next generation. This is their standing ovation..

The Legacy Award is closed for peer nominations.

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD OF RECOGNITION

Recognizing the sustainability champions sharing a greener future for food and beyond.

This award recognizes a foodservice operator that embeds environmentally conscious choices into the way they run their business. This award winner is moving the needle in sustainable foodservice, whether though their focus on food waste, packaging, sourcing, or energy.

The Environmental Stewardship Award is open for peer nominations.

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OLYMEL



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Coffee in a Pullback Economy

From Camera-Ready Cups to Human-Ready Experiences



WITH CHERYL HUNG,
VP, DIG INSIGHTS

Coffee culture has never felt more central to daily life in Canada—or more complicated for the businesses serving it.

Yet the way people drink coffee — including where and when — has shifted dramatically. Making coffee at home has become a comforting, cost-conscious ritual. Deloitte's first global coffee study[1] found that nearly 70 per cent of coffee drinkers now make coffee at home every day, and more than half say rising prices have pushed them away from out-of-home coffee. Deloitte's research also shows that many consumers view home brewing as part of their morning routine rather than a compromise, valuing it for convenience and comfort.

That shift is echoed in ongoing National Coffee Data Trends research led by Dig Insights,[2] which shows that even in markets where café traffic has recovered, the home remains the primary setting for coffee consumption, with a significantly smaller share of past-day drinkers consuming coffee out-of-home.

For restaurants, these shifts are colliding with serious cost headwinds. Statistics Canada reports that Canadians paid 27.9 per cent more for coffee at the grocery store in August 2025 than a year earlier, driven largely by the impacts of climate change and related weather events in major producing origins and higher input costs throughout the supply chain. Over the four years to mid-2024, retail coffee prices rose more than 20 per cent, with economists warning that trade pressures and climate-related shocks in Brazil and Vietnam are likely to keep pressure on futures and, eventually, on menu prices.

At the same time, chains from Starbucks to Tim Hortons continue to lean hard into high-margin, customizable cold and specialty beverages. Starbucks

1. Deloitte, Coffee Study 2024: Forces Shaping the Market (global survey of 7,000 coffee drinkers in 13 countries).
2. National Coffee Association, National Coffee Data Trends (NCDT), tracking study conducted by Dig Insights; 2024–2025 highlights on home vs. out-of-home consumption.



has reported that about three-quarters of its beverage sales now come from cold drinks, from iced coffee to cold brew and blended beverages, underscoring how strongly demand has shifted in that direction. At Tim Hortons, cold options like Iced Capp and iced coffee continue to rank among Canadians' top orders, and the brand has been expanding its iced and frozen lineup as a key growth platform. Together, these moves suggest where consumer excitement, and much of the North American category's future profitability, may be moving: toward customizable, flavour-forward cold and specialty coffee experiences rather than just a standard hot cup.

Against that backdrop, the opportunity for restaurants isn't just to sell more cups—it's to double down on coffee as a social, experience-led occasion. Industry voices at the Coffee Association of Canada have described coffee as an "olive branch," a way to bring people together, and consumer research backs that up: people are looking for small moments of celebration, connection and personalization when they go out for coffee.

At the Coffee Association of Canada conference in November 2024, Cheryl Hung, Vice President at Dig Insights, highlighted that past-day coffee penetration is at an all-time high, with roughly three-quarters of Canadians reporting they had at least one cup of coffee yesterday—underscoring coffee's resilience even in a shaky economy. At the same time, Dig Insights' work shows that coffee drinkers are becoming younger, more diverse and more demanding: specialty drinks are growing, and a changing cultural mix of coffee drinkers is reshaping expectations around flavour, formats and the overall coffee experience.

So, what does this mean for Canadian cafés and restaurants? Which trends should operators take seriously, and how can they hedge against rising coffee prices by designing coffee programs—hot and cold, dine-in and on-the-go—that lean



into sociability, storytelling and distinctive experiences rather than competing on price alone?

We sat down with Cheryl Hung to get to the bottom of the cup on what's truly changed in coffee behaviour—and what operators should do about it.

Hung's vantage point is unusually wide. Dig Insights is a market research consultancy that began in Toronto and now works globally, helping brands like Nestlé, Mars, McDonald's and Starbucks answer their toughest consumer questions. One of Hung's key clients is the Coffee Association of Canada, along with its U.S. counterpart, which together run "the longest standing beverage tracker in North America," with data stretching back to the 1950s. That gives her a rare longitudinal view of how coffee—and the broader beverage landscape around it—has evolved, from traditional hot drip to iced, functional waters and beyond.



Puncturing the Trend Balloon

On headline trends, Hung is quick to puncture some of the hype, cutting through the noise on adaptogens, no- and low-alcohol, and highly "health-forward" ingredients that dominate industry headlines. "At a broad level, they're still very fringe and niche," she says. "Functional, benefit-driven beverages—from vitamin-infused waters to 'sleepy' drinks—are starting to pick up, but those formulas are really only resonating with a certain type of client. It certainly isn't mass yet."

While Hung isn't holding her breath for these trends to show up in mainstream QSR coffee programs at scale, she points out that what is winning in coffee is what she calls the "elevated coffee drinking experience." While the industry would likely categorize this offering as "specialty," Hung prefers to focus on what guests actually see and taste: "Your lattes with the salted caramel foam and cold… it's the temperature state that is really generating the attention," she points out. "Over the past few years, operators have just added more and more and more stuff to coffee, to the point where the purists will say, "are you going to add coffee to your milk and sugar beverage?"

It can feel gimmicky, she admits, but it's also exactly what a younger cohort is asking for. Consumers under 40 are driving as-seen-on-social-media and flavour-forward trends and are endlessly looking for what's new. "It's all about, 'What's the newest flavour that's going to come out? What's the newest foam topping?'" And in that world, how a drink looks matters almost as much as how it tastes, she says: "It's about how pretty a beverage looks and how visual it is."

That spirit of discovery is largely a North American invention rather than a deep dive into global coffee traditions. "Discovery isn't about exploring how other cultures drink coffee the traditional way," Hung says. "It's, 'What can I invent? What colours do I match together? What flavours can I match together?'" Many of those experiments pull in broader food trends, such as added protein in foams or toppings.

It may read as frivolous to purists, but Hung takes a pragmatic view: if consumers are drinking coffee and making it their own, it fits with a wider shift toward personalization across food, beverage and health. "I wouldn't say it's particularly positive or negative," she says. "The positive spin is they're drinking coffee."

The real pressure point for operators is what happens when the demand for novelty and customization collides with volatile input costs. Bean prices are rising, and Hung says she doesn't envy operators trying to manage profitability in such a challenging environment. Out-of-home coffee is still the trend-setting segment, with cafés and restaurants pushing new formats and flavours that in-home brands later adopt. That dynamic means restaurants can't simply stop innovating; instead, they need to pull other levers to make coffee work harder for the business.

Breaking Up with the Donut

One of the clearest opportunities Hung sees for operators lies in rethinking how coffee shows up alongside food. Drawing a parallel to wine, she points out that coffee has never fully made the leap from a supporting player to a considered pairing experience. While wine has expand-

> "Functional, benefit-driven beverages—from vitamin-infused waters to 'sleepy' drinks—are starting to pick up, but those formulas are really only resonating with a certain type of client. It certainly isn't mass yet."

ed well beyond cheese into full menus and multiple occasions, coffee remains largely confined to morning pastries or a post-meal afterthought. For restaurants willing to experiment, she sees significant upside in exploring how different roasts and flavour profiles could work with light, protein-forward bites—particularly in the afternoon, when guests are looking for something that carries them through the rest of the day without the weight of a full meal.

That same logic extends to experience-led formats that encourage exploration rather than speed. Hung has observed the rise of coffee flights in parts of the U.S., where guests sample several small preparations in one sitting, often paired with simple bites. While still rare in Canada, she sees this as an underused way to turn coffee into a destination rather than a transaction. These tasting-style experiences create space for discovery, education and conversation, while also giving operators more opportunities to layer in food and increase overall spend. For Hung, the appeal isn't novelty for its own sake, but the chance to reposition coffee as something guests linger over—an experience that feels intentional, social and worth leaving the house for.

Underlying all of this is something bigger than beverage formats: the role of hospitality in an anxious, high-cost moment. Hung notes that Canadians are clearly pulling back on discretionary spending — "The first to go will be your out-of-home food and beverage," she acknowledges. "Many people are saying they stay home because every time they step out the door, they spend a hundred bucks. This has obvious implications for restaurant revenues, but also for our social fabric. If people aren't replacing a night out with "come over, I'll cook," and groceries are also expensive, we're losing those socializing opportunities. We're leading quieter lives."



Coffee as a Hero Experience

That's where coffee can quietly become a strategic asset. Instead of thinking only in terms of full meals, Hung urges operators to consider "bite-sized" and highly personalized, social experiences that acknowledge tighter budgets but still feel like a complete outing. In a world where some guests want speed and pure convenience—and are happy to use the drive-thru or accept a robot-made drink—she believes there is still a large segment paying for atmosphere, human connection and the feeling of being looked after. "The entire ambience—the experience of walking in—is what turns a pricey cup into something people will still prioritize, even when money is tight."

For Canadian cafés and restaurants, that may be the real hedge against rising coffee prices. Treating coffee not as a cost centre to be minimized, but as a flexible, social, highly personal experience that can be promoted as a standalone offering that can stretch a visit, deepen loyalty and give guests a reason to leave the house — whether they're there for "me time" with a book or a long-overdue catch-up with a friend—or simply for an affordable luxury.



About Cheryl Hung
Vice President, Dig Insights

Cheryl Hung is an insights consultant at Dig Insights with two decades of market research experience in food & beverage, retailer and non-profit sectors. Outside of Dig, she is a mentor for the Women In Research (WIRe) program, helping young researchers find their footing in the industry.

She has extensive experience working in consumer research within coffee and has served as a board member for the Coffee Coalition for Racial Equity (2020-2022) and is a founding board member for the International Women's Coffee Alliance Canadian chapter (IWCA 2026).

She has spoken at food & beverage conferences throughout Canada and the US including Restaurants Canada (RC Show 2024), Specialty Coffee Association's Re:Co Symposium (2023) and the annual events held by the National Coffee Association and the Coffee Association of Canada. Cheryl's expertise in data and coffee has been published in Coffee People Zine, Go Fund Bean and the SCA's 25 magazine. She prefers to take her coffee black!

Dig Insights

diginsights.com linkedin.com/company/dig-insights/

BURGERS, FRIES & FAMILY

How The Varsity in Edmonton Thrives Through Supplier Relationships and Groupex Rebates



At The Varsity in Edmonton, it's not unusual to see toddlers tossing Cheerios under the table, a soccer team celebrating over milkshakes, or retirees catching up over soup and salad. That's by design. Co-owner Brandi Craner describes the restaurant as "everything to everyone," a space where guests can treat it like their living room—or enjoy the adults-only lounge if they're after a kid-free date night.

In an era where many family-friendly casual restaurants have disappeared, The Varsity has carved out a niche as a warm, judgment-free local gathering place—where burgers, fries, and flexibility are always on the menu, and where strong supplier relationships and Groupex Canada rebates help keep the business sustainable behind the scenes.

Before co-founding The Varsity, Craner spent years in restaurant operations, eventually becoming a General Manager for a major brand. She managed large teams and learned the ins and outs of high-volume service—overseeing everything from staffing and scheduling to supplier negotiations and guest experience. It was a fast-paced, all-consuming role. "Restaurants are a 25/7 business," she says with a laugh. "There just aren't enough hours in the year to do it all—especially when you're raising a family."

That reality eventually pushed her to step away from the floor and into a more traditional nine-to-five role. But as a parent, she quickly recognized something missing from the dining land-



scape. "So many of the family-style dining experiences in my community had been replaced by pub-style restaurants that turn into 18-plus venues later at night," she recalls. "We didn't want to feel like a burden bringing our kids to dinner."

That realization led to action. A conversation with friends became a concept. A lease turned into an opportunity. "It was the perfect storm," she says. The Varsity opened its doors three years ago and continues to thrive, fuelled by community and uncompromising on food quality, even through one of the most challenging periods for independent restaurants in recent memory.

The Varsity's strength lies in its rare balance of hospitality and operational discipline. Designed as a flexible, inclusive space for families, sports teams, couples, and community groups, the restaurant also runs on clear values and smart controls. "We're family-friendly externally and internally," says Craner. "If your child is sick, go take care of them. That's our culture. We'll figure the rest out."

She applies the same philosophy to numbers. "Labour and inventory—those are the biggies," she says. "You can't ignore them just because they're hard. Money doesn't magically go into your back pocket at the end of the day—it goes out the back door if you're not careful."

ENGAGING SUPPLIERS AS SILENT PARTNERS.

That focus on stability extends to The Varsity's supplier strategy. Craner credits much of the restaurant's resilience to an unwavering focus on quality and long-standing, trusted relationships—especially with Gordon Food Service (GFS), a Groupex Canada partner. "Our GFS sales rep is like family," she explains. "If we find something cheaper or have a quality issue, we reach out—and he always finds a solution, whether it's price-matching or sourcing better alternatives."

For independent operators like The Varsity, that kind of personalized support can be the difference between staying on track or scrambling to recover. "We're a small, mom-and-pop shop. We can't afford to be down," Craner says. "We ran out of fries and burgers once during a rush—how can we run out of French fries and burgers? That's our mainstay. Our suppliers jumped into action. McCain rerouted product from Calgary. Our patty supplier did an extra run. That kind of support is everything."

HOW THE VARSITY TURNS REBATES INTO REAL MARGIN.

While suppliers keep the kitchen running, Groupex Canada helps bolster the bottom line. Through Groupex, operators earn rebates simply by purchasing from approved suppliers they already use—making the program both practical and easy to integrate into daily operations.

For The Varsity, the rebate program is simple, effective, and deeply embedded in menu planning. "For our small establishment, we need to find our nickels and dimes wherever we can and work on those rebate programs," says Craner, admitting she routinely checks the Groupex partner list when updating or developing new seasonal items, looking for eligible products—such as sauces or spices—that can help stretch every dollar.

Thanks to strong sales, the rebates add up quickly. "The rebates are significant because our sales are significant. The more we buy, the larger the rebate," Craner notes. "You just buy what you need, and you get a cheque—it's pretty basic. "I look through the Groupex list of partners, make sure they're on my menu and my order guide, and 30 days later—Bob's your uncle—I have a cheque."

That simplicity, paired with measurable return, is why Groupex has become a core part of The Varsity's approach to margin management.

IN IT FOR THE RIGHT REASONS.

The Varsity isn't chasing trends or trying to become the next buzzy concept. It's doing something better—building a place that evolves with its guests, adapts to its neighbourhood, and treats staff and suppliers like extended family. "We're not trying to be the next big thing," Craner says. "We're just trying to be the best place for you to come, sit, eat, and be yourself."

That philosophy also shapes the menu: stay consistent with beloved staples, and refresh often enough to keep guests coming back. "We've got mainstays like the mushroom burger, but we rotate in new flavours—fish burgers, seasonal perogies—to keep it fresh."

With trusted suppliers, Groupex Canada in their corner, and a business model rooted in purpose and practicality, The Varsity is proving that relationships are the real secret to staying power in Canadian hospitality.



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Groupex is a Canadian foodservice buying group that helps operators reduce costs through access to volume pricing and rebates on essential supplies.

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THE LEDGER:

FINANCE MATTERS FOR RESTAURANTS

CASH ISN'T GOING ANYWHERE

In foodservice, it's easy to assume Canada has moved on from cash—until the POS goes down, the internet drops, or a guest pays the way they always have. Cash still matters because it's simple, widely accepted, and reliable when systems fail. That's why the Bank of Canada continues to issue and protect banknotes: designing them with security features that can be checked quickly at the point of sale and providing training, so cash handlers know what to look for.

For operators, the stakes are practical and immediate. The Bank will not reimburse a counterfeit note, and once a fake bill is accepted, the loss—and any liability tied to how it's handled—can become an expensive lesson.



WITH
ANNA HARDY,
SENIOR REGIONAL
REPRESENTATIVE,
BANK OF CANADA



OPERATORS STILL NEED CASH.

In a December 2025 address to the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, Bank of Canada governor Tiff Macklem emphasized that even as digital payments surge, cash remains widely used across the economy: "About 80 per cent of Canadians—perhaps surprisingly, both old and young—and 96 per cent of small- and medium-sized businesses use cash." That continued reliance on banknotes shows up at the point of sale, too. Anna Hardy, Senior Regional Representative at the Bank of Canada, notes that cash is still moving through the economy at a scale operators can't ignore. "The bank does survey Canadians about their cash usage and right now, about one in five transactions is done in cash," she says. And wherever cash remains in circulation, the risk follows: "Counterfeiting is still comparatively low, but we are seeing small increases across the country."

For restaurant and retail operators, cash is not just nostalgia—it's continuity. Hardy's case for cash is practical and rooted in service realities. "Cash is simple; it's widely accepted," she says. "It's accessible and inexpensive to use, and it's the only form of payment that's 100 per cent reliable. You can use it during power outages, and without vulnerability to cyber attack."

Hardy defines the cash vs. digital payment debate as really not much of a debate at all, noting that cash isn't competing with digital payments, but filling the gaps digital transactions can't always cover. "Cash is also essential and inclusive," Hardy emphasizes. "In Bank of Canada surveys, most Canadians say they have no plans to go cashless in the next five years. Also, places with lower levels of Internet connectivity typically rely on cash more often. For example, I recently visited an island off the coast of BC that has a candy store. The owner only accepts cash because her Internet cuts out so often she can't reliably accept electronic payments."

COUNTERFEIT RISK TO OPERATORS IS REAL.

The reason counterfeit risk matters to operators isn't simply that fakes exist—it's who ultimately pays for them. "There is no central bank in the world that will reimburse somebody for a counterfeit bill," Hardy says. "That's why, even with the highly engineered polymer notes the Bank produces, the burden still falls on the business to protect itself during the transaction. And in sectors with tight margins, the cost of a single mistake can be outsized."

To put the risk in operator terms, Hardy references a Statistics Canada profit-margin figure for a broad retail grouping (grocery, convenience, food retailers, and alcohol retailers)

> Bearing the cost of counterfeit is tough, and especially in industries with narrow profit margins... you would have to sell about $2,000-worth of goods to recoup a loss incurred through a single $100 counterfeit banknote."



showing margins of roughly five per cent in 2024—thin enough that a single counterfeit note becomes a sales-recovery problem. At a five per cent margin, every $1 in sales generates about five cents in profit. So, if a business takes a $100 counterfeit bill, that $100 is effectively a direct loss. "Bearing the cost of counterfeit is tough, and especially in industries with narrow profit margins," Hardy points out. "So, to put that example in perspective, you would have to sell about $2,000-worth of goods to recoup a loss incurred through a single $100 counterfeit banknote."

WHAT OPERATORS MUST DO IF THEY SUSPECT A BANK NOTE IS COUNTERFEIT.

The second a suspicious banknote is found; the operator's responsibility is straightforward: turn it over to police—either local police or the RCMP. From there, the police will process it and send it to the National Anti-Counterfeiting Bureau (NACB), an RCMP office in Ottawa that acts as the central repository for counterfeit currency recovered in Canada, including Canadian notes, U.S. currency, and other currencies.

Hardy emphasizes that the process is designed to take further burden off the business once a note is in hand because not every "off" note is actually counterfeit; sometimes a bill is simply worn out, damaged, or low quality, and the NACB can confirm whether it's genuine.

If the note is genuine, it will be returned to the business; if it's counterfeit, police determine next steps for investigation, which may include requesting video footage or other details related to the person who passed the bill. Hardy also clarifies the Bank of Canada's role in this chain: "The Bank's role is to produce the notes that are highly secure against counterfeiting," she says, "and then train and educate people on how to check those security features. We also work with law enforcement to support them in their investigations."

"BANKNOTES ARE ONLY SECURE IF YOU CHECK THEM."

The Bank of Canada's central message to businesses is straightforward—and operator-facing. "We can make the most secure bank notes in the world, but that doesn't matter if people don't take the time to check them," Hardy says. "It only takes a few seconds to check a bank note, and they are all designed to be checked without any special equipment by anyone, anytime and anywhere.

Hardy weighs the value of training restaurant teams to make checking for counterfeit bank notes an operational habit against the cost of failing to do it, and it's a no-brainer. she says. "So, taking a few seconds to look, feel and flip is pretty important."

And for any business tempted to "move it along" once a bill is recognized as suspicious, she's equally clear: "Knowingly passing a counterfeit bill is a criminal offence."

FEEL, LOOK, FLIP: A PROCESS THAT SURVIVES A RUSH.

The Bank's recommended method is designed to work in a real service environment—fast, repeatable, and trainable, taking just a few seconds to complete. "Once you know what you're looking for it's really easy to check," Hardy says, pointing out that the Feel, Look, Flip slogan is a mnemonic device to make it easy to remember the process. "First, you want to feel the smooth texture of the polymer and then the areas with the raised ink. Next, you want to look through the transparent windows and then the details and the metallic images." Finally, you flip the note over and look for the metallic images repeated on the back of the note."

Crucially, she points out that experienced front-line staff often have an intuitive advantage because of repetition. "Our brains are wired on pattern recognition," Hardy says, and "generally servers would handle enough cash to know when something feels 'off'. It's helpful to remember to look for differences rather than similarities, so compare the note to a note that you know is genuine and you should be able to tell pretty quickly whether or not the note in question is counterfeit."

FEEL, LOOK & FLIP





1. POLYMER
Feel the smooth, unique texture of the note. It is made from a single piece of polymer with some transparent areas.

2. RAISED INK
Feel the raised ink on the front of the note.

3. LARGE TRANSPARENT WINDOW
Look at the detailed metallic images and symbols. **Flip** the note to see the library ceiling and maple leaves repeated in the same colours and detail on the other side.

4. COLOR-SHIFTING EAGLE FEATHER
Look at the pattern in the eagle feather. **Tilt** the note to see the pattern move up and down, and the colour shift from gold to green.

THE MISTAKE COUNTERFEITERS COUNT ON.

If there's one operational pattern Hardy sees again and again, it's selective checking. "The most common mistake is only checking larger denominations like $50 or $100 bills," she shares. "Counterfeiters know that $100 bills will face more scrutiny, so they often work with smaller denominations like fives or twenties because they think that cash handlers won't see a five- or a twenty-dollar bill as a threat. You should check all your notes."

Hardy also counsels caution for small business owners who may hear about an uptick in counterfeit activity on the news. "When there is a media report, some retailers will stop accepting $100 bills," she says. "I wouldn't recommend that approach because it may give you a false sense of security—it actually doesn't make you any less vulnerable."

DECLINING A NOTE SAFELY, WITHOUT ESCALATING THE SITUATION OR OFFENDING A GUEST.

For operators, the most delicate moment is the face-to-face refusal. Hardy's advice prioritizes staff safety and internal policy, encouraging operators and staff to follow their internal procedures—without putting themselves or their staff at risk. Hardy also acknowledges that not everyone holding a counterfeit note is doing so knowingly. "It is possible that the person in possession of the bill is just an innocent victim," she says. "They may have no idea it's counterfeit."

For these reasons, Hardy suggests a simple, polite script: "I'm sorry. This note looks like it might not be genuine, and you might want to check it with police. I'd be happy to take another note or a different form of payment instead."



STAFF GUIDE:

HOW TO POLITELY REFUSE A SUSPICIOUS NOTE

Courtesy of Anna Hardy, Senior Regional Representative, Bank of Canada.

"I'm sorry. This note looks like it might not be genuine, and you might want to check it with police. I'd be happy to take another note or a different form of payment instead."

Even if you decline the note, she says it's still useful to inform local police about a possible attempt to pass suspected counterfeit cash. "Local police services will be tracking the trends in your area. The more people check notes and report, the more it's normalized, and then the more the process protects everyone."



THE FUTURE INCLUDES CASH, AND NEW NOTES ARE ON THE WAY.

Even as payment technologies evolve, the Bank of Canada anticipates a continued role for cash. "We know that the future has cash in it and that means that counterfeiting will also be part of the future," Hardy says. "We are issuing a new, vertical $20 bank note next year featuring King Charles III, and it will include the latest, state-of-the-art security features. Following that, we're going to be issuing a new $5 bill featuring Terry Fox."

Hardy also points to a shift operators may have noticed over time: rather than issuing banknotes in full series—as with the Birds of Canada series (1986–2001) and the Frontier series (2011–2013), the first polymer series—the Bank of Canada now releases notes one denomination at a time to stay current with evolving security threats. The practical implication is straightforward: new security features aren't retrofitted into older notes. Instead, updated denominations enter circulation gradually, and older notes are steadily withdrawn and replaced as they cycle out of use.

MAKE THE CHECK VISIBLE AND ROUTINE.

Canada's banknotes are designed with security in mind—but that security only works if it's used at the point of sale. Hardy's advice is simple: train yourself, train your staff, and make "feel, look, and flip" a visible, everyday habit. When customers see that you check notes as a matter of routine, it becomes normal—and a few seconds of attention can prevent a loss you'll have to work hard to earn back. "Just take a second to feel, look, and flip so you don't get more than you bargained for," says Hardy. "Most people think it's pretty fun to look at money in a different way than they may have in the past."

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Value at the Core: Winning in a Stagnant Market

Canada's Foodservice industry has shown remarkable resilience, standing out as one of the few countries tracked by Circana's CREST® to achieve traffic growth in 2025. Looking ahead to 2026, however, our Future of™ Foodservice forecasting tool signals a flat outlook for traffic. The consumer landscape is shaped by economic uncertainty, shifting habits, and rising expectations for transparency and quality. Per capita visits have been stagnant for two years, making every occasion more intentional and every brand work harder to prove its relevance. In this flat market, growth will come from owning your value story and winning share through targeted occasions and behaviors.

Value Remains Paramount

Nearly **1-in-3 occasions included a deal** in 2025. Alongside this rising deal rate, customer satisfaction scores for affordability and value for money have seen the strongest gains among tracked metrics—reversing two years of declines. At the start of 2026, major QSR players battled around the $4 price point. Those who couldn't compete on price leaned into portion size or health benefit messaging, such as protein content, to reinforce value.

Menu Innovation as a Visit Incentive

While value gets customers through the door, menu innovation keeps them coming back. Consumers expect a steady stream of new and exciting options, and global cuisines remain a powerful draw. In 2025, the **fastest-growing main dishes were Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican**. Adding global twists to familiar favorites can attract curious diners without alienating loyal customers.

Digital Ordering is No Longer Optional

Going hand-in-hand with value, with a deal rate of nearly 50%, one of the constants heading into 2026 is the **continued growth of digital ordering**. Steadily growing since 2023 and now representing **15% of all restaurant visits**, digital ordering has become a necessary convenience in the lives of Canadians. Brands that can compete on value on 3rd party aggregator apps or can make their own apps seamless, rewarding, and personalized will have a competitive advantage.

Shifting Family Dynamics

Family visits declined for the second consecutive year, underscoring the economic pressures Canadians face. Growth pockets remain for restaurants offering large, timesaving, and budget-friendly meals—such as pizza and chicken QSR. This highlights the importance of kids' meals and family-focused deals paired with seamless ordering if you intend to engage families under financial pressure.

The Rise of Fast Casual

In 2025, **QSR outpaced FSR in traffic growth**, with visits driven by good prices for QSR and food quality for FSR. Within QSR, the **fast casual subsegment stood out growing 10%**—more than three times faster than total QSR or FSR. These brands embody many of the themes discussed above: elevated food quality and atmosphere, innovative menu concepts, and a strong digital presence all at a price point below FSR.

In 2026, success will favour brands that clearly define their role in consumers' lives, communicate a compelling value proposition, and keep menus and experiences feeling fresh.

"Family visits" are any visit that included a child under 18.
Sources: Circana, Future of™ Foodservice, Canada, August 2025 Circana, CREST®, Canada, Year Ending November 2025 vs. 2024



About the Author

Circana Foodservice Industry Specialist Tate Bastien inspires actions that unlock business growth. He supports some of the industry's top operators and manufacturers through exceptional industry knowledge, technical and communication skills, and client relations. Reach Tate at tate.bastien@circana.com.

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A QUIET EMERGENCY

Inside The Burnt Chef Project's Canadian build-out, and the new baseline hospitality needs to move forward.

MENU Magazine in conversation with Rob Hood and Tom Mitchell of The Burnt Chef Project.



Tom Mitchell, DNS CFE
Canadian Chief Ambassador & President for North America for The Burnt Chef Project

Robert Hood, FIH
Corporate Director, Food & Beverage, Silver Hotel Group, Canadian Ambassador for The Burnt Chef Project



Rob Hood is calling in from Cancun on a work trip—doing what hospitality people do best: showing up, adapting, and getting it done. But this conversation isn't about travel. It's about what the industry he loves asks of its people, and what it has too often failed to return.

Hood is Corporate Director, Food & Beverage for Silver Hotel Group and a Canadian Ambassador for The Burnt Chef Project. He's joined by Tom Mitchell, the Project's Canadian Chief Ambassador and President for North America, who has spent five decades in hospitality, from frontline operations to executive leadership. Between them, they've watched hospitality's proudest traits—discipline, pace, perfectionism, service—become risk factors when they're paired with stigma, isolation, and a culture that still treats burnout as a rite of passage.

"We've probably lost so many potential leaders over the years by not even acknowledging that this is an issue in hospitality," Hood says. And that's the heart of The Burnt Chef Project: calling out what's happening, pulling the mental health conversation out of the shadows, and putting practical tools into the hands of the people who lead teams every day.

Founded in 2019 in the U.K. by Kris Hall, the organization has grown internationally—but Mitchell is clear that Canada is entering a new phase, defined by Canadian governance, Canadian programming, and a community built for the realities on the ground here. "We've come to an agreement to basically hand over Canadian management to the Canadian team, and U.S. management to the U.S. team," Mitchell says. "And so now we're setting up the charity, and we've got the nonprofit corporations created."

That next step matters, because The Burnt Chef is not a marketing or awareness vehicle. The organization is hyper-focused on creating accessible, tangible supports and solutions that bring the hospitality community together to address a persistent problem that leads to loneliness, isolation and attrition.

Hood admits that he was originally a little skeptical about The Burnt Chef Project. After 30-plus years in hospitality, he assumed it might be another well-intentioned initiative with minimal substance. "The Burnt Chef was brought up to me and I kind of dismissed it," he says. "Because I thought it would be another one of those, "Pay $12.95 a month and you get a newsletter type of organizations—I really didn't take it that seriously. When I got into it, I really understood the amazing work it does at a grassroots level—The Burnt Chef Project absolutely touches people, and especially frontline workers."

For Hood, that detail matters. Failure in designing and protecting a positive, healthy work environment doesn't exist only at the extremes; it can be embedded in the everyday—in the untrained manager who doesn't know what to do when someone is "on the edge," in the team culture that normalizes yelling, in the silent assumption that if you can't handle it, you don't belong. "There's no hotel management class that teaches people how to do this," Hood says. "Our job is to provide that training to help managers guide their people into the right direction—how to find that help, how to find those resources. We're not psychologists or medical doctors, and we do not profess to be that."

Instead, the work is about mental health awareness, recognition and early intervention, and access—giving people language, pathways, and resources before they hit crisis.

Mitchell found The Burnt Chef Project online about two years ago, as the organization's posts began surfacing in his feed. "I contacted them and said, 'Hi, I'd like to help you develop Canada," he recalls.

What he saw, early on, was a classic growth problem: ambassadors without an engine. People willing to advocate, but no structure that made Canada feel like a real chapter with its own decision-making power. "There wasn't anybody to actu-



ally make it gel," Mitchell says. "To make them feel like they were working for their own country. It was more of a U.K.-based operation. We've done a lot of convincing and a lot of proving that we are able to run Canada," he says. "We've proven that we can manage the market here."

Part of that credibility comes from Mitchell's own background. As a past president of MAFSI, the manufacturer association for the foodservice industry in North America, he has deep experience and credibility within the industry. That credibility has been essential—but so has endurance. Mitchell jokes that building a charity in Canada is "about as complex as setting up a new political party," and contrasts the speed of U.S. nonprofit infrastructure with Canada's. "We had a 5013c in the U.S. in less than three weeks," he says. "In Canada, six months. And $12,000."

But it's happening. The Canadian division is being built not as a satellite, but as a locally run, locally responsive organization because the Canadian industry is unique, both to the U.K. and the U.S., and the pressures here have unique features across geographies, markets, and segments. Not only is the mental health context specific in each country in The Burnt Chef network, but its texture is also evolving at an escalating pace.

"The problems now are completely different from what they were even 10 years ago," Mitchell says.

ADDRESSING STIGMA.

When Mitchell talks about stigma, he isn't describing a vague cultural discomfort. He's describing active resistance—sometimes from places that should be aligned. "One of the things I've noticed since I got involved is the stigma," he says. "I had no idea… the actual stigma behind mental health is surprising. People that should be jumping on our bandwagon, but they're afraid it will hurt their business. There are schools, associations and individuals who believe that if they get up and talk about tough things, new people won't come into the industry. Actually, it's quite the opposite: if we correct the problems, more young people will come into the industry, and we need everyone."

That line—we need everyone—isn't just a values statement. It's an economic reality. Hospitality can't solve its staffing crisis through recruitment alone if the culture continues to push people out.

> "The staffing crisis is not a new issue—it's been around the last 40 years."
>
> – Rob Hood

Hood agrees, and points to the generational shift already underway. Younger workers are not only more aware—they're more decisive. "The staffing crisis is not a new issue—it's been around the last 40 years. The people who are really into this are younger people, they are entry level workers," he says. "This is an actual issue which is important to them. If we can address it at that early stage, people will stay and go on to have meaningful careers. This is a social issue—outside of rates of pay and vacation time—that matters to youth. They want to see employers really invested in their welfare. I cannot tell you the amount of people between the ages of 19 and 25 who come up to us after a presentation and have a new interest in what it is that we want to do. If we can take that as a read, then I think the results of what The Burnt Chef Project is aiming to do nationally will be tenfold. That is how we're going to build legacy for our industry."

Mitchell has been in the business long enough to name what many people still romanticize. Yes, hospitality can create excellence. But for decades, it also trained people to accept extremes in expectation and performance as normal, and he personally experienced a culture built on intimidation and fear. "I think a lot of the older generation of leaders are afraid of the change," he says. "They don't understand that the culture can be different and believe the only way to get there is with this angry discipline. The whole idea was to create perfection—that if somebody stood over you and yelled at you, you would get there."

And the legacy of that culture shows up in a devastating way—not only in mental health outcomes, but in what workers now assume a job will require. "When I was interviewing people for jobs, I would ask questions like, 'Are you good at talking to people? Are you good at multi-tasking?'" Mitchell says. "One of the interesting things that came out of The Burnt Chef training is learning that now, one of the common interview questions is, 'How do you handle being yelled at?'"

The idea that, to achieve a subjective concept of excellence, entry-level workers are being conditioned to anticipate mistreatment as a standard operating condition is a shocking cultural indictment. Whether it's a practice of the few or the many, addressing it can't be left to individual resilience or whispered warnings passed down between colleagues. It requires an industry-wide reset: a new baseline where respect is non-negotiable, where "high standards" are separated from humiliation, and where leaders are trained to manage performance without managing through fear. Otherwise, the message to the next generation is clear—if you want to build a career here, you'd better get used to being yelled at—and hospitality will keep bleeding talent not because the work is hard, but because the culture is.

Hood believes the remedy is in the process. "First of all, we need to recognize that there are issues and there is a stigma around it," he says. "And second, we need to identify programs that will actually help people and then provide resources that can actually make a difference at a level that they understand and are accessible to them."

He's also candid about the fact that the industry just can't fake or hide these skeletons anymore—the information gap is closed. "Today's prospective employees can go online and find out about a company's principles, their corporate impact, their good and bad reviews—with just a

> "The whole idea was to create perfection—that if somebody stood over you and yelled at you, you would get there."
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click," Hood says. "Younger people are very smart. If there is no substance behind a company, they see right through it."

If culture is now a recruitment tool, it's also a retention filter. If the workplace reality doesn't match the public story, the workforce will move on, and that's why Burnt Chef's approach is as much about building management capability as it is about providing crisis resources. "For me, running operations right now, I need to put those skills in the hands of my managers and culinary leaders," Hood says. "You've got a team member that's on the edge, they need to know how to manage that. Many organizations want to support positive mental health awareness initiatives, but don't quite know how to do it. They're asking for the tools and the process to do better."

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN CANADA.

If you look at The Burnt Chef Project's U.K. presence online, you'll see large fundraising feats—big climbs, big walks, big visibility. Those efforts matter, Mitchell says, but the Canadian movement is focused on accessible, repeatable, human-scale connection first. "People are visiting the website and seeing events like climbing Mount Kilimanjaro or a 45-kilometre walk to raise money," Mitchell says. "They want to get involved in these big events—and we'll get there—but what we need right now is people going for coffee. People sitting down at the table and talking about the issues and the problems."

That "coffee and chat" model isn't small—it's strategic. It scales precisely because it doesn't ask people to announce a crisis or ask for help before they've even admitted, even privately, that something's wrong. It lowers the barrier to entry in an industry where pride, pace, and stigma can make a formal ask for support feel like weakness.

Meeting over coffee is familiar. The format is easy to replicate anywhere. And the small, human setting makes room for nuance—everyday stress, quiet loneliness, and burnout that's been brushed off as "just the job." In that sense, these gatherings function as early intervention and social infrastructure at once: a place where people can be seen, where they can compare notes, where they can realize they're not the outlier, and where support can be offered before someone tips into crisis. Mitchell's larger vision is explicit—Burnt Chef as the industry's connective tissue. "We want to create a community where Burnt Chef becomes the caregiver and the conscience for the industry," he says.

THE CREEPING THREAT OF LONELINESS.

Burnt Chef's work spans a wide range of challenges—substance abuse, anxiety, depression, toxic work environments. But Mitchell points to two areas of concern that keep rising to the top. "In the data we get back, the two biggest problems are loneliness and substance abuse," he says. "Substance abuse is pretty obvious, but it's loneliness that surprises the hell out of everyone."

It's also the most revealing. Loneliness isn't only about being alone; it's about disconnection inside a business that markets connection as its product. It's the irony at the centre of hospitality: creating welcome for others while quietly feeling unwelcome yourself.

That's why Mitchell talks about Burnt Chef not only as a mental health initiative, but as a community rebuild. "We want people to go into it knowing that there's somebody out there that cares about them," he says. "Somebody… who's going to provide activities that they can participate in and be part of the community."

When asked whether the problem has shifted dramatically in recent years, Mitchell doesn't hesitate. "Covid probably did the most damage," he says. "Trust was lost, hope was lost, and it's taking a long time to get it back."

In his view, the workforce pipeline isn't just thinner; it's different. Today's labour landscape is shaped by youth unemployment, barriers to entry, and a cohort whose early adulthood was defined by isolation and disruption—years when milestones, routines, and social confidence were interrupted. "All the experience was taken away from them and they want it back," Mitchell says. "

Ironically, hospitality's promise—community, belonging, culture, experience—has never been more relevant, even as the work itself has rarely felt more demanding. Hood agrees the conversation has moved, but he's blunt about the gap between awareness and real change. "Have they shifted enough? No," he says. "As an industry, we need to change our entire perception of allowing people to have a career that isn't based on aggravation."

He describes what his own hospitality career has given him. "This business opened the door for me," he says. "I saw I could actually do something with my life. It wasn't easy… and I didn't work with some of the nicest people to do it, but it doesn't have to be that way."

BUILDING A LASTING MOVEMENT.

Both leaders return, repeatedly, to the same idea: this work isn't only about helping people survive hospitality. It's about making hospitality worth staying in. For Mitchell, that future depends on rebuilding something the industry has allowed to erode—leadership as a practiced skill, rather than an inherited temperament. "We need to teach young people leadership," he says. "We've got to get it across to them that it's important that they create their own world. We'll help them, but they're going to have to be the leaders of tomorrow."

Hood frames the same ambition in terms of continuity: "The root of what we're all trying to do is ensure our industry is going to continue and prosper," he says—because a sector that can't retain people can't grow, and a sector that can't care for people will eventually run out of them.

In the months ahead, that long view will take clearer shape in The Burnt Chef Project's plan for Canada through formal governance, deeper partnerships, and on-the-ground activations that meet the industry where it is: at industry gatherings, at colleges, inside communities, and around tables. Their thesis is simple: if hospitality wants people, it has to care for people—but as a system. As Mitchell puts it, "It's all about community. This is what we have to create. People need to feel like they're part of a bigger thing."



> The Burnt Chef Project has always been active in Canada. This isn't a launch, it's a formalization thanks to Tom and his team. What the new legal structure gives us is the ability to better support the people who are already engaging with our work here, to build deeper partnerships, and to widen the reach of support available to the Canadian hospitality community. It allows us to do what we've always done—just more sustainably, and at scale."
>
> – Kris Hall, Founder, The Burnt Chef Project

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About Tom Mitchell, DNS CFE Canadian Chief Ambassador and President for North America for The Burnt Chef Project

Tom Mitchell began his career in Hospitality in 1974 working in the resort industry then moved to Calgary becoming the youngest department manager for CP Hotels. They sent him to hotel school at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. After graduation and short stints with Westin Hotels and The Lake Louise Lift Company He joined The Old Spaghetti Factory and managed stores in Calgary, Winnipeg and Toronto.

In 1983 he and partners created TLC Marketing Inc, a manufacturers agency for the Food Service Industry, over the next 40 years He worked with all aspects of the industry, with chefs, consultants and industry experts. In 2021 he was elected to be President of MAFSI for North America.

A skilled negotiator and marketer, upon stepping away from TLC he joined The Burnt Chef Project to guide it to the size and scale necessary to benefit the Hospitality Industry.

About Rob Hood, FIH Corporate Director, Food & Beverage, Silver Hotel Group

Rob Hood is originally from the United Kingdom and has spent more than 30 years in food and beverage management, including roles in Europe with Queens Moat House Hotels and in the United States with Marriott Hotels. Since moving to Canada, he has held leadership positions with ClubLink Corporation and Atlific Hotels and now leads corporate F&B for Silver Hotel Group.

Hood studied at Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Arts (B-TEC HND, Hotel Management) and holds a Bachelor of Applied Science in Hospitality Administration from the University of Southern New Hampshire. A member of the Institute of Hospitality since 1988, he was elected a Fellow in 2021 and is also a Maître Hotelier with La Chaîne des Rôtisseurs.

In 2025, Hood was appointed a Canadian Ambassador for The Burnt Chef Project and joined the Culinary Federation's Toronto chapter.



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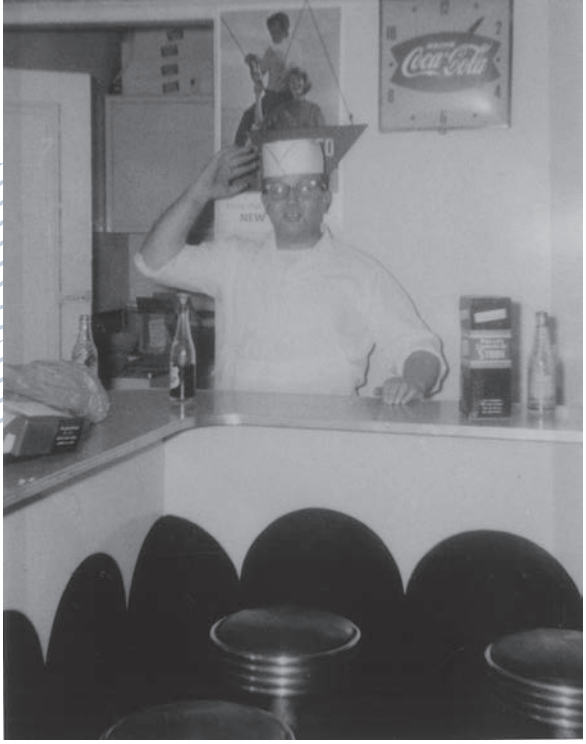
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THE FI & CHI DYNASTY:

Ches's Famous Fish and Chips, a St. John's institution, celebrates 75 years



by GABBY PEYTON

What makes a restaurant an institution? Years of service are not tantamount to a restaurant's prestige, and long-established restaurants don't always fit the bill. Restaurants become institutions when they have become embedded in the community, woven into the historical fabric, garnering cultural significance. Many restaurateurs and diners view the term as a particular badge of honour when a restaurant is known for its innovation, steadfastness and community-oriented practices. They become a third space for their communities, a beloved place to celebrate milestones, or just get together with family. Oh, and they also have to serve some really good food.

Ches's Famous Fish and Chips in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, ticks all the boxes. Celebrating their 75th anniversary this year, the snack-bar-come-pseudo-restaurant-chain can be considered fundamental to the dining scene in St. John's, and Newfoundland and Labrador on the whole. It has been family-owned and family-run for its entire existence, and for Kathy Barbour, Vice-President and daughter of the Ches, it's all about family, community and really good fried fish.

At the bedrock of Ches's is fish and chips, and in Newfoundland and Labrador, they are a staple – beloved by locals, and a must-try when visiting the province. It must be noted that any mention of "fish" in Newfoundland and Labrador is almost always referencing cod. But few people know it was actually Ches Barbour who was the first to bring Fi & Chi (pronounced "fee" and "chee") inside restaurants to the table.

Fish and chips arrived in Newfoundland after the First World War. Already a popular dish in Britain by the late 19th century, Newfoundland soldiers experienced the dish in London while on leave and developed a taste for it, captivated by that crispy battered fish and greasy chips wrapped in newspaper. Though there are multiple origin stories to how fish and chips made their way back across the pond, it's said that a man by the name of Stacey brought back a big stove from Germany after the First World War and started serving fish and chips from a trailer he towed around with a horse and cart.

Fish and chip trailers multiplied, and soon there were many around the city, setting up in Bowring Park and other locations frequented by hungry pedestrians. They became a staple at the annual Regatta (North America's longest-running sporting event hosted at Quidi Vidi Lake) and other community events. The fare became beloved, even before it was really considered a dish; it was just street food, until Ches came along, creating Ches's Fish and Chips restaurants.

Ches Barbour and his wife, Betty, opened their first restaurant, a snack bar, on October 29, 1951, on Harvey Road in St. John's. Every morning, Ches would take his motor boat out the harbour, catch the fish himself in the cold Atlantic from April to January, and bring it back to the shop to be served with chips. Their snack shop was the first to have stools inside, making it the first fish and chips restaurant in the city—a serving cost 30 cents.

In 1957, they moved to their Freshwater Road location, which still stands today, despite fire, cod moratorium and COVID-19. The Barbour family—Ches, Betty and their children, Kathy and Bob—

"It must be noted that any mention of "fish" in Newfoundland and Labrador is almost always referencing cod. But few people know it was actually Ches Barbour who was the first to bring Fi & Chi (pronounced "fee" and "chee") inside restaurants to the table."

> Every morning, Ches would take his motor boat out the harbour, catch the fish himself in the cold Atlantic from April to January, and bring it back to the shop to be served with chips.



lived above the restaurant, butr eally, the restaurant has been home. Barbour, now in her early 60s, has been working in the restaurant as long as shecan remember, but she started making alittle pocket money by the time she was13 or 14.

"Remember years ago, you'd have a fish and chips, and there'd be a fork and a sauce and vinegar wrapped in a napkin," recalls Barbour. "I used to get paid a cent to pack a packet."

Matriarch Betty Barbour, affectionatelyknown by customers as "Mrs. Ches," was also an innovator: "Mom is the one who brought gravy to go with fish and chips," explains Barbour, "Everyone said she was nuts, but she made a little pot of gravy and said: 'We'll see if anyone wants it.'"

And they did. The dressing (which, to those outside Newfoundland and Labrador, is stuffing) soon followed—chips, dressing and gravy were already a staple dish in many snack bars across the province, but Mrs. Ches was the one who prompted the moniker of "Fi & Chi" to have an additional shorthand – Fi & Chi with a side of D & G.

By 1990, the Barbour family had opened and closed the New Gower Street location (thanks to the construction of the last kilometres of the T.C.H. going right through it), opened two more locations and expanded the dining room on FreshwaterRoad. In 1991, Ches passed away unexpectedly, right before the biggest challenge yet: the cod moratorium.

In July 1992, the cod fishery off Newfoundland and Labrador was shut down when scientists confirmed the stock had collapsed after decades of overfishing. Upwards of 40,000 lost their livelihoods virtually overnight, and it remains one of the largest industrial closures in Canadian history. Fishers, plant workers and snack bar owners grappled with this unexpected turn of events.

"It was a very scary time. The price of fish went right through the roof," recalls Barbour. The restaurant tried lots of different species of fish to replace the beloved cod, like hake and grenadier. "People didn't like the names, but they were really good. And we sold more chicken, too."

The chicken tenders at Ches's remain a favourite for many, as does the Fin and Feather, which consists of one piece of fish and chicken wings. A brief stint in Baffin Island for Barbour led to their famous pies hitting the fridge case—Ches's started selling them in the mid-90s when they opened the deli side of things. Those sky-high lemon meringue pies and coconut creams are now famous in the city.

The restaurants remained successful through a devastating fire in 1994, which led to a complete rebuild for the FreshwaterRoad location, and the death of Betty Barbour in 2009, but nothing had prepared Ches's Famous Fish and Chips (or any restaurant for that matter) for the events of early 2020.

COVID-19 regulations shuttered in-person dining at all restaurants in Newfoundland and Labrador into July 2020, but Ches's was not going to miss out on the biggest day of the year—Good Friday.

"I love Good Friday," says Barbour, "I'm pretty tired by the time I go home, and I'm not working like I used to, but still you're on your feet that day." And tired they should be: in Newfoundland and Labrador, Good Friday, or "Fish Friday" as many call it, means lineups down the street for most fish and chips spots. It's become a tradition in the province, and it's all hands on deck at Ches's—they are usually pumping out 5,000 pounds of codfish and 15,000 pounds of potatoes from all the location, in one day. On Good Friday 2020, they opened Freshwater Road for takeout only, and it was only five family members taking orders and doling out the Fi & Chi, to great success.





"Not long afterwards, I was at a store, and I had a Ches's shirt on, and one of the girls looked at me and said, 'You know, on COVID, they say the Freshwater Road was run all by the family.'" says Barbour. "She said it was the best fish and chips that went out of there for years."

Keeping things in the family has always been important to the Barbours, but with Bob acting as President and semi-retired and Kathy in her early 60s, there have been discussions about succession planning.

"Well, my daughter works with the restaurant, but she doesn't want to run it," Barbour says she would like to retire eventually. "This is a young person's game."

"One of these days, we'll find the right person who will keep it going, because I don't want to sell it just to anybody, you know? I want the right person who's going to take care of it," says Barbour. She praises her Operations Manager, Michelle Seo, for taking a lot of stress from her and wants to make sure current staff are looked after—there are several who have worked with the family for over 40 years.

"We worked together as teenagers," Barbour laughs. "We've known each other all our lives. We went to each other's weddings. We saw each other's kids being born. It's been a lifetime."

Despite the long-term workers who have helped to cultivate the convivial atmosphere and crispy fried fish, Ches's is not immune to the post-COVID pandemic plaguing many Canadian restaurants: staffing.

"The customers are back, the staff is back, but staffing is hard. That's the biggest thing since COVID," says Barbour. Across the country's hospitality industry, restaurateurs are asking themselves the same questions the folks at Ches's are: "I really don't know where all the young people that used to work went."

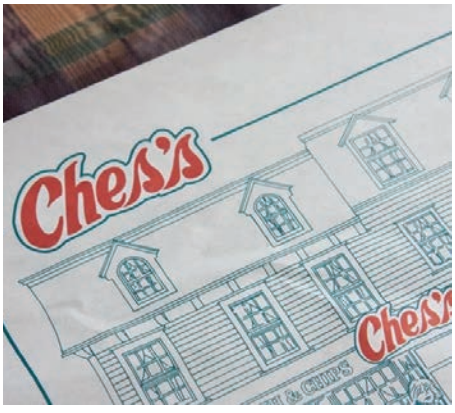
When it comes down to it, Barbour and the rest of the Ches's dynasty understand their importance as a dining institution in the city. Barbour views the business as a tourism business as much as she does a restaurant business and wants to offer the best experience possible in her restaurants, whether it's for regulars or tourists. After all, Newfoundlanders are known for two things – warm demeanours and good fried codfish.

"I mean, the restaurant industry is a wonderful industry, right?" says Barbour. "No two days are ever alike. The people you meet, the friendships that you cultivate, it's just wonderful."

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Gabby Peyton is an award-winning author, food writer and culinary historian based in St. John's, NL, where she's always planning her next trip to eat. Her work on travel, dining and history has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *Canadian Geographic*, and *EnRoute Magazine*. Gabby's first book, *Where We Ate: A Field Guide to Canada's Restaurants, Past and Present*, is a bestseller and chronicles the history of Canadian dining through the stories of 150 restaurants nationwide.

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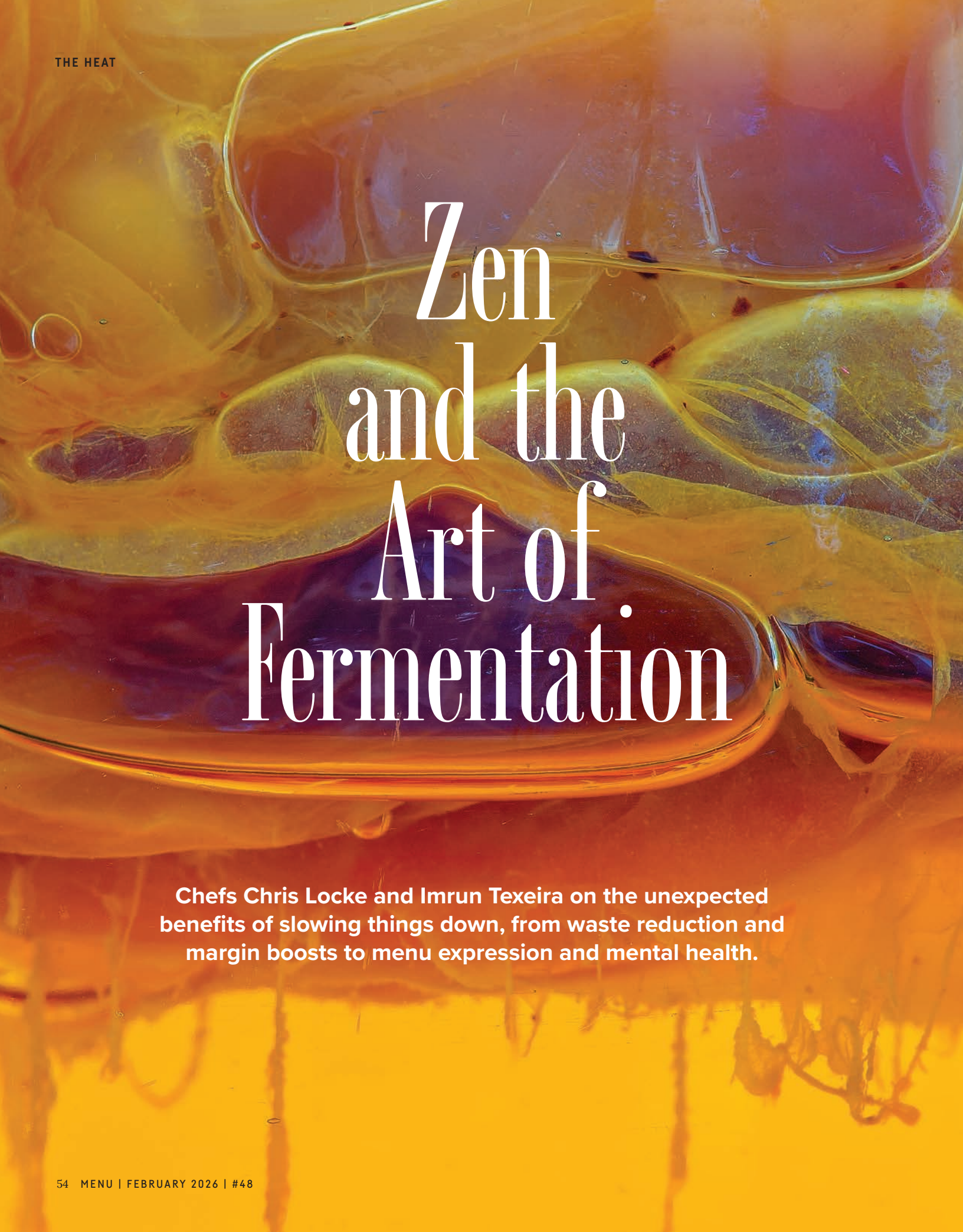
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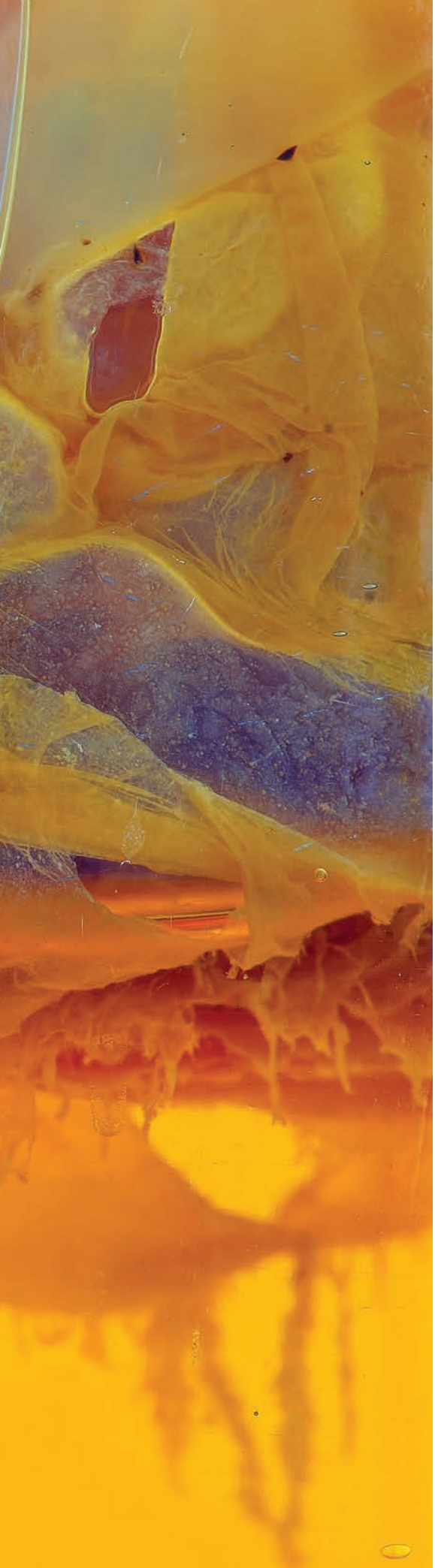
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Zen and the Art of Fermentation

Chefs Chris Locke and Imrun Texeira on the unexpected benefits of slowing things down, from waste reduction and margin boosts to menu expression and mental health.



Fermentation gets framed as a niche passion—something that lives in cookbooks full of Scandinavian minimalism, in rustic homestead cellars, and in back-of-house projects that sound exciting until service starts. But when you listen closely to chefs who rely on fermentation in working kitchens, the story is less about novelty and more about utility and slowing things down. Fermentation is a way to engage unseen organisms and alchemical processes to conjure new potential and depth from humble ingredients, to extend shelf life without adding labour, and to turn what would have been waste into something valuable. It is also, in a quieter sense, a way of relating to time differently in an industry addicted to speed.

Chef Chris Locke is currently the head of fermentation and R&D at Baldío, Mexico City's first zero-waste restaurant and sole Michelin Green-starred restaurant in the city. In his world, fermentation isn't a culinary aesthetic or gimmick—it's a practical tool that marries his passion for exploration with a method for making a kitchen more responsible and more resilient by turning byproducts into flavour. A Noma alum and The Burnt Chef Project Canadian Ambassador, Chef Imrun Texeira helms his luxury private dining service, Wanderlust, in Toronto, and comes to fermentation through technique, heritage, and creative reinvention.

Taken together, their perspectives form a clear picture of fermentation as it actually functions in restaurants: not as a "project," but as a working tool—one that can deepen a menu's identity, protect margins, reduce waste, and quietly shift the pace and mindset of a kitchen.

For Locke, fermentation is inseparable from the conditions around it: the ingredients available, the waste streams a kitchen produces, and the question of what gets thrown away versus transformed. His interest is rooted in real service constraints and real seasons. Working in Toronto at a local, seasonal restaurant, he describes reaching a wall: "We got to winter and we had just root vegetables, meat and fish, and dried ingredients. It was really hard to develop the flavour in ways that were exciting to people."

Texeira began with fermentation as a way to enhance his range and express identity. "As a chef, I've always wanted to deepen my technique," he says. "These techniques aren't easy to grasp and employ all the time, so it was a challenge to learn something new that is actually very old. Especially as I've dove into my South Asian heritage and the world of ferments and preserves from that part of the world, I've been able to refine my approach by blending traditional methods with my own culinary voice. It's become a way to honour my roots while pushing the boundaries of what fermentation can do in a modern kitchen."

That contrast matters for operators because it makes fermentation feel less like a monolith. It can be systems-first (waste, preservation, cost, availability) or expression-first (identity, heritage, originality)—and in strong kitchens, it becomes both.

CHEF CHRIS LOCKE



Favourite ferment: Corn Masa Miso (at the moment), I'm in Mexico, so it's very relevant to the place, and it's a nice combination of cultures.

Favourite method: Anything with koji. It transforms flavours in way that other fermentation processes can't.

Most elusive flavour: The white whale...I don't know that there is one, to be honest.

Best gateway ferment: Pickles. Cucumber pickles. They're pretty forgiving, and can be very delious.

Most unconventional ferment: A few years ago, when I was working in Toronto, we made beef fat brioche. A batch didn't proof correctly, so we made a whole batch of beef fat brioche miso and used it in ice cream.

DEPTH, DIFFERENTIATION, AND THE ECONOMICS OF WASTE.

Fermentation doesn't just improve what's already on the plate. It changes the value of what used to be off the plate, creating flavour you can't shortcut, and turning familiar ingredients into something genuinely new. "You basically bring in a lot more depth of flavour to dishes. You bring in more umami, and flavours that are also unique to you—and to your restaurant. It's like having an army of microbes working in your kitchen transforming food, even while you're sleeping. I think that's really fun."

Locke also believes that a fermentation-forward menu works best when it stays quiet. "We don't mention that anything we serve is fermented even though each dish has numerous fermented ingredients in it," he explains. "It's part of our process. If you go and buy a bar of chocolate, it doesn't say it's fermented cacao. If you buy coffee, it doesn't say it's fermented coffee beans. It's not important. It's part of the process and you enjoy it in the same way."

Texeira, too, is less interested in fermentation as a trend than as a lever—especially when waste is the raw material. "Flavour and upcycling, for sure," he says. "Less waste, more profit, and more flavour. Fermentation allows us to take trimmings, overripe produce, or ingredients that might otherwise be discarded and transform them into something with incredible depth and complexity. It extends shelf life, adds umami, acidity, and funk to dishes, and creates unique flavour profiles that set my menus apart. From an operational standpoint, it's a win on every level: sustainability, cost savings, and delivering flavours that guests can't get anywhere else."

START WHERE THE RISK IS LOW AND THE WINS ARE FAST.

Fermentation scales best when staff learn fundamentals on low-risk ferments before moving into higher-stakes, longer-aging projects, and both chefs argue it has to start with processes that are forgiving, delivering payoff without demanding a lab.

For Texeira, that means lacto-fermentation: "It's incredibly forgiving, requires minimal equipment, and delivers impressive results quickly." The appeal, he says, is not just the result but the learning curve: "You get to witness the transformation firsthand—the bubbling, the tangy aroma, the flavour development—and it builds confidence."

Locke recommends the most practical version of that same idea: cucumber pickles. "Nothing's foolproof," he says, "but they're pretty forgiving and you can end up with something very delicious." He also points to fast fermented beverages as an accessible next step—especially ones that use scraps. "Tepache is really easy and also really fast," he says, "and a great way to use fruit scraps."

Locke also points out that even when you follow a recipe exactly, variables like the time, temperature, and ingredients themselves cause the results of the same ferments to naturally drift from one kitchen to the next. And that's okay. Variation becomes part of the craft, and part of the signature, extending the transformative act of cooking beyond what heat and acid can do alone. "Even if you're replicating a ferment that is in a recipe book, it will age differently and it will taste different," he says, noting that the allowance for the process to "do its thing" is baked into the technique.

CRAFT AS PROCUREMENT STRATEGY.

Fermentation as a procurement strategy is all about replacing cost using low-cost or waste inputs you already generate in the course of regular operations.

Both chefs are animated about the potential of koji—rice (or other grains) inoculated with Aspergillus oryzae, a Japanese fermentation mould—not because it's trendy, but because it opens doors. "Once you master cultivating Aspergillus oryzae on rice, barley, or other grains, you unlock the ability to make miso, soy sauce, sake, mirin, amazake, and countless other ferments," Texeira explains. "It's not just a technique; it's a gateway to an entire world of umami-rich, complex flavours that have been central to Japanese cuisine for centuries."

> "It's like having an army of microbes working in your kitchen transforming food, even while you're sleeping. I think that's really fun."
>
> – Chris Locke



"Anything with koji," Locke sums up simply. "I mean it's cheaper to make it than it is to buy it, so that's number one. If you're using fish sauce, you're already using fermented food. If you have fish on the menu, you're accumulating fish bones, so you can make fish sauce—quite easily. We make 120 litres of fish sauce in a week with fish bones and koji."

Koji also reveals one of fermentation's key psychological barriers—it can feel like it violates everything you've been taught about safety. "Some of the processes may seem very foreign. To make koji, you have to keep it at 30 degrees and 80 per cent humidity for 28 hours, which is counter to everything that you've been taught—ever— about holding rice," Locke explains. "You need to trust the process. The ferment will tell you itself if it's bad—either visually or by smell or texture. I advise against trying to get to a high level straight away without understanding the fundamentals."

For chefs eager to explore fermentation, the chefs caution against letting excitement outpace discipline. "The biggest mistake is impatience," Texeira says. "Fermentation is a slow process, and trying to rush it or constantly checking on it can lead to contamination or inconsistent results. Trust the process and give it time. Another common pitfall is not maintaining proper ratios, especially with salt in lacto-fermentation. Too little salt and you risk spoilage; too much and you halt the fermentation altogether. Cleanliness is also critical. While fermentation is forgiving, poor sanitation can introduce unwanted bacteria or mould. Finally, chefs often abandon a ferment too early because it smells or looks strange. Fermentation can be funky, and that's okay. Learn to distinguish between good funk and actual spoilage, and don't be afraid to taste and adjust as you go. Keep detailed notes so you can replicate successes and learn from failures."

THE SCALABILITY OF FERMENTS.

The chefs hold slightly different philosophies on building systems strong enough to protect safety and repeatability, while allowing controlled variation where the concept benefits from it.

Texeira's approach is operationally rigorous: "Documentation is everything," he says. "I create detailed recipes with exact measurements, timelines, temperatures, and sensory benchmarks so anyone on the team can replicate the ferment consistently. I also establish clear labelling and dating systems so I can track batches, monitor aging, and ensure proper rotation. For food safety, I know the signs of successful fermentation versus contamination, and I set strict temperature and pH monitoring protocols where necessary. When the team understands the value and feels ownership over the process, they're much more likely to maintain quality and consistency."

Locke is less interested in producing identical batches—especially in an environment where the inputs consistently change. "We buy from small-scale farms,

CHEF IMRUN TEXEIRA



Favourite ferment: A Mexican take on yuzu kosho, a traditional Japanese condiment paste. Instead of the traditional Japanese ingredients, I use tart pineapple in place of yuzu and dried Mexican chilis instead of fresh Japanese peppers.

Favourite method: The base skill it takes to make a good bed of koji, which opens the door for so many possibilities.

Most elusive flavour: My banana miso. There's something about the tropical sweetness of banana combined with the deep, funky umami of miso that creates a flavour profile I'm constantly chasing.

Best gateway ferment: Lacto-fermentation. It's incredibly forgiving, requires minimal equipment, and delivers impressive results quickly. Whether you're making sauerkraut, kimchi, pickles, or hot sauce, the process is straightforward: salt, vegetables, time, and anaerobic conditions.

Most unconventional ferment: Kombucha glazes. A reduction of an over-acidic kombucha for a sweet-sour glaze. When a batch of kombucha goes too far and becomes almost vinegar-like, instead of tossing it, I reduce it down until it becomes a thick, glossy glaze. The acidity mellows into this beautiful, sweet-tart coating that's perfect for roasted vegetables, grilled meats, or even drizzled over desserts.



> In an industry plagued by burnout, fermentation offers a way to reconnect with the why behind what we do."
>
> – Imrun Texeira

so the products change all the time," he says. "We're in a zero-waste system, so the byproducts change all the time. One batch is not going to be the same as the other—but there's some beauty in that. It's another opportunity to doctor the flavour and adjust the dish and make it something new. Nature doesn't do that either. So why are we trying to create this system that's completely consistent? It's kind of like fighting against nature rather than embracing it."

SPIN-OFF ADVANTAGES OF A SLOW KITCHEN PROCESS.

The chefs describe fermentation as something rare in hospitality: a process that cannot be bullied into going faster. That constraint becomes a gift that isn't so much sentimental as it is strategic. Fermentation introduces a different rhythm into the work—one that can restore a sense of craft, curiosity, and agency in an environment that too often elevates speed and repetition.

For Texeira, the adoption of the art of fermentation is a mindset shift. "It's a practice that requires observation, reflection, and acceptance that not everything can be controlled or rushed," he says. "For me, that mindset has been grounding. It reminds me that good things take time and that there's value in the journey, not just the result. As a leader, embracing slow food practices has made me more intentional about how I run my kitchen. I prioritize thoughtful prep over chaos, encourage my team to take pride in craft over speed, and create space for experimentation and learning. In an industry plagued by burnout, fermentation offers a way to reconnect with the why behind what we do. It's meditative, creative, and tangible. You can see, smell, and taste the transformation, which is deeply satisfying. Building these practices into a kitchen culture can help shift the focus from just surviving service to actually enjoying the craft, fostering resilience, creativity, and a healthier relationship with food and work.

Locke lands in a similar place through metaphor. "I find it very peaceful," he says. "There's some tranquility in letting food transform… slowly, that can't be rushed." He compares it to walking through a forest: you can move quickly and miss everything, or slow down and notice what's changing—the moss, the season, the mushrooms. For him, fermentation offers that slower attention inside a kitchen. "It's like having a Zen garden," he adds, "but you don't have to do any raking."





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The original Zamalek format is a **still hibiscus infusion**, with expanded **sparkling extensions** (including sparkling hibiscus and hibiscus-ginger), giving operators both a clean, culinary still option and a more "pop-adjacent" sparkling choice.

What makes Zamalek compelling is the brand's canny balance of **cultural grounding and modern utility**. For those outside of the inner circle, hibiscus carries real heritage, with a profile and packaging that feels new and exciting in the Canadian market for those waiting to be initiated. Zamalek translates these bigger brand ideas into a product that fits seamlessly into contemporary hospitality: fridge-ready, portable, and easy to build into a beverage program without a lot of prep.

For operators, the beverages offer a solution to the evergreen problem of boring non-alc options while keeping execution simple. Zamalek positions itself as having **no artificial sweeteners**, **all-natural ingredients**, and **57 per cent less sugar than conventional soft drinks**—useful language for guests who want something fun and flavourful but less sugary. The can designs are beautiful and conversation-worthy, making it easy to deliver fast service, convenience and clear inventory control in style—in short, the can is a worthy vessel on its own.

Creatively, the still infusion can anchor **zero-proof signatures** where you want acidity and colour without carbonation—think hibiscus + citrus + mint, or hibiscus + ginger + lime with a salted rim. The sparkling versions would work well for spritz-style builds, non-alc "celebration" drinks, or as a premium alternative to standard sodas. Behind the bar, treat either format as a **tart botanical mixer** perfect for lengthening highballs, brightening sours, or batching a feature cocktail with a hibiscus backbone.

Get it: zamalek.ca
Contact: Farabi Ahmed - Sales Representative
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This product is particularly cool because it's explicitly designed for **pizzeria use**, where performance matters—how it integrates with cheese and sauce, and how easily it drops into a line. The ingredient story (koji + mycoprotein) also offers a credible, modern hook for guests who care about craft and process, not just whether there's a vegan option to be had.

Pepperoni is one of the most ordered pizza toppings, so offering a plant-based pepperoni explicitly **designed for pizzeria use**, lets operators capture mixed-diet tables and flexitarians without redesigning the menu. It's also **pre-sliced for efficient prep** and intended to **cup and crisp when cooked** and integrate well with cheese and sauce for that artisan effect—details that matter in a high-volume pizza program. Run it as a swap on any existing pizza (same build, different guest) or extend it into high-margin formats: pepperoni flatbread at the bar, pepperoni + hot honey as a shareable, **pizza dip** with crisped slices folded in—anywhere you want punchy, deli flavour with minimal labour.

Get it: primeroots.com | Booth #1026 at RC Show
Contact: Issay Lopez | E: marketing@primeroots.com



Grüvi's Non-Alcoholic Dry Secco is a solid fix for sad sparkling wine alternatives that feel more like juice in a flute than a premium beverage. It's a **carbonated, alcohol-free (0.0%)** sparkling-wine-style drink made from **wine grapes**, designed to feel like a real toast drink—not juice in a flute.

At just **50 calories per 10 oz serving, gluten-free and sulfite-free**, it's a legit-feeling **celebration pour** for brunch, baby showers, corporate lunches, and "I'm just not drinking tonight" tables—giving you an easy non-alc upsell that saves time and labour on mocktail production.

Inspired by the effervescence of Champagne with floral and tart end notes, Grüvi's Dry Secco is semi-dry and crafted from hand-picked and blended wine grapes. Oh, and they also package it in **270 ml mini bottles**, so it stays properly bubbly and looks really cool on a table (or anywhere, actually).

Pour it by the bottle with a chilled flute and a citrus twist, run it as a **NA mimosa** base (they even suggest that), or build a quick "house spritz" with a few dashes of bitters and lemon for a more grown-up edge.

Get it: getgruvi.com | Booth #1334B at RC Show
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