MENU

CANADA'S FOODSERVICE MAGAZINE

RC Show
Restaurants Canada
CELEBRATING 80 YEARS



the CONVERSATION:

with **SHINGO GOKAN**,
RC Show 2025 Bar & Beverage **KEYNOTE**

LETTER FROM THE NEW CHAIR OF THE RESTAURANTS CANADA BOARD OF DIRECTORS
NICOLAS FILIATRAULT

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Dear Readers,

Creativity and connection are at the heart of everything we do in foodservice and hospitality. As **RC Show celebrates its 80th anniversary**, there's no better time to come together, share ideas and shape the future of our industry. From **April 7-9 at the Enercare Centre in Toronto**, this year's show is about more than just looking back—it's about fuelling what comes next.

One of the conversations I'm most excited about—and deeply honoured to be part of—is the fireside chat with **Show headliner Chef José Andrés**. As a chef, humanitarian and global advocate for the power of foodservice, his impact reaches far beyond the kitchen. His message about recognizing the true potential and impact of our industry is one we all need to hear. I'll admit, I'm a little nervous to be sitting across from such an inspiring figure, but I know it's going to be an unforgettable conversation. If you haven't made plans yet, there's still time to purchase tickets.

This issue of MENU explores the theme of **Creativity & Connection**—two forces driving change and innovation in hospitality. We highlight an **important leadership transition at Restaurants Canada**, with a **letter from Nicolas Filiatrault, the new Chair of the Board of Directors**, and a conversation with outgoing Chair Jeremy Bonia on what he's learned and what's next on his hospitality journey.

Don't miss key updates from Restaurants Canada: Milena Stanoeva shares **the latest on the ongoing tariff war and its impact on restaurants**. Tracy Macgregor and Paljor Dolma outline **new opportunities for members** to connect, grow and maximize the value of their membership. Plus, we introduce **dish., Restaurants Canada's new event, networking and content series designed for women** leaders in foodservice—an initiative you'll want to be a part of.

We're also diving into the stories that are shaping the future of foodservice. **Shingo Gokan, RC Show's Bar and Beverage Keynote**, shares his vision for the next era of cocktails and hospitality. Rebecca Mackenzie from the Culinary Tourism Alliance explores the **growing movement toward conscious sourcing and how it's building more resilient food systems**. Chuck Ortiz, founder of **The Food Runners**, discusses how the run crew is raising awareness and addressing mental health and wellness in hospitality. Asma Syed and Chef Moeen Abuzaid of **Arbequina Restaurant** open up about building a restaurant rooted in inclusivity and sustainability. Chef Chris Commandant offers a powerful perspective on **Indigenous foodways and leadership**, while Val Upfold shares insights on **navigating change with agile leadership**.

Marking 80 years of RC Show isn't just about celebrating a milestone—it's about reimagining what's possible. Whether you're looking for fresh inspiration, new connections, or just the energy that comes from being surrounded by people who share your passion, this is the place to find the ideas and insights to fuel your business and your soul.

I hope to see you there!



Kelly Higginson
President & CEO

Spring 2025
Volume 10 Number 2

Restaurants Canada
The voice of foodservice | La voix des services alimentaires

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10.2

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REVAMPED & RECHARGED

Restaurants Canada is Relaunching the MENU Unplugged Podcast. The MENU Unplugged Podcast is coming back with a fresh perspective, as Jim Taylor, founder of Benchmark Sixty, and Derek Smith take the mic as the new hosts. The relaunched podcast will feature in-depth conversations with industry leaders, innovators and changemakers, delivering actionable insights and fresh ideas to help operators navigate an evolving landscape and fuel the future of foodservice.

Jim and Derek will be conducting live interviews with featured speakers and industry leaders at the Restaurants Canada booth (#2001) at RC Show 2025. Drop by and check it out!

Keep an eye on your inbox for updates coming this spring!



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For more information and to request a Restaurant Health Check, please contact Paljor Dolma, Senior Manager, Member Marketing & Engagement at: pdolma@restaurantscanada.org

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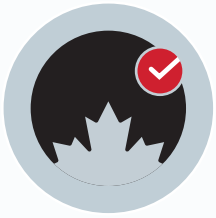
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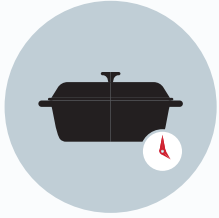


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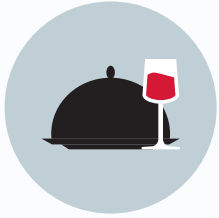


Module 7: Prepping & Cooking



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Learn More

Canada Beef is the national industry association that promotes beef on behalf of Canadian cattle producers. To learn more about the **Certified Canadian Beef Training Program - Foodservice** contact:

Sandesh Rodrigo
srodrigo@canadabeef.ca





Letter from the New Chair of the Restaurants Canada Board of Directors

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Dear MENU Magazine Readers,

As I step into my role as the new Chair of Restaurants Canada, I am filled with excitement and a sense of responsibility, particularly given the current trade challenges facing our industry.

My involvement with Restaurants Canada for nearly a decade has only strengthened my passion for this dynamic sector. Over the years, I've witnessed major transformations—from the rise of delivery apps to the pandemic that upended our operations. These experiences have shown me just how resilient and innovative our industry truly is.

What deeply motivates me is seeing how restaurants enrich our communities. They are more than just places to eat—they are spaces for connection, celebration, and cultural discovery. As the CEO of Benny&Co., a Quebec family business for 60 years, I intimately understand the importance of restaurants in the social fabric of our communities.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Board of Directors for their trust and confidence in appointing me to this role. Their unanimous support is both humbling and inspiring. I also want to warmly thank the Benny&Co. teams for their support as I take on this dual role. Their backing demonstrates the spirit of collaboration that characterizes our industry.

The Canadian restaurant industry has consistently demonstrated its resilience, having overcome major challenges such as the recent pandemic. I am confident in our collective ability to adapt and innovate in the face of new trade pressures. Our industry's strength lies in our creativity, determination, and ability to come together in times of adversity.

Now more than ever, solidarity within our industry is crucial. We must work together, share insights, and support one another to overcome this difficult period. By uniting our voices and efforts, we can more effectively advocate for our needs and find innovative solutions to the challenges ahead.

The upcoming 80th anniversary of RC Show takes place April 7 to 9. This flagship event showcases the strength and creativity of our sector and will provide unique networking and B2B meeting opportunities to foster connections and partnerships. I warmly invite you to attend, as it is a must for staying ahead of industry trends and innovations.

Our industry is facing significant economic headwinds. The latest forecasts project a modest 0.8 per cent real growth in restaurant sales for 2025, amid challenges such as changes in immigration policies, tariff threats and low consumer confidence. Despite these challenges, there are reasons for optimism. The foodservice market in Canada is expected to reach US$135.52 billion by 2033, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 5.43 per cent from 2025.

To navigate these challenges and opportunities, Restaurants Canada is focusing on several key areas: advocacy, innovation and technology, customer loyalty, sustainability, and diversification of activities. We're also investing in research and resources that directly benefit our members. The team stands strong in advocating for our industry's interests, driven by the mission to be the champion that unites us and fuels success through advocacy, connection and support. Guided by the vision of vibrant and thriving restaurant and foodservice communities across Canada, we will continue to work tirelessly to protect, empower and uplift operators, ensuring a stronger future for all.

Despite the challenges ahead, I remain optimistic about the future of our industry. This resilience and forward-thinking attitude are what truly defines the strength of our sector. I look forward to meeting many of you at RC Show 2025 and our other upcoming events, and hearing your stories, ideas, and visions for the future. Together, we will continue to serve Canadians with pride and passion, adapting to new realities while preserving the very essence of hospitality that defines us.



Sincerely,
Nicolas Filiatrault
Chair, Restaurants Canada

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Canada's Trade Battle:

The Story So Far on the Tariff War and its Impact on Restaurants

BY MILENA STANOEVA, SENIOR DIRECTOR, COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

After months of escalating threats, then a last-minute reversal in February, President Trump finally followed through on imposing a sweeping 25 per cent tariff on Canadian goods, with a 10 per cent tariff on energy. While he reversed the policy just days later, providing an exemption for CUSMA compliant goods until April 2, Canada is not out of the woods.

As of the time of this writing in mid-March, Canada has taken a hard-line approach to the tariff dispute, imposing its own 25 per cent tariffs on $60B worth of U.S. goods, with the promise to expand that list to $150B worth of goods if the U.S. does not remove all tariffs by April 2. In addition, all provincial and territorial governments have stopped buying and selling U.S. alcohol products and are excluding U.S. firms from government contracts. This strategy by our government aims to strike the U.S. as strongly as possible in an effort to pressure them to remove the tariffs as quickly as possible. It enjoys strong support among Canadian consumers, which must be considered as we at Restaurants Canada develop our strategy.

It has been heartening to see the unity with which Canadians have responded to these threats, even as we gear up for a long period of economic uncertainty. Here are a number of ways this has impacted the restaurant sector:

Interprovincial trade is finally getting its day in the sun.

The rapid deterioration of Canada's trading relationship with the U.S. has forced the government to look to grow its agreements with other markets, but it has also finally pushed Canada to rethink its protectionist internal trade policies.

While the Canada Free Trade Agreement has been in place for nearly 10 years, we have never seen this level of unified interest in actually liberalizing trade across provincial borders. Last month, Minister of Internal Trade Anita Anand announced that nearly all provinces and territories will move to allow the purchase of alcohol from other provinces, something that Restaurants Canada has been calling for for years.

We also saw commitments from Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario to strike mutual recognition agreements with other provinces willing to do the same. This is a big deal because it would tackle the core of interprovincial trade barriers—inconsistent regulations from province to province on things like first aid kits in trucks—rather than addressing each barrier individually.



Opening up the flow of goods, services and labour between provincial borders has the potential to add $200 billion annually to our economy. On the micro level, it would make it easier and less expensive for Canadian producers to diversify their supply chains and for foodservice businesses to source products from Canada.

There is still a lot of work left on this file, but it has certainly been a silver lining in the tariff war with the U.S. We should not waste this precious momentum. Restaurants Canada will be pushing hard to dismantle interprovincial trade barriers that stem the flow of goods the foodservice industry depends on.

The importance of strength and unity in the face of adversity.

Just as Canada is building its international relationships, Restaurants Canada has been busy building a network of policy makers, trade negotiators and other business and labour associations to get the latest information and amplify our advocacy. Our focus is to highlight the specific challenges the foodservice industry faces during the tariff war to all levels of government. We are raising the industry's critical needs, required resources, and the potential impact of rising costs, supply chain issues, and loss of access to essential items in all consultations with government.

In December, we joined the Canada-U.S. Trade Council, a group of industry associations and organized labour across impacted sectors to share information and develop policy recommendations. We reached out to our counterparts in the U.S., the National Restaurant Association, and had one of their representatives join us for two webinars on trade and tariffs.

In March, Richard Alexander, Restaurants Canada's Executive Vice-President of Government Relations and Public Affairs, travelled to Washington, D.C., on a trade mission with the Retail Council of Canada, Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and the Canadian Produce Marketing Association. There, he met with Senators, Members of Congress, American business leaders and associations, to share the importance of Canada-U.S. collaboration and ensure that conversations about tariffs in Washington include considerations for the restaurant industry on both sides of the border.

Maintaining these strong relationships and information networks is going to be key as we parse through unpredictable and rapid policy changes from the U.S. administration.

We're calling for support for businesses and workers impacted by the trade dispute.

Job losses on both sides of the border have already started as a result of U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminium and the uncertainty surrounding other sectors. As we saw during the pandemic, layoffs, even if temporary, cause massive shifts in the workforce as people move to other sectors or relocate. It's important for Canada to lay the groundwork to maintain the employer-employee relationship for affected workers through wage supports in the event the tariff dispute heats up. Last month, the federal government announced it is expanding the EI Work-Sharing Program to cover more types of businesses and workers for a longer maximum duration. The Work-Sharing Program allows employers to reduce employees' hours in response to an unexpected reduction in business activity and use EI benefits to offset lost wages. The program now covers non-permanent and part-time employees, and eligibility requirements have been simplified.

This was a good first step to protect Canadian jobs and we encourage restaurant operators to look into the program if they are concerned about job losses in their businesses. We will continue to push for more relief for workers and businesses affected by job losses as the situation evolves.

The next few months (or years) will undoubtedly test our resolve—as a country, as business leaders and as individual citizens. Operators can count on Restaurants Canada to be in their corner, raising their voice on behalf of the foodservice industry, sharing information you need to run your business and celebrating your successes in the face of adversity.

For more on this developing situation, please visit restaurantscanada.org to subscribe to Restaurants Canada's regular newsletters for updates and click on the TARIFFS FAQ button on the top right of the landing page.



About Milena Stanoeva

Milena Stanoeva is the Sr. Director, Public Affairs and Communications at Restaurants Canada. Prior to joining Restaurants Canada in 2024, she headed the communications department at the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB). She holds an Honours Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies and Women's and Gender Studies from Carleton University and a Master of Arts in Communication and Culture from York University.

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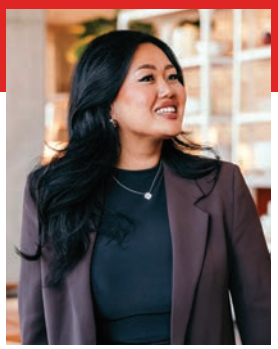
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ONE INDUSTRY, ONE VOICE

RESTAURANTS CANADA IS UNLOCKING THE POWER OF COMMUNITY



Tracy Macgregor,
Chief Operating Officer, Restaurants Canada



Paljor Dolma,
Senior Manager of Member Marketing and Engagement, Restaurants Canada

FOR MORE THAN 80 YEARS, Restaurants Canada (RC) has been the national voice of the foodservice industry, advocating for policies that support growth, providing industry insights, and fostering connections across the sector. Much like the industry it represents, RC thrives on collaboration, adaptability and innovation. And, just as restaurant operators continuously refine their approach to stay competitive, RC is doubling down on its commitment to advocacy, industry support, and member-driven solutions—ensuring it remains the most effective resource for Canada's foodservice community.

"We want Restaurants Canada to be the first call operators make when they have a problem, a question, or a business challenge," says Tracy Macgregor, RC's Chief Operating Officer. At the centre of this effort is Paljor Dolma, RC's Senior
Manager of Member Marketing and Engagement, who is focused on helping members unlock the full value of their membership. Whether it's guiding operators to the right industry connections, advocacy initiatives, or business resources, Dolma ensures that members not only have access to solutions but know exactly how to use them.

Through quarterly Virtual Town Halls, an expanded slate of in-person and virtual meetings, and new networking opportunities, RC is ensuring that the same sense of connection and support that defines the restaurant industry is reflected in the association itself. Just as foodservice operators rely on their teams, suppliers and peers to navigate challenges, RC is strengthening its role as a key resource and strategic partner.

Building Year-Round Engagement

For years, RC Show—a single, massive event where foodservice leaders gather to discuss trends, innovations, and advocacy priorities—has been the gathering place for the industry and the centrepiece of the Restaurants Canada's engagement efforts. But one thing was missing: year-round connection. "When I first joined RC, I noticed that there were very few regular, ongoing member events," Macgregor recalls. "Everything was centred around RC Show. That needed to change. With the accelerating pace of the industry, getting together once a year, while amazing, is just not enough."

In 2024, RC committed to expanding its national engagement strategy, rolling out Virtual Town Halls, regional networking receptions, and focused industry meet-ups to keep conversations going and connections growing. "We're restructuring things—moving key events, like the Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence, out of RC Show and into a new fall gala event. We're launching new programs to elevate women in the industry, and creating more spaces for networking," Macgregor says. "Because connections matter. We are focused on making sure all operators, across all segments have a place and a reason to connect with us and with each other."

Making Advocacy More Accessible

Macgregor and Dolma understand that, for many restaurant operators, industry advocacy can feel distant. Policies change, regulations shift and major decisions affecting foodservice happen at levels that may seem disconnected from the day-to-day realities of running a restaurant. But those decisions are shaped by the voices of operators—when they engage. The challenge is ensuring those voices are heard in a way that drives real change.

That's exactly the gap RC's new Quarterly Virtual Town Halls are designed to bridge. "These sessions aren't just about delivering information—they're about hearing directly

from members and turning their concerns into action," says Dolma. "We launched the Virtual Town Halls in February to provide operators with a direct channel to RC's leadership, allowing them to ask questions, provide feedback, and gain clarity on the industry-wide issues affecting their businesses." The sessions include a review and discussion of the research findings in the most recent edition of The Quarterly Canadian Restaurant Intelligence Report, produced by Chris Elliott, Restaurants Canada's Chief Economist and VP Research, and the RC research team. "It's one thing to send out a report," adds Macgregor, "But these sessions allow operators to ask questions specific to their business, plan ahead, and actually apply insights to their business strategies."

Restaurants Canada

2025 VIRTUAL TOWN HALLS & MEMBER EVENTS

RC Show 2025
April 7-9, 2025, Toronto

Quarterly Virtual Town Halls*
April 28, 2025
July 28, 2025
November 3, 2025

Member Events
Quebec City: May 2025
Atlantic Canada: July 2025
(date and location TBA)

RC Gala & Awards of Excellence
September 16, 2025
(The Warehouse, Toronto)

**Dates are tentative and subject to change.*

"When I first joined RC, I noticed there were very few regular, ongoing member events. Everything was centred around RC Show. That needed to change. With the accelerating pace of the industry, getting together once a year, while amazing, is just not enough."

- Tracy Macgregor



Kelowna-Mission MLA Gavin Dew (Jobs, Economic Development, and Innovation Critic), Prince George-Mackenzie MLA Kiel Giddens (Labour Critic), and Restaurants Canada VP, Western Canada Mark von Schellwitz meet over breakfast in February to discuss policies impacting BC's foodservice and hospitality industry.



Janick Cormier, Restaurants Canada's VP Atlantic, met with members at Water Polo restaurant in Halifax, where industry leaders gathered to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing foodservice operators in the region. The event was attended by the Honourable Danielle Barkhouse, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, reinforcing the importance of collaboration between government and the restaurant sector.



Beyond the ability to engage directly, the town halls are making advocacy feel more personal and immediate. "Operators don't just see a report—they see the people behind it," Macgregor explains. "They put faces to the team advocating for them, and that makes it more real. They're not just reading an email; they're having a conversation." That distinction is important. When members understand the work being done on their behalf and have the opportunity to voice their concerns in real time, it builds stronger trust and alignment between operators and the association representing their business.

Macgregor also points out that advocacy isn't just about making noise—it's about delivering results.

"Every time we meet with policymakers, the first question we're asked is: "Do you have the data to back that up?" Macgregor also stresses that without strong, segmented data reflecting the realities of operators across different provinces and business models, it becomes much harder to push for meaningful policy change. "Some provinces—like Quebec, Manitoba and parts of Atlantic Canada—struggle to get enough participation to provide region-specific data," she explains. "And without it, it's harder to move the needle with government." The solution is simple: more members engaging in surveys, town halls, and research initiatives means stronger data, clearer insights, and more compelling arguments when it comes time to negotiate with policymakers.

Taking just a few minutes to respond to RC's surveys helps shape not only advocacy efforts but also the resources, supports and industry partnerships RC develops to address member pain points. These surveys provide critical insights into the challenges and priorities of foodservice operators, allowing RC to push for policy changes, negotiate better business supports, and build strategic partnerships that deliver real value to members. "Every response, every data point, every shared experience adds weight to our voice," says Tracy MacGregor, RC's Chief Operating Officer. "And when that happens, change follows. We use surveys sparingly because we know how busy our members are, but we send them to ensure our advocacy work is optimized and the supports we invest in are aligned with what matters most."

Focused on Member Success

One of the biggest shifts within Restaurants Canada (RC) is a deeper, more proactive approach to member engagement—not as a transactional relationship, but as a strategic partnership. At the centre of this effort is Dolma, whose work is focused on ensuring that every RC member gets maximum value from their membership. "My role is really about member success," says Dolma. "It's not just about signing people up for membership—it's about making sure they get the most value out of it." That means ensuring operators don't just have access to resources, but that they know exactly how to use them—whether it's advocacy support, networking opportunities, or business tools designed to help them navigate industry challenges.

> "We launched the Virtual Town Halls in February to provide operators with a direct channel to RC's leadership, allowing them to ask questions, provide feedback, and gain clarity on the industry-wide issues affecting their businesses."
>
> - Paljor Dolma

This shift reflects a broader, enterprise-wide focus within RC—one that positions the organization as the first call operators make when they need solutions or support. "We want operators to see us as their go-to resource," Macgregor explains. "If they don't know where to get an answer, they should know that someone here will connect them to the right person, tool, or solution. No matter who they come to at RC, they should be able to get connected to the answer they need." Part of Macgregor and Dolma's mandate is to strengthen internal processes to make sure no member question or request falls through the cracks—and that every touchpoint leads to actionable support.

RC has implemented robust new member success programs and structured outreach initiatives that ensure members fully understand and utilize their benefits. "We need to be reminding members of all the benefits they have access to," Macgregor says. "Whether it's through an online call, an orientation session, or an open Q&A—members should know what's available to them and how to use it."

This also means making key industry tools more accessible, from navigating the RC member portal and leveraging the Groupex group purchasing program to tapping into exclusive industry partnerships. "If we're not proactively reaching out to members, they won't always know what's available to them," Dolma emphasizes. "So, we've created more structured opportunities to encourage engagement. We're focused on turning engagement into impact and ensuring that operators see RC as an essential business partner in their success."

To learn more about Restaurants Canada member benefits, contact Paljor Dolma at: PDolma@restaurantscanada.org

AUTHENTICITY WITHOUT COMPROMISE:

The Role of Smart Sourcing & Strong Partnerships in Blowers & Grafton's Growth



In the heart of Alberta, a slice of Halifax's vibrant street food culture has found an unexpected home. Blowers & Grafton, named after the iconic intersection in downtown Halifax, has been delighting Canadians with authentic East Coast flavours since its inception.

The journey began with Josh Robinson, a Halifax native whose entrepreneurial spirit was evident from the start. At 17, Robinson operated a cotton candy stand on the Halifax waterfront, which later evolved into a donair and pizza shop. These early ventures laid the foundation for his deep appreciation of Maritime culinary traditions. In 2013, seeking new horizons, Robinson moved to Calgary to work in the oil and gas industry, but the allure of the food industry proved irresistible. Teaming up with business partners Samim and Tam Aminzadah, they identified a significant gap in the Alberta market: the absence of genuine East Coast cuisine. This realization led to the birth of Blowers & Grafton.

"Being in Calgary and spending my entire life in the Maritimes, there were a lot of things that you don't realize are actually from the Maritimes when it comes to food," Robinson







reflects. "There are so many staples, like every pub has Chris Brothers' pepperoni, and you won't find it out here." Determined to bridge this culinary divide, the team embarked on a mission to introduce Alberta to the rich flavors of Halifax street food, opening the first Blowers & Grafton in a heritage building in Calgary with just 34 seats.

Since then, Blowers & Grafton has experienced remarkable growth. Today, they boast multiple locations across Alberta, including Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, with plans to expand further into Lloydminster and Red Deer. This success is a testament to their unwavering commitment to authenticity. "Whatever we did had to be 100% authentic," Robinson emphasizes. "It has to be the real ingredients; it has to be—when it needs to be—a traditional recipe or process."

Sourcing genuine ingredients is at the heart of their operation and Robinson and the team have forged partnerships with renowned East Coast suppliers to ensure every dish resonates with authenticity. For instance, their donair meat comes directly from Nova Scotia, adhering to Peter Gamoulakos's original recipe—the creator of the donair. Additionally, they collaborate with local Lebanese bakeries in various cities to perfect their offerings. This meticulous attention to detail ensures that patrons experience a genuine taste of the Maritimes.

However, maintaining such high standards comes with challenges, particularly in sourcing premium Atlantic seafood. The volatility of supply and pricing requires strategic partnerships to keep operations sustainable. This is where Groupex Canada has played a pivotal role. Groupex negotiates with suppliers on behalf of independent restaurants and chains like Blowers & Grafton, granting access to volume pricing and higher rebates.

Blowers & Grafton recently transitioned to Groupex, aligning with Gordon Food Service (GFS) in the process. Though new to the partnership, Robinson has already seen its advantages. "Groupex has been amazing to us already, even though we've only just moved over to them. They've been very accommodating and very, very generous with supporting us in this move. When it comes to the information I need as we move to a new food buyer, with all these different partnerships—even the littlest ones—they've been able to give me information promptly and in a straightforward way. That has allowed me to make quick, informed decisions that have been very useful, just in the last couple of weeks."

By collaborating with Groupex, Blowers & Grafton has been able to tighten margins on essential menu items without compromising their core vision. "The bottom line is incredibly delicate for us," Robinson notes. "Every single ingredient is crucial for us to hit certain benchmarks and levels so that we can survive while providing these very special ingredients. Groupex has been incredibly important, helping us analyze each individual item—even the less exciting ones, but ones we go through a ton of."

One of the most surprising discoveries since partnering with Groupex has been the level of rebates on everyday items purchased through Groupex partners like GFS. "I was actually very impressed to see many of those rebates coming through Groupex actually being significantly higher than some direct rebates I had with those vendors themselves," Robinson reveals. "The transparency that Groupex offers has already allowed us to make some great business decisions and see what we can do to leverage our vendors as best we can and strengthen those partnerships."

Beyond cost savings, Groupex provides stability in an industry where consistency is key. "With all of the ingredients that we bring in from across the country—especially things that are so volatile like Atlantic seafood, premium Atlantic seafood—the market is incredibly risky. Groupex helps us see where we can offset costs so we can continue to focus on what matters most: quality and authenticity."

As Blowers & Grafton continues to expand, their dedication to authenticity remains steadfast. They serve as a shining example of how staying true to one's roots, coupled with strategic partnerships, can lead to sustained success in the culinary world.

RC Show Restaurants Canada

groupex CANADA

Groupex Canada is a Canadian foodservice buying group that helps operators maximize savings with exclusive volume pricing and rebates from 300+ supplier partners. Visit Groupex at booth #2201 at RC Show 2025 to learn more.

INTRODUCING dish.

FUEL FOR WOMEN LEADERS IN FOOD







The numbers don't lie: women make up 58 per cent of entry-level foodservice positions, yet that representation drops sharply as they climb the leadership ladder—only 30 per cent of management roles are held by women, and just 11 per cent ever reach the C-suite. It's a familiar story across industries, but in foodservice—where women have long shaped and sustained hospitality—this imbalance is particularly stark.

For many women in leadership, the real challenge isn't breaking the glass ceiling—it's the broken rung: the barrier to taking that crucial first step into management. Research confirms that the most significant roadblock women face is the initial promotion to leadership, often due to unconscious bias, lack of mentorship, and the perception that leadership roles aren't flexible enough for women managing caregiving responsibilities. Once that first step is missed, the gap only widens.

"I was confronted with my own bias during a senior hiring process," recalls Kelly Higginson, President & CEO of Restaurants Canada. "I had two candidates: a woman with direct brand experience and extensive leadership training, and a man who lacked both. Yet, I initially gave the job to the man. I was swayed by others' opinions of my decision and had been culturally conditioned to believe that the confidence of the male applicant equated to actual capabilities. It was an uncomfortable realization, but it made me more aware of the influence and impact of unconscious bias, and how deeply ingrained these biases can be—even in those of us fighting for change."



Top Row:
Jazzlyn Chia (Amex), Silvana Bria (Amex), Louise Zhou (Amex), Rhonda Murphy (PepsiCo), Emma Sweet Kretz (PepsiCo), Karlyn Percil (Speaker, KDPM Equity Institute)

Middle Row:
Amanda Roberts (Sysco), Val Sy-Quia (Sysco)

Bottom Row:
Emma Kristensen (DoorDash), Kelly Higginson (Restaurants Canada), Jocelyn Pepe (Speaker, TrU), Shilpa Arora (DoorDash)

Higginson's experience underscores how societal norms subtly shape decision-making, often favouring men for leadership roles despite objective qualifications. It's a reminder that overcoming bias requires active self-awareness, reflection, and deliberate action to challenge ingrained assumptions and create real opportunities. "Women are proven innovators—we bring fresh perspectives and play a critical role in driving results and initiatives. Yet, we remain underrepresented in leadership in most industries, including our own," she points out. "That's why we created *dish*.—to provide a platform for real change and a space where women in foodservice can connect, collaborate, and lead."

> "Donna helped pave the way for women like me who watched as she cut her own path in this industry. To launch dish. in her space, surrounded by incredible women, was deeply meaningful."
>
> ~ Kelly Higginson, President & CEO, Restaurants Canada

Fuelling Women Leaders in Food—And Those Who Aspire

dish. by Restaurants Canada is more than an initiative—it's a movement designed to level the playing field. The platform launched with a sold-out morning gathering of powerhouse women in downtown Toronto, which was enthusiastically sponsored by DoorDash, Sysco and American Express with product support from PepsiCo.

The setting was also symbolic—Mildred's Temple Kitchen, owned by Donna Dooher, a trailblazing chef, restaurateur, and former President & CEO of Restaurants Canada, provided the perfect backdrop. "Donna helped pave the way for women like me who watched as she cut her own path in this industry," says Higginson. "To launch dish. in her space, surrounded by incredible women, was deeply meaningful."

Over an incredible brunch, 75 attendees engaged in a high-energy networking session, where ideas flowed, partnerships formed, and future collaborations began taking shape in real time. This wasn't just networking—it was women showing up for each other, sparking connections, and laying the groundwork for collective success.



The event also featured insights from Jocelyn Pepe, an expert in workplace well-being, who led a grounding session to set the tone for keynote speaker Karlyn Percil, a renowned equity and emotional intelligence strategist. Together, they challenged attendees to redefine leadership on their own terms and break free from outdated structures that limit potential. The demand for *dish*. was clear—the room was filled with energy, intention, and a shared commitment to rewriting the rules of leadership in foodservice.

What's next for *dish*.

The launch of *dish*. is just the beginning. The momentum continues with an exclusive *MENU Magazine* content series spotlighting



"Not everyone can step away from their business or travel for events, but that shouldn't mean they miss out on critical conversations and networking. These virtual meet-ups will help bridge the gap, ensuring that every woman in foodservice with the ambition to lead has access to a strong, supportive community."

~ Kelly Higginson, President & CEO, Restaurants Canada



women leaders from all corners of the foodservice and hospitality industry.

"These aren't your standard corporate profiles," says Higginson. "We're going beyond polished résumés and curated success stories. dish. is about giving women an authentic platform to share their journeys—the challenges, the hard choices, and the wins, big and small, that have shaped their leadership paths. When we amplify real stories, we expose the systemic challenges holding women back while showcasing the full spectrum of female leadership—from emerging talents to established pioneers. Our goal is to help others see not just where women leaders are today, but where they could be if we break down barriers and truly fix that broken first rung on the ladder."

And *dish*. isn't stopping there. Plans are already in motion to expand the initiative's reach with virtual meet-ups, ensuring women across Canada—whether in a bustling city or a small town—have access to meaningful connections and industry support. These candid online gatherings will create a dynamic space for mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and open conversations about the unique challenges and opportunities for women in foodservice.

"Not everyone can step away from their business or travel for events, but that shouldn't mean they miss out on critical conversations and networking," says Higginson. "These virtual meet-ups will help bridge the gap, ensuring that every woman in foodservice with the ambition to lead has access to a strong, supportive community."

Creating a more inclusive industry.

As *dish*. expands, Restaurants Canada is calling on industry leaders to step up—not just to support women, but to actively dismantle the barriers holding them back.

"We need to move past performative allyship," says Higginson. "Success isn't about checking a diversity box—it's about ensuring women are given the same opportunities to lead and thrive as their male counterparts. It is about changing the system, not changing women. Our hope is that women join the *dish*. community to share their experiences and perspectives. By fostering real connections, we're not just closing the gap; we're building a stronger, more inclusive industry where talent—not gender—determines success."

Foodservice is at a turning point, and women are ready to lead the charge. *dish*. is here to ensure they have the tools, resources, and community to do just that.

dish.

FUEL FOR WOMEN LEADERS IN FOOD.

To learn more about *dish*. and how to get involved, visit restaurantscanada.org/dish/.

Industry leaders weigh in...

"Entrepreneurship is at the heart of every community in Canada, no matter how large or small. We're constantly inspired by hearing from women within the culinary industry who showcase the resilience, innovation, and grit behind growing their businesses. The more we're able to collectively empower women in hospitality and create dedicated space to exchange ideas, the stronger our industry will be for years to come."

~ Shilpa Arora, General Manager, DoorDash Canada

"Sysco Canada was proud to sponsor Restaurants Canada's inaugural dish. event, as part of our commitment to enhancing industry-wide inclusion and promoting a culture of belonging in the communities where we live and work. We're proud to have gender balance in leadership roles, and we continue to focus on empowering colleagues to fuel progress. Together with Restaurants Canada, we're laying the foundation for a more dynamic, innovative, and supportive industry for all."

~ Adrienne Cristini, VP, Talent Management, Sysco Canada

Photo Credit: @savagemediagroupinc

American Express Is Fuelling Canada's Dining Scene

A look inside the Amex programs and supports for restaurants.

In 2023, over 26,500 dining locations across Canada—from quick service to fine dining—began accepting American Express® Cards. But Amex provides more than secure payments. Through programs and complimentary resources that boost traffic and loyalty, Amex is helping restaurants overcome industry challenges and thrive.



MENU caught up with Kerri-Ann Santaguida, Vice President and General Manager, Global Merchant Services, at American Express Canada to learn more.





Amex is known for seamless, secure transactions, but how does it support the growth of small businesses and restaurants?

At Amex, we don't just process payments—we power small businesses. Restaurants are the heartbeat of their communities, and we're here to help them thrive. We act as a built-in marketing engine, connecting restaurants with high-spending[1] Cardmembers through targeted promotions and exclusive perks. Since launching 'Shop Small' in Canada in 2013, we've driven millions of transactions at independent businesses nationwide, making shopping local more rewarding. This year, we introduced 'Local Gems', another program designed to support small businesses while also rewarding Cardmembers for shopping locally. We launched with two neighbourhoods in Toronto: Leslieville and Queen West. Beyond programs, we provide hands-on support through our servicing teams, helping restaurants maximize their Amex partnership and attract the high-value customers that keep them growing.

Given recent industry shifts, what trends should restaurant owners watch, and how can Amex help them adapt?

Three key trends stand out. First is the demand for digital dining—customers expect seamless, contactless payments, mobile ordering and loyalty programs, and Amex integrates with all POS providers to make transactions fast and secure. Second is the rise of premium, experience-driven dining. Programs like the Amex Global Dining Collection and Platinum Dining Experiences connect restaurants with guests seeking unique, curated moments. Finally, loyalty and personalization are more important than ever. With 'Amex Offers', we offer participating merchants a simple way to reach the right customer, at the right time, with tailored offers that are most relevant to Cardmembers.

How does Amex drive dining spend and elevate the customer experience?

We help restaurants connect with high-value customers through a range of exclusive benefits. Platinum Cardmembers enjoy dining credits, early reservations and curated culinary events, all of which drive traffic to top-tier restaurants.

Programs like Shop Small have been game-changers, boosting visibility and transactions for nearly one million small businesses last year, and our support of marquee events like MTLàTABLE increases foot traffic and celebrates the best of the local dining scene.

Amex Offers helps Cardmembers seek out restaurants with targeted incentives, while helping merchants acquire new customers or build loyalty with existing customers. We promote your business and offers across our digital channels, connecting your business with the right audience to increase exposure and help build your brand. Amex Cardmembers spend more per visit, and our campaigns help restaurants tap into this valuable audience. These programs are central to our mission of supporting local businesses, building community and driving economic growth—giving small restaurants the visibility and customer base they need to thrive.

What's next from Amex to continue driving engagement in the dining sector?

This year we launched 'Platinum Dining Experiences', a new way to deliver on one of the benefits our Platinum Cardmembers value most—exceptional dining. The program features curated events at award-winning restaurants across Canada, spotlighting some of the country's top chefs. It builds on the experiences our Cardmembers already love, from reserved tables through the Global Dining Collection to private shopping events and exclusive packages. More importantly, it reflects our ongoing commitment to Canadian restaurant owners—a community of dedicated entrepreneurs we're proud to support as they grow.

[1] *Source: The Nilson Report #1259 (March 2024).*

RC Show Restaurants Canada | AMEX

Stay hydrated at RC Show! Visit the Amex activation in the Food Truck'N Experience to stay refreshed and learn more about their merchant services and programs for restaurants.

People *Perspectives*

STAYING STEADY IN THE STORM: AGILE LEADERSHIP LESSONS FOR (AND FROM) HOSPITALITY

BY VAL UPFOLD, PRINCIPAL, VAL UPFOLD INC.



If there's one constant in hospitality, it's change. Shifting guest expectations, unpredictable supply chains, rising costs, staffing shortages—we're an industry built on our ability to pivot. And yet, even with this resilience, the past few years (and now these past few months) have stretched us further than we thought possible.

As an HR leader, I've seen the toll prolonged uncertainty takes—not just on teams, but on those leading them. But I also believe hospitality professionals are uniquely equipped to navigate these moments. Why? Because adaptability is part of who we are.

Long before "agility" became a corporate buzzword, it was how we survived a slammed Saturday night with two servers down and a line out the door. It's how we turned last-minute menu changes into seamless service and guest complaints into five-star reviews.

We're wired to make the unpredictable feel effortless.

But what happens when the unpredictability never lets up? When uncertainty becomes the norm instead of the exception? That's when agile leadership becomes less about managing change and more about building cultures that thrive through it. Here's what I've learned about staying grounded while guiding others through the storm.

1. COMMUNICATE EARLY, HONESTLY AND OFTEN.

When business—or the world around us—feels uncertain, silence can be a breeding ground for anxiety. And yet, as leaders, we sometimes hold back, waiting until we have the full picture or the perfect plan. But in the absence of information, people fill the gaps themselves—and rarely with good news.

Your team doesn't expect you to have all the answers. What they need is transparency, consistency and a sense that they're part of the process. Even saying, "Here's what we know today, and here's what we're watching," can build trust.

Regular touchpoints—quick huddles, candid check-ins, open-door conversations—help people feel informed and included. People commit to what they help create, and agile leadership is less about having the full plan and more about building the kind of team that's ready to create one together.

2. EMPOWER FLEXIBILITY AND GROWTH

Rigid systems crack under pressure—and so do people. If the last few years have taught us anything, it's that survival depends on our ability to bend, adapt and move with what's happening around us.

That starts with creating agile teams and meeting people where they are. Flexible scheduling, cross-training, and adjusting policies to reflect real life aren't just nice-to-haves anymore—they're essential. Some employees are balancing childcare. Others are caring for family, picking up extra work, or navigating burnout. When we show our teams that we see them as whole people, not just roles on a schedule, we keep them engaged, loyal and ready to go the distance.

Agility is also about creating real growth opportunities within the business. Too often, outdated hierarchies and roles hold people and potential back. When we rethink those structures and allow them to breathe by creating new roles and job titles, launching mentorship programs and inviting fresh voices into the conversation, we give our people clearer reasons to stay and pathways to thrive. These changes and recognition have to be visible. Don't let your top performers quietly carry the load behind the scenes. Celebrate them. Introduce them to guests, highlight them on social media, and make sure their talent and glow are part of your story.

3. CREATE MOMENTS OF CONNECTION AND CARE.

We spend our days creating memorable experiences for our guests—anticipating needs, adding thoughtful touches, making people feel like they belong. But how often do we turn that same level of care inward? Especially when the pace is relentless and the pressure is high, our teams need to feel that same spirit of hospitality from us.

It doesn't take a big budget to make a big impact. Small, intentional gestures—a handwritten thank you, a public shout-out, a shared meal to mark the end of a busy week—go further than we sometimes realize. These micro-moments stack up, creating a workplace culture where people feel seen, appreciated, and connected, even on the toughest days. And, when people feel cared for, it becomes a place they're proud to be part of—where they feel purpose and belonging. And in an industry built on human connection, that's not just nice to have—it's the key to keeping great people around.

4. DON'T FORGET YOURSELF.

This is the hardest one. In hospitality, we're wired to serve—our guests, our teams, our business. But you can't lead well if you're running on empty.

Sustainable leadership requires boundaries. Block time to recharge. Delegate, even when it's uncomfortable. Ask for help when you need it. The most effective leaders I know are the ones who model what balance looks like. When you give yourself permission to pause, you create space for others to do the same—and that's how you build lasting strength into your culture.

5. STAY GROUNDED IN PURPOSE.

When everything feels like it's shifting under your feet, purpose is what holds you steady. Hospitality has always been about more than food and service. We create spaces where people connect. We help mark milestones. We provide comfort, joy, and belonging. That work matters—especially now. When morale dips, remind your team why they do what they do. Share guest feedback. Celebrate team wins. Reflect on the impact you're making together. Purpose won't eliminate uncertainty, but it will keep you grounded in what's real and worth showing up for.

Recognition is retention. Purpose is performance. Agility is culture. If we can reimagine old systems, centre our people, and create workplaces where everyone—leaders included—can thrive through the unknown, we can weather uncertain times.

And, if anyone's built to handle the unexpected with grace, it's us.

About Val...

Valerie Upfold has extensive experience in the hospitality industry, having worked in hotels and restaurants in Canada and Australia. Her roles have included Restaurant Manager, Sommelier and HR Director. At Oliver & Bonacini Hospitality, Val spent 15 years—five as Manager and Sommelier at Canoe Restaurant in Toronto, and ten as HR Director, where she established the HR department and grew the company from 100 to over 1,500 employees. With over ten years in hospitality recruitment and HR consulting, Val is a trusted expert for renowned brands. She also conducts food TV casting, identifying top talent for the screen. Val contributes to Centennial College and George Brown College hospitality advisory committees, has lectured at the University of Guelph's HAFA program, and speaks at industry events nationwide. She volunteers with Catalyste+ to support the hospitality sector in developing markets.

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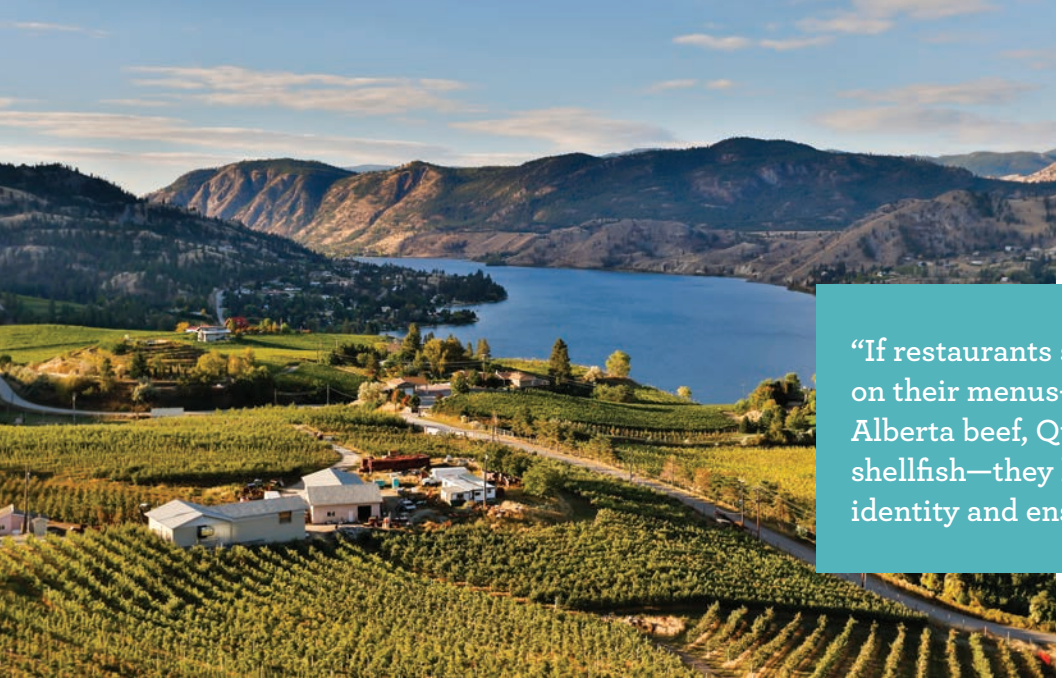
CONSCIOUS SOURCING

Insights on Building a More Resilient and Sustainable Food System with Rebecca Mackenzie, President and CEO of the Culinary Tourism Alliance

Canada's food system is often touted as one of the most robust in the world, a vast network of farms, fisheries and artisans producing ingredients of exceptional quality under some of the strictest safety and sustainability regulations anywhere. Yet, for all its strengths, it remains vulnerable. Global supply chains are increasingly volatile, climate change is shifting growing seasons and disrupting harvests, and trade disputes threaten access to key markets and ingredients. In a moment where food security and sovereignty have become pressing national concerns, the question is no longer just whether Canada can feed itself—but how well it can sustain a food system that is resilient, equitable and distinctly its own.

For Rebecca Mackenzie, President and CEO of the Culinary Tourism Alliance (CTA), the answer lies in deepening Canada's relationship with its own food sources. For nearly two decades as a highly visible and knowledgeable advocate for local food and taste of place, she has championed a movement that positions local food not as a luxury or a trend but as an essential pillar of national identity. She has made great strides in helping bridge the gap between farmers, chefs and restaurateurs to ensure that Canadian ingredients are celebrated, savoured and woven into the stories that define Canada's culinary identity at home and abroad.

Founded in 2006 as the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance, the CTA successfully implemented a decade-long culinary tourism strategy before evolving into a national organization in 2016. Expanding its mandate to collaborate with destination marketing organizations, economic development agencies, and foodservice operators across Canada, the CTA has played a pivotal role in strengthening local food economies. The pandemic prompted a strategic recalibration, leading to initiatives like the Great Taste of Ontario, which later expanded into the Great Taste of Canada in 2023. As the CTA continues to amplify local food stories and foster culinary tourism, its "Big Hairy Audacious Goal" remains clear: to establish Canada as a globally recognized "delicious destination" by 2030.



> "If restaurants showcase local food and drink on their menus—whether it's Nova Scotia lobster, Alberta beef, Quebec maple syrup, or BC shellfish—they help shape Canada's culinary identity and ensure these industries thrive."

A Shift Towards Local Food and Stronger Connections

Over the past decade, local food in Canada has evolved from a culinary passion to a mainstream movement, shaped by changing policies, agricultural innovations, and shifting social values. Trade tensions with the U.S. have heightened public interest, while the pandemic accelerated existing trends toward transparency and sustainability. "We've seen a significant change," Mackenzie says. "The demand for local has been growing, especially post-pandemic, as more people want to know where their food comes from. Consumers, particularly younger generations, value sustainable practices and want to make choices that support local economies."

Yet, enthusiasm alone does not create a resilient food system—education and structural change are equally critical. Mackenzie notes a persistent disconnect between the foodservice industry and local producers. "There's still an enormous amount of education that needs to happen within the foodservice sector to help operators understand how they can support local 365 days a year—not just in peak season," she explains. "Canada produces incredible ingredients all year long, and it depends on how much an operator is willing to invest in relationships rather than just checking a box with a distributor."

One longstanding challenge has been balancing convenience with commitment to local sourcing. Broadline distributors offer efficiency and consistency but may not always prioritize local options. "For many restaurants, it's simpler to place an order and receive everything from a single supplier rather than coordinate directly with multiple farmers and adjust menus seasonally," Mackenzie acknowledges. "But those who make the effort—who truly integrate local food beyond a marketing slogan—often build stronger customer loyalty and more resilient supply chains." With increased demand, distributors are adapting, expanding their Canadian offerings to support operators who want to strengthen local ties.

Mackenzie sees an opportunity for more restaurants to embed local sourcing into their business models—not just to enhance their menus, but to create a compelling narrative. "When restaurants lean into their local food story, share their relationships with producers, and make that a visible part of their brand—that's when they create a connection that consumers truly value," she says. "We need more of that storytelling."

Overcoming Challenges: Sourcing Local Year-Round

Mackenzie challenges the persistent misconception that local food is inherently seasonal, and that fully integrating local sourcing is only viable in the height of summer, emphasizing that Canada's agricultural landscape yields high-quality ingredients throughout the year, from root vegetables and pulses to dairy, grains, and proteins. More correctly, she identifies infrastructure and logistics as the gremlins in the system.

Small-scale farmers and agri-food companies often struggle with distribution, making it difficult for restaurants to access local products easily and reliably. Mackenzie notes that this gap is being addressed by a growing network of national and local Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and economic development agencies that are working to foster direct connections between farmers and chefs and investing in infrastructure to make local sourcing viable. "It's happening," Mackenzie asserts, "and it's making a difference." She points to initiatives like Ontario's Feast On certification, which helps restaurants and foodservice operators commit to sourcing a significant portion of their ingredients from local producers, as a model for strengthening regional food economies. By providing businesses with a recognizable certification that signals their commitment to local sourcing, Feast On not only incentivizes restaurants to engage with nearby farmers and food producers but also educates consumers about the impact of their dining choices.

She also highlights the role of regional food hubs, which act as intermediaries connecting small- and mid-sized farms with restaurants, retailers and institutions that might otherwise struggle to access local products at scale. These hubs help to streamline distribution, reducing the logistical challenges that often deter operators from committing to local sourcing. "When restaurants have easier access to quality local ingredients, they're far more likely to incorporate them into their menus in a meaningful way," Mackenzie explains.

The proliferation of these programs signals a growing shift towards a more integrated and resilient food system, where local products are not only available but also actively supported



through infrastructure and policy changes designed to make regional sourcing the practical, sustainable choice. Ultimately, Mackenzie sees local sourcing as a long-term investment. "It's not just about the here and now—it's about creating a food system that supports our producers and our communities for generations to come."

The Business Case for Local: It's More Than Just a Feel-Good Choice

The benefits of sourcing local go beyond ethics and sustainability; they also provide a strategic advantage in a challenging industry. For Mackenzie, the case for local food is not just about doing the right thing—it's about long-term business viability. "Restaurants that develop deep relationships with their suppliers were far more resilient during the pandemic," she points out. "When supply chains were disrupted, those with direct relationships could pivot more easily."

She also challenges the assumption that local food is significantly more expensive, arguing that cost efficiency often comes down to operational choices. "It's not necessarily the case that local ingredients cost more—it's often about whether a restaurant is set up to use them efficiently," she explains. While a conscious commitment to local food may require greater menu adaptability and staff training, it offers an often-undervalued opportunity for differentiation. "Yes, labour costs can be a factor, but when you engage consumers by telling the story of where their food comes from, it adds value beyond just price. People want to feel good about where they're spending their money, and when they know their meal supports local farmers, fishers and artisans, they're more likely to come back."

This storytelling component is where local sourcing truly shines. Restaurants that integrate local food not only benefit from fresher, higher-quality ingredients but also build a distinct identity that resonates with customers. "As consumers continue to seek meaningful dining experiences, restaurants that embrace local sourcing have a competitive edge—not just in quality, but in loyalty. And, if you create something that locals love, it becomes a must-visit for visitors, too," Mackenzie notes. "Your local audience is your bread and butter; your tourists are the gravy."

The Role of Restaurants in Strengthening Canada's Food Resilience

Restaurants are more than just places to eat; they are educators, storytellers, and ambassadors of taste of place. As Mackenzie points out, they are also the proximal link between



"A well-informed server who understands the provenance of the food they're serving can provide an experience that's memorable and meaningful, and that storytelling makes a real impact."

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producers and consumers, shaping public perception of local ingredients and reinforcing Canada's food and culinary identity.

Beyond influencing individual diners, restaurants play a crucial role in generating demand for local products on a larger scale. "If restaurants showcase local food and drink on their menus—whether it's Nova Scotia lobster, Alberta beef, Quebec maple syrup, or BC shellfish—they help shape Canada's culinary identity and ensure these industries thrive." Mackenzie explains, emphasizing the importance of equipping staff with the knowledge to share the stories behind the ingredients on the menu. "A well-informed server who understands the provenance of the food they're serving can provide an experience that's memorable and meaningful, and that storytelling makes a real impact. By making local sourcing an integral part of their offerings, restaurants reinforce the value of these products and contribute to the stability of local food systems."

She encourages operators who may be unsure where to begin to start small. "Even if a restaurant isn't entirely local, it can take steps—like integrating seasonal ingredients, highlighting local wines and craft beers, or participating in regional food trails. It's not about being all or nothing; it's about progress." These incremental changes not only strengthen relationships with local producers but also help build consumer awareness, fostering a deeper appreciation for Canada's diverse and abundant food landscape.

A Call for Collaboration and the Path Forward

Mackenzie sees connection and collaboration as the foundation of a resilient food system. She points to the success of initiatives like Ontario's Feast On certification program and BC's Chef's Table Society, which have strengthened relationships between chefs and farmers, creating direct pathways for local sourcing. She also sees promise in evolving interprovincial trade policies, which could unlock greater access to Canadian products nationwide. "There's an exciting time ahead as we work to reduce internal trade barriers," she says. "This could mean greater access to incredible Canadian products from coast to coast to coast."

But for Mackenzie, supporting local food goes beyond economics—it's about securing Canada's food future. "If we don't support our local producers, we risk losing them. It's not just about doing what's best for business; it's about doing what's best for people and the planet."

Every dollar spent on local food is an investment in the strength of communities, the sustainability of the environment, and the identity of the nation. By embracing the rich diversity of Canada's culinary landscape, we don't just address food insecurity and enrich our own experiences—we help define Canada as a world-class food destination, which it absolutely is.





ABOUT REBECCA MACKENZIE

Rebecca Mackenzie, President and CEO of the Culinary Tourism Alliance, is a culinary tourism maven with a boundless appetite for food, culture and adventure. Rebecca holds a master's degree in Global Leadership from Royal Roads University and boasts over 25 years of experience in culinary and agritourism. Rebecca is also a published author and professor, and has written curriculum for several post-secondary institutions. She generously contributes her expertise as a volunteer on various destination marketing and tourism boards. Her career has been a thrilling journey, from working with renowned culinary destinations to crafting unforgettable foodie experiences that tantalize travellers' taste buds.

Follow @tasteofplacechampion

ABOUT THE CULINARY TOURISM ALLIANCE

The Culinary Tourism Alliance is a non-profit committed to connecting tastemakers across Canada and around the world to spark delicious developments in culinary tourism. With an established expertise in culinary tourism development, the Culinary Tourism Alliance seeks to ensure that authentic tastes of place become a significant economic driver for communities and regions, and a primary way for travellers to enrich their experience. To learn more, follow @CulinaryTourismAlliance on Instagram or visit www.culinarytourismalliance.com.

Are you doing something delicious? Reach out to the Culinary Tourism Alliance:
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PAST AS PROLOGUE

In Conversation with Jeremy Bonia: Sommelier, Restaurateur & Outgoing Chair of the Restaurants Canada Board of Directors



For more than a decade, Jeremy Bonia has stood at the crossroads of hospitality and advocacy, balancing the immediate demands of running restaurants with the broader fight to shape national policy. As he steps down from his extended two-year tenure as Chair of the Restaurants Canada board of directors, Bonia leaves behind a legacy as a steady hand in turbulent times—guiding an industry still in flux as it grapples with yet another wave of economic shocks, from labour shortages and inflation to a trade war with the U.S., adding new layers of political and supply chain pressures.

Restaurants, as Bonia sees them, are more than places to eat. They are the town halls of modern life, where culture, economy, and community quietly converge—until crisis exposes the fragility of it all. The pandemic delivered a gut punch to foodservice, shuttering businesses, upending supply chains, and laying bare the precarious economics of an industry too often taken for granted. As Chair, Bonia led a galvanized board and a newly assertive Restaurants Canada, not just lobbying for survival but fighting for a permanent seat at the table where policies that shape foodservice are made.

Since its beginning, Bonia's career has been defined by a deep respect for food, wine and the people who serve them. In St. John's, Newfoundland, he helped build Raymonds into a fine-dining institution, proving that a restaurant on Canada's easternmost edge could command global attention, from Canada's 100 Best list to En Route magazine as Canada's Best New Restaurant—only to see the beloved institution fall casualty to the pandemic. He later co-founded Portage and The Merchant Tavern—more casual but equally ambitious ventures that further cemented his reputation as a leader in Canada's restaurant scene. Just recently, he stepped away from The Merchant Tavern, marking a new chapter in his career.

He envisions a more resilient, united, and respected sector—one that shapes cities and communities long before anyone takes notice. And as he steps away from boardrooms and parliamentary meetings, he returns to where it all began: building restaurants, one plate and one bottle of wine at a time.

MM After years of shaping restaurant culture—both in the dining room and the boardroom—you've stepped away from The Merchant Tavern, Portage, and now the Restaurants Canada board. What's next for you?

Jeremy Bonia: *We sold The Merchant Tavern to our partner in October, and since then, I've been in a bit of a free agency period. I've been doing some consulting, and I recently partnered with a group as a managing partner at Grotto, a new restaurant here in St. John's. I'm also working with a few other restaurants in the province, helping them navigate different challenges. It's been nice, honestly—getting to share what I've learned over the years, working with different operations and figuring out how to make things better. I'm really enjoying it.*

MM Is consulting something you see as a long-term career move, or is it more of a way to reset before deciding on your next venture?

JB: *Honestly, it started out of pure boredom. It was my first summer off in a long time, and while that was nice for a while, when fall rolled around, my kids went back to school, and I found myself wondering, "What am I doing?" Then this opportunity came up—I was approached by a group to get involved, and I said, 'Okay, yeah, I'll do it'. And I've really enjoyed it.*

I love the variety—working with different restaurants, solving different problems, getting a fresh challenge every day. With Grotto, I've been given a completely blank slate—menu, wine list, staff, everything. That's exciting. With the other businesses I'm working with, it's more about fine-tuning—troubleshooting cost overruns, labour challenges, making things more efficient without overhauling what already works.

The best part is getting to go home at night without worrying about whether the dishwasher showed up.

MM You've spent years advocating for restaurants at the national level. From your perspective, what role do they play in shaping culture, community, and the economy?

JB: *Coming from a smaller market like St. John's—it's technically a city but still feels like a small town—I see restaurants as more than just businesses. They're the heart of the community, places where people gather, connect, and build relationships. That's true across Canada, whether it's an independent spot or a chain. Walk into a Tim Hortons or an A&W in a small town, and you'll find the same group of regulars there every morning, treating it like their own town hall. Beyond that, restaurants are huge supporters of their communities. They're the first to be asked for donations when there's a kids' sports fund-raiser, a charity event, or even a local family in crisis. The amount of money that flows back into communities through restaurants is massive—96 cents of every dollar spent in a Canadian restaurant stays in Canada. But despite that, we've been taken for granted. People don't always think of restaurants as an industry the way they do manufacturing or tech—it's just assumed we'll always be there.*

And some of these places have been around forever. They're institutions. You see it in Toronto, too, with places like Terroni or Canoe, or even a JOEY—they're landmarks in their own right. Restaurants aren't just where people eat; they shape cities and communities in ways that often go unnoticed until they're gone.

MM What led you to join the Restaurants Canada board—what convinced you it was worth the commitment?

JB: *I think it's been about ten years now —2015 was my first real involvement. At the time, Brenda O'Reilly was the Newfoundland representative, and when her term was up, she approached me. I was still fairly new to the industry and, while I was already a Restaurants Canada member, I didn't know much about what the association or the board actually did.*

"We've come out of the last few years stronger than ever as an organization. Restaurants Canada now has a real seat at the table. In the past, we were always reacting to challenges and government decisions. Now, we're being contacted before those decisions are made. We're advising, not just responding—that's a huge change."

When I attended my first meeting and sat down with people from all over the country—independent operators, CEOs, small business owners—I really got a sense of the issues. The moment that sold me was our trip to Ottawa for Lobby Day on Parliament Hill. Sitting in those meetings, seeing firsthand the influence the organization could have, I thought, 'This matters. This is something worth being a part of'.

Restaurants Canada has a unique position—we have the weight of the big chains, but also the heart of independent restaurants. And the reality is, whether you own one restaurant or 50, the core issues—labour, costs, government policies—affect everyone. Being on the board has been an incredible learning experience, and the things I've learned from the people I've met through it have made it even better. It's been unbelievable.

MM You became Chair of the Restaurants Canada board during a turbulent period. Looking beyond the immediate challenges of the pandemic, what lasting changes do you think will define the industry moving forward?

JB: *I don't take credit for any of this, but I do think we've come out of the last few years stronger than ever as an organization. That was part of why I stayed on for an extra year—to provide some stability, especially with a brand-new CEO. Kelly came from the board, and I was her mentor there, so we already had a relationship, which made the transition smoother.*

The industry is still dealing with so many pressures—taxation issues, tariffs, labour shortages, sustainability—it's always death by a thousand cuts. But the biggest shift is that Restaurants Canada now has a real seat at the table. In the past, we were always reacting to challenges and government decisions. Now, we're being contacted before those decisions are made. We're advising, not just responding—that's a huge change.

A lot of credit goes to Kelly and the team for making that happen. The board's role has evolved too—we're here to support, to act as a brain trust, and to provide guidance so the team can focus on executing their goals. And what they've accomplished in just two years has been incredible. The organization is more stable, more influential, and better positioned to advocate for the industry than ever before. All we've done is just support Kelly and allow her to build a team and find good people who





work well together. They're really in the thick of it right now, and we just had our board meeting last week and it was great to see the change. There's a confidence—a swagger about them that comes from finding their stride. And I think that's only going to grow.

MM You were in a uniquely difficult position—advocating for the industry as board member and then Chair while facing your own challenges, including the closure of Raymonds. What was it like trying to balance those roles?

JB: *It wasn't easy wearing both hats. As Chair, my job was to represent the entire industry—independents, chains, multi-units—everyone. I had to separate my own struggles from the broader mission, but at the same time, going through those challenges firsthand made me even more motivated to push for real wins at the national level.*

COVID was devastating, and we're still feeling the aftershocks. The debt load, closures, businesses unable to recover—it hasn't fully settled yet. Newfoundland had it tough, but Ontario had the longest lockdowns—two years. It's hard to dwell on personal hardships when the entire industry was suffering. Everyone was in the same boat.

But in a way, being on the board provided perspective. There's strength in numbers. Whether we were commiserating or sharing solutions, it helped to connect with operators across the country. Sometimes, a policy that worked in one province could be a model for another. It's often easier to push change at the provincial level than federally, and governments do talk. In the Atlantic, a shift in Nova Scotia will often ripple across to New Brunswick, P.E.I. and Newfoundland. That's another way Restaurants Canada and its GR team have learned to apply pressure—leveraging what worked in one place and using it to move the needle for everyone.



Jeremy Bonia and Chef Jeremy Charles



Jeremy Bonia and Chef Jeremy Charles

MM What do you think policymakers and government officials often overlook or undervalue about the restaurant industry's contribution to culture and the economy?

JB: *In the past, I think it came down to a lack of knowledge—just simple ignorance about what restaurants really are. There was this perception that restaurants were just small businesses with minimum wage jobs, not major contributors to local economies. But when you look at the numbers, our industry is massive—one of the largest in the country. There's a restaurant in every single riding in Canada, often multiple. We employ millions. And when you put the entire foodservice sector together, its economic impact is undeniable.*

That's why the lobbying work has been so important. The team at Restaurants Canada has done a great job making the case with hard facts—showing the numbers, demonstrating the influence, and making people in government take notice. We're seeing more engagement now and are being invited to committees and consulted on policy decisions. That's a huge shift, and I think that momentum is only going to grow.

MM Balancing your role as Chair of the Restaurants Canada board while managing your own restaurants must have been challenging. Were there any personal principles or ideas that helped you navigate that dual responsibility?

JB: *It was easier than it might have been because I stepped into the Chair role after we had already built a strong foundation at The Merchant Tavern and Portage. We'd been at it for a decade, and over the years, we put together a solid team who could run things day-to-day without me needing to be there constantly. That gave me the flexibility to step away when I needed to travel for board meetings or lobbying efforts.*

Family support also made a huge difference. When you're away as much as I was, whether it's for the board or for business, you need that understanding from home.

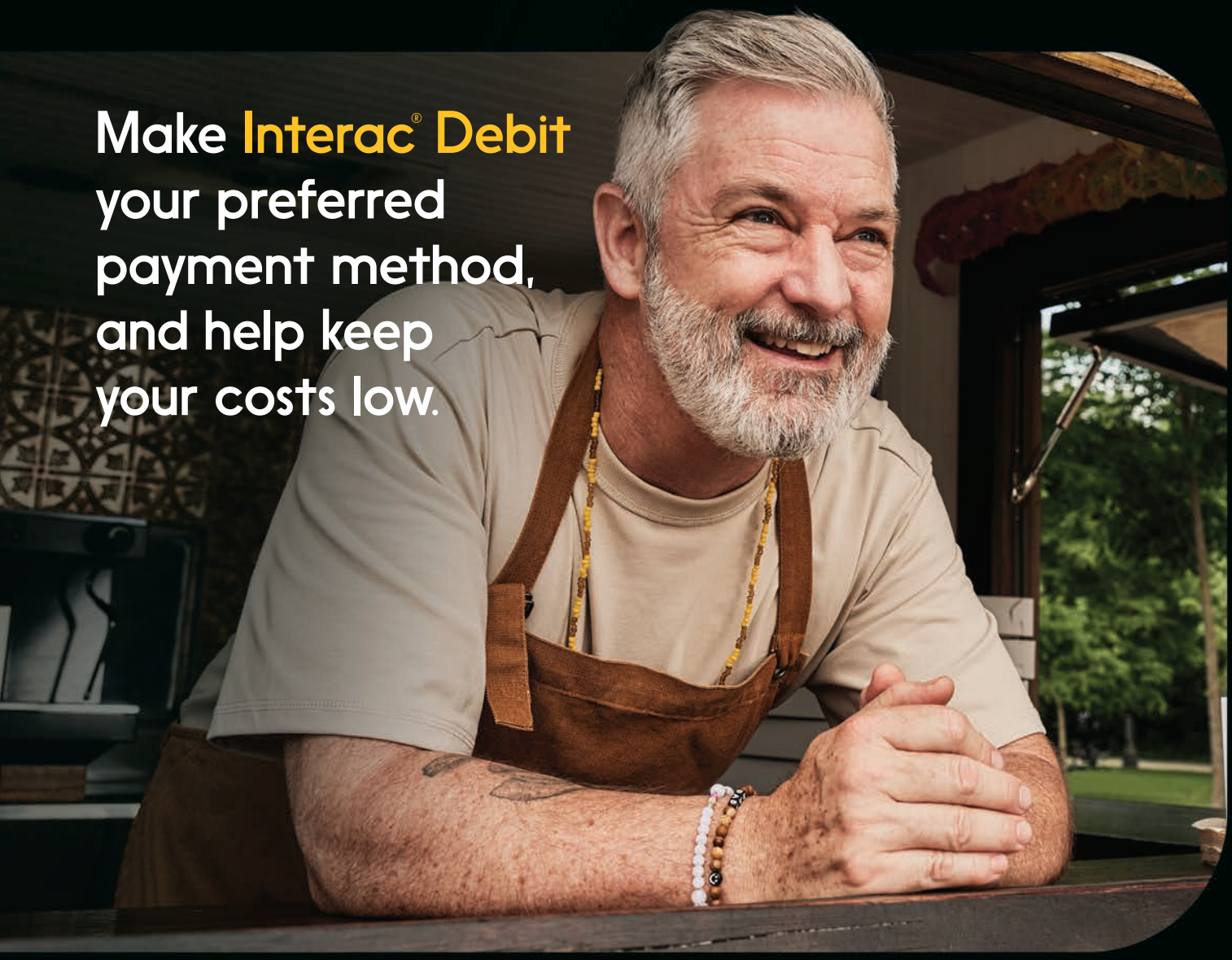
Had I taken on the role earlier in my career—say, in the first year of opening Raymonds—I don't think it would have been possible. Back then, every day was a fight just to keep things running. But with experience, you learn to trust the people around you, delegate, and step back in when needed.

MM You studied history before building your career in restaurants. Do you think that background has influenced the way you approach the business?

JB: *Absolutely. History, at its core, is about storytelling, and restaurants are no different. That's what drew me to both. When I was studying, I was fascinated by the narratives of past events, how they shaped people and places. At the same time, I was working in restaurants and getting deeper into wine, and I realized how much history plays into that world as well—the regions, the winemaking families, the generations of tradition behind every bottle.*

That perspective carried into Raymonds. The restaurant was in a historical building

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from 1916, originally the Commercial Cable Telegraph Company—the headquarters for the first transatlantic cable connecting Ireland to North America. That connection to history mattered to us. We leaned into it, naming the restaurant after my dad and Jeremy Charles' grandfather and designed it in a classic, old-school fine dining style.

More broadly, I think having that historical lens helps me take a long-term view of the industry. Restaurants go through cycles, just like economies do. There have been booms and busts, good years and brutal ones. If you look back at the '80s and early '90s, you see a lot of the same challenges—recessions, shifting consumer habits, changing labour markets. None of it is new.

That's why I try not to react too quickly or get caught up in short-term panic. Even in the hardest times, like the pandemic, I remind myself that things do turn around. You have to play the long game in this business.

"You won't get consistent Cabernet Sauvignon in Niagara every year. But Gamay? We can do it as well or better than anybody. Our Pinot Noir is outstanding in good years. Cabernet Franc is probably the heaviest red we can do consistently well, year over year, as well as Chardonnay, Riesling, and Sauvignon Blanc."

MM Many restaurants, intentionally or not, often play a certain historical role in their communities—preserving foodways, regional identities, architecture and history. How do you see this stewardship aspect of restaurants, and is it particularly prevalent in Newfoundland?

JB: *We've definitely paid homage to those who came before us. St. John's had a history of innovative restaurants long before Raymonds opened, but we saw an opportunity to take it further. Newfoundland is the only province in Canada allowed to serve wild game, and from day one, we embraced that—at a time when a lot of restaurants were going in the opposite direction, bringing in product from all over the world instead of celebrating what was here.*

There was a time when there wasn't as much pride in our food or even in the province itself. Newfoundland had long been considered an underdog—economically struggling, sometimes the punchline of a joke. But we saw something different: a place full of incredible people, ingredients and stories that deserved to be recognized.

We were fortunate that Raymonds launched at the right moment. We won Best New Restaurant in Canada, got great press, and had the chance to travel, showcasing Newfoundland on a larger stage. The Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown episode brought even more attention, and alongside that, places like Fogo Island Inn and others were also building momentum.

I wouldn't claim responsibility for any of that on my own though. We all worked together, supporting each other through that shift. And now, it's exciting to see a new generation of chefs and business owners carrying that forward—people who aren't just accepting what's here but really owning it, building on it, and making something amazing in the process. There's a real sense of pride in Newfoundland food now, and that's something worth celebrating.

When it comes to architecture and old buildings, just think about how young operators and chefs are often responsible for gentrifying areas of less popular areas of town. Usually, if you're an independent restaurant owner, you don't have a whole lot of money when you're starting up—you can't afford financial district prices for rent. So where do you go? You go to the outskirts, you find those small, unique or historical buildings wherever you can. You put a restaurant in an older buildings and then you see the growth of other businesses around them. I feel like a lot of times restaurants are some of the leaders in creating new communities outside of established, urban centres.

MM Let's talk about Canadian wine, which is currently enjoying a new domestic spotlight as the 'Buy Canadian' movement takes hold. It's a growing industry, but one that still struggles with its global identity. What's your perspective on where we stand? What are we doing well, where is there room for growth, and where do you see things heading?

JB: *Over the last decade, the quality and reputation of Canadian wine have grown exponentially. But we have to remember—most of our wine regions are still young. A lot of our vineyards are only a generation or two deep, which means the best is yet to come. As those vines mature, the quality will continue to improve.*

That said, we're still shaking off some of the baggage from the past. In the '90s, a lot of bulk wine was sold under Canadian labels—





Taken during Anthony Bourdain's first visit to Newfoundland for Parts Unknown (Season 11, Episode 3), which featured Jeremy Bonia and Chefs Jeremy Charles, Frédéric Morin and David McMillan.

"I'd love to see a stronger presence in Quebec. It has one of the richest food cultures in the country and plays a major role in shaping Canada's restaurant scene, especially for independents. It's such an influential region, and I think there's a real opportunity for Restaurants Canada to be better represented there."

cheap international blends boxed up and pushed through the market. It turned a lot of the market off and created a stigma that has taken years to overcome. Now, we're as good an industry as any other in the world. There are many outstanding wine makers here, producing exceptional wine, Canadians don't always support their own industry the way other countries do. British Columbia is super supportive of their wine industry—most of the wine lists in Vancouver and Victoria heavily feature local wines and they're dominant in private wine shops. Ontario, despite having some incredible wineries, hasn't quite reached that same level of local loyalty. Maybe it's the larger population or greater access to international wine, but it's something we could do better, and it is getting better and better. There are a lot of great wineries and independents who have really taken charge of the quality, and you can put it beside any other region in the world.

The diversity of what we can produce is impressive, but not every grape is going to thrive here—its geography and its climate. You won't get consistent Cabernet Sauvignon in Niagara every year. Once in a while it's great, but you can't build your business on it. But Gamay? We can do it as well or better than anybody. Our Pinot Noir is outstanding in good years. Cabernet Franc is probably the heaviest red we can do consistently well, year over year, as well as Chardonnay, Riesling, and Sauvignon Blanc. There's a lot of innovation in winemaking across the country. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are doing outstanding sparkling wine and, while they are infants in the industry, their still wines are getting better and better. You don't see a lot of Quebec wines outside the province, but what they're doing is unbelievable. There are some truly great offerings and a lot of positives.

Internationally, Canada is gaining traction. There are some great organizations promoting Canadian wine internationally. We're not just ice wine anymore. It's a great product, but that's not all we do. More of our top wineries are exporting, getting placements at big wine shows, and proving that we belong at the table. And there's a younger generation driving that momentum—people in their 20s and 30s who are engaged, visiting wineries, and excited about Canadian wine. That's where the real growth is going to come from.

MM Beyond wineries themselves, what role do restaurants play in promoting Canadian wine and local products? Should they be doing more?

JB: *100%. Restaurants have always been a critical piece of the puzzle. In a way, they're the frontline marketers for wine, introducing consumers to labels they might not otherwise find. When you go to a restaurant, order a wine you love, and then seek it out at a liquor store or online, that's direct influence. Restaurants act as an extension of a winery's tasting room. A good sommelier isn't just pouring a glass; they're telling the story behind the bottle—where it's from, who made it and what makes it special. That personal connection is powerful. It turns a drink into an experience, and that's what people remember.*

We've seen this dynamic play out in cocktail and drink culture, too. The trends often start in restaurants and trickle out into the wider market. Wine is no different. We're seeing more wine dinners happening across Canada, and more travelling winemakers engaging directly with restaurants. We've hosted some ourselves in Newfoundland, and that face-to-face connection between winemaker and diner makes all the difference.

I'd love to see more support for Canadian wines. It's not about shutting out international bottles—they're great, too—but when you look at taxation and interprovincial trade barriers, it's often easier for a restaurant to pour a foreign wine than a great bottle from a Canadian producer. That's a problem. We need policies that help small, independent wineries get their wines into restaurants without excessive hurdles, because when restaurants champion Canadian wine, consumers follow.



Jeremy Bonia and Chef Jeremy Charles

The cost of Canadian products is often higher than imports, making it challenging for restaurants to prioritize local ingredients and beverages. Do you think policy changes are needed to level the playing field, and what would make it easier for restaurants to champion Canadian producers?

JB: *I think restaurants should absolutely support Canadian producers, but the reality is that cost plays a huge role in decision-making. Often, it's actually more expensive to buy Canadian wine than imports. The cost of production here is significantly higher—making wine in Canada cost far more than producing it in Argentina, for example. But when those bottles hit the market, they're taxed at the same rate. So, if a restaurant is choosing between a high-quality but more expensive Canadian wine and a more affordable import that allows for a better markup, the financial decision becomes clear.*

At Raymonds, we made a commitment to featuring Canadian wines, especially for our house pours. We built relationships with winemakers, supported them as much as we could, and I still promote Canadian wines whenever possible. But the reality is that for many restaurant owners struggling with rising costs, local isn't always the easiest choice.

I'd love to see more policies in place to support independent wineries, breweries, and distilleries—whether it's tax breaks, reduced import fees, or streamlined shipping across provinces. If restaurants could purchase Canadian wine more easily, without excessive taxation, it would allow them to showcase local products without taking a financial hit. That kind of support would benefit both producers and restaurants, making it easier to get great Canadian wine on more tables.

Looking back on your tenure as Chair, is there a particular success or contribution you're especially proud of? Something you feel you had a direct hand in shaping?

JB: *I wouldn't say there's any one accomplishment I'd take personal credit for, but if there's something I'm proud of, it's the stability we maintained as a board. Supporting Kelly and her team, ensuring we had a unified voice, and being there when they needed us—that was the priority. Whether that meant offering guidance, listening when frustrations ran high, or stepping in when needed, I feel like we created a strong foundation for them to build on.*

When I first stepped in as Chair, my very first task was to terminate the previous CEO. That was day one. To go from that moment to where we are now—a strong, cohesive, and highly effective organization—has been incredible to witness. It's been a period of real stability, and that's something I take pride in.

Any regrets?

JB: *Maybe that we didn't make certain changes sooner. But no, no real regrets. I'm going to miss the people, for sure. The board is full of smart, passionate individuals, and I've been lucky to work alongside them. I'll still be around in a past-chair capacity for another year, but I'm also looking forward to what's next. There's a great team in place, and I have a lot of confidence in Nicolas Filiatrault as he steps into his leadership. It's going to be exciting to see where the board and team take things.*

Where do you see opportunities for Restaurants Canada to grow in the future?

JB: *It wouldn't hurt if we had a dedicated minister for our industry—maybe a Minister of Restaurants alongside the Minister of Tourism. I think that's a real possibility, especially given how much progress the GR team has made. I wouldn't be surprised if we see something like that sooner rather than later.*

Beyond that, I'd love to see a stronger presence in Quebec. It has one of the richest food cultures in the country and plays a major role in shaping Canada's restaurant scene, especially for independents. It's such an influential region, and I think there's a real opportunity for Restaurants Canada to be better represented there.

Jeremy Bonia's All-Canadian Wine Recommendations

Why look south when some of the world's best wines are made right here in Canada? Jeremy Bonia shares his top Canadian selections to replace popular U.S. wines on your restaurant's list—without compromising quality or character.

California Cabernet Sauvignon & Red Blends:
Try BC Meritage (Red Blends) or Cabernet Franc from BC & Ontario for structure, depth, and elegance.

Oregon & California Pinot Noir:
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Through the Looking Glass with Global Cocktail Master

SHINGO GOKAN

Shingo Gokan didn't set out to change the cocktail world. In fact, if you'd asked him at any point in his early years behind the bar, he would have told you he was only staying long enough to learn something useful before returning home to Japan to take over his father's metal manufacturing business. But Gokan's story is a reminder that life has a way of throwing the best-laid plans into the blender.

What began as a short-term gig fueled by curiosity has evolved into an empire. Today, as founder of SG Group, Gokan stands at the helm of more than 20 bars at 12 addresses across four countries, each one uniquely designed and narratively rich. He also worked with master distillers to develop and launch his own brand of shochu, The SG Shochu, created for bartenders to perform in cocktails without losing its distinct Japanese character. He is, arguably, one of the most influential, creative and thoughtful hospitality entrepreneurs of his generation. His venues are studied globally for how they balance detail, story and style, and his drinks have become lasting symbols of innovation. Yet, as his portfolio has expanded from Tokyo to Shanghai, and Hong Kong to New York, Gokan has stayed true to the instincts that first captivated him: a relentless focus on craft, a restless curiosity, and the pursuit of spaces that feel as personal as they are exceptional.

"If I can enjoy the space, the guests can enjoy it," he says. "That's my rule. If I'm bored, they'll feel that."

And after more than two decades, Gokan shows no sign of boredom.

THE WEIGHT OF DESTINY.

To understand Gokan's career, you have to understand what was supposed to happen. He grew up in Japan, the son of a factory owner. His father's business made metal components for cameras and other precision equipment—a trade built on discipline and inherited responsibility.

"Since I was a baby, they'd been telling me I would take over," Gokan says. "It was just the way it was supposed to be." This shadow shaped his early career. Even as bartending pulled him in—first only part-time, then into his first full management role by the age of 20—he kept telling himself he was just preparing. "I started bartending at 18 as a



Your prized possession?

A suitcase.

Favourite bar tools?

A venencia and a shaker.

Secret cocktail ingredients?

Sherry and Shochu.

Signature skills?

Venenciar and shaking.

Personal best cocktails?

Speak Low and Tomato Tree.

Favourite flavour?

Bergamot.

Desert island cases?

Cigars and coffee.

Your proudest moment?

The moment I achieve something with my team.

Favourite spirit?

Shochu.

Bartending philosophy?

Balanced cocktails, guest perspective, memorable experiences.

part-time job," he says. "In Japan, you can't drink until you're 20, but you can work behind the bar. So, I thought, why not? But it was never supposed to be forever. I just wanted to experience something different."

It was in those early years that his "two-year rule" emerged: two years in any job before moving on. Bartending was never supposed to stick, but then came the comment from a customer that changed everything. "One of my regulars told me, 'You should go to New York,'" he recalls. "And I thought, 'Yeah, why not?' So, I left."

THE BIRTH OF INSPIRATION.

Gokan was experienced in Japan, but he found New York indifferent to his skill and technique. The city had its own hierarchy and bar culture, so he had to start from the bottom. "When I got to New York in 2006, I couldn't speak English. I didn't have money. I didn't have any status," he says. "And the style of bartending was completely different than what I knew."

In Japan, bartending is quiet and composed. Guests keep a respectful distance, watching the precision of the bartender, soaking in the mastery and technique. It is controlled, and extremely refined. New York, however, was a chaos he couldn't prepare for. "It's about speed, entertainment and fun," Gokan says. "The vibe is everything—people want to feel the energy. Remember, there was no YouTube or social media back then, so I had no idea what I was walking into. Every day, I just tried to figure it out."

Slowly, Gokan began to adapt, realizing that what had worked in Japan couldn't work here, at least not on its own. He felt there was something new to be made from the clash of styles. "I wanted to take the best parts of Japanese bartending—the precision, the technique—and combine them with the energy and fun of New York," he says. "That became my focus and what I wanted to build."

His turning point came with Angel's Share, the iconic East Village speakeasy where Gokan worked for nearly a decade. There, he honed his philosophy of hospitality and balanced his dual influences from Japan and New York. These lessons stayed with him, influencing the way he designed his future bars to offer multiple experiences under one roof.

By the time Gokan won the Bacardi Legacy Global Cocktail Competition in 2012 with his legendary Speak Low cocktail, he was nearly a decade into his New York life. The weight of his family expectations was still there—but it had started to feel different. The future that once felt inevitable now seemed less certain. And for the first time, Gokan allowed himself to admit that bartender might be his permanent calling. "When I told my dad I wasn't coming back to take over, he wasn't happy," Gokan says. "He thought bartending was something I was doing to learn from other industries. But when I said, 'No, this is my path,' he was pissed, which gave me extra motivation to succeed as an entrepreneur. I wanted him to understand why."

Over the years, his parents have come around. "When I visit home," Gokan laughs, "My mom says, 'You made the right choice.' And my dad… well, the house is full of my articles and pictures."

Few moments in his career have carried the same weight as stepping behind the bar at The Savoy in London—a place so deeply embedded in cocktail history that, for many bartenders, it represents the pinnacle of the craft. "For us, in Japan, The Savoy's cocktail book is like the Bible," Gokan explains. "Everyone reads it when they start bartending. So, to be invited to do a guest shift there was like a dream."

In 2012, fresh off his Bacardi Legacy win, Gokan became the first guest bartender in the hotel's storied history. "I was still so young. I was excited, but honestly, I couldn't really remember all the details afterward because I was just too nervous," he admits. But that night left its mark, and more than a decade later, in 2024, The Savoy invited him back for its 135th anniversary. This time, it was The Savoy who approached him directly. "That was very special. To be asked back, to create new cocktails inspired by their classics, and to do it alongside people like Steve Schneider and the former head bartenders… it was the highlight of my career. There's really nothing bigger than that for me."

THE ART OF STORYTELLING.

For Gokan, opening a bar is never just about crafting and serving drinks. It's about world-building. Each of his venues exists as a kind of living story, where every detail—from the lighting and music to the glassware and uniforms—is chosen with the same intentionality as the ingredients in his cocktails. In Gokan's world, you're not walking into a bar, you're being invited into Gokan's imagination. "My bars are always based on places I want to be," he explains. "That's the starting point. If I enjoy it, if it feels authentic to me, then I believe the guests will feel that, too. But I don't want to create the same bar over and over. I want each one to have its own world, its own feeling, its own story."

At The SG Club in Tokyo, that desire for storytelling, layered with personal touches and unexpected moments, is tucked into what most would dismiss as wasted space. In a narrow nook originally intended for liquor storage you'll find an active shoeshine booth. While it might seem like an odd addition at first glance, the choice is deeply personal. "When I was travelling in New York and Mexico, one of my favorite things was getting my shoes shined while having a drink," Gokan recalls. "It's such a small pleasure. Just sitting there, having someone carefully working on your shoes, while you sip something good and watch the world go by. I thought, why not build that into the bar? Why not give guests that same little surprise moment?" And so, what could have been a utilitarian corner became one of The SG Club's most distinctive features. Guests can sip on an expertly crafted cocktail while a professional shines their shoes, transforming an ordinary service into something memorable—a playful intersection of hospitality and nostalgia that guests didn't know they needed until it appeared before them.

But nowhere is Gokan's ability to tell stories through space more evident than at Speak Low in Shanghai, his breakthrough project and, in many ways, the foundation of his multi-dimensional design philosophy. Open since 2014, Speak Low is not one bar but three, stacked vertically in an historic building. Each level offers a distinct concept and atmosphere, designed to serve different moods, different energies, different price points and different kinds of nights—all under the same roof.

The idea, Gokan says, came directly from his time working at Angel's Share in New York, one of the pioneering cocktail bars of the modern era, known as much for its hushed atmosphere as for its near-religious rules: no standing, no parties larger than four, no loud talking. "It created this beautiful space, very peaceful, very focused on the drinks," Gokan says. "But it wasn't always easy. Guests would come in, maybe visiting from out of town, and we'd have to say, 'Sorry, your group is too big.' or 'No, we don't do standing.' People would get frustrated. They didn't understand why."

Rather than replicate that experience when opening his own place, Gokan thought: what if he could offer it all? What if one building could house multiple experiences—one for the people who want the high-energy, standing-bar vibe, and another for those who want a quieter, more refined cocktail experience? And what if, on top of that, there was a secret floor for the regulars, the insiders, the ones who treat the bar like home? Behind a bookshelf in the ground floor cocktail and barware shop at Speak Low Shanghai, a hidden entrance leads you to a loud and vibrant standing bar where guests crowd around, and the energy is electric. Upstairs, on the second floor, the vibe shifts into a more intimate cocktail lounge, where the focus is on creative drinks and expert technique. At the very top is a members-only floor, a hidden sanctuary reserved for regulars and friends, where the night slows down and the experience becomes truly personal.

Each of Gokan's bars is highly distinctive, blending aspects of the local culture with the cocktail master's personal passions. If there is a through line that identifies a "Shingo Gokan bar", it would be the emphasis on surprise—small, thoughtful details and surprises that guests discover as the night unfolds. Whether it's a hidden room, an unusual menu format, or a dish inspired by a childhood memory, these moments are what transform a good night into an unforgettable one. "There always has to be something extra," Gokan explains. "Something you didn't expect, something you remember. If I'm enjoying myself, if I love the space, if I would want to spend my own time there, I believe that's what makes the difference. That's always the goal."

For Gokan, those details aren't afterthoughts. They're the essence of the experience—the connective tissue between concept and execution, between bartender and guest, between the room and the story it tells.

THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION.

For Gokan, perfection is not a destination, it's a horizon that shifts the closer you think you're getting to it. In his world, there is no such thing as finished. Not when it comes to drinks, to service, or the bars themselves. "I'm always asking myself, 'Is this really the best it can be?'" Gokan says. "Even if a drink is good, even if people like it, I'm still thinking about what could make it better. What's missing? What could be improved? I don't ever really stop."

That mindset has defined his approach to signature cocktails, none more famously than the Tomato Tree, one of the standout creations at The SG Club in Tokyo. But the Tomato Tree

"When I told my dad I wasn't coming back to take over, he wasn't happy. But when I said, 'No, this is my path,' he was pissed, which gave me extra motivation to succeed as an entrepreneur. I wanted him to understand why."



didn't begin as a bestseller, or even as a fully realized idea. It started as an experiment. Nearly 15 years ago, Gokan first began working with clear tomato water—a technique he picked up from a Japanese chef who specialized in clarification methods. "At that time, nobody was really using tomato water in cocktails," he says. "I remember thinking it was so interesting—how you could take something like a tomato, which people expect to be red and thick and savoury and turn it into something clear and delicate. But my first versions of the drink weren't quite right. The balance was off. The idea was there, but I didn't have the experience yet to make it what I wanted."

Years passed. Gokan moved between continents. He built bars, won competitions and refined his craft. And then, while developing the menu for The SG Club, he found himself coming back to that early tomato water concept, curious if it was finally time to give it new life. "When we opened The SG Club, I thought, maybe now I can really make this work," he recalls. "So I went back to the idea, but this time with everything I had learned over the years. I adjusted the ingredients, the technique, the way it was presented, and that's how the Tomato Tree was born."

The drink quickly became a signature—an elegant, crystal-clear cocktail that surprises guests with its layered depth and brightness, defying their expectations of what a tomato can taste like in a drink. But even after its success, Gokan just couldn't leave it alone. "After we put it on the menu, I kept thinking, can I make it better?" he says. "I tried changing the garnish. Tweaking the balance. Adjusting the recipe. But in the end, the original version of the Tomato Tree was still the best. So, I went back to that."

That relentless impulse to revisit, rethink and rework extends far beyond any single cocktail. For Gokan, it's the heartbeat of his entire operation. "It's not just the drinks," he says. "It's the service, atmosphere and the details of the design—the way the team works together. I'm always asking how we can make things better."

"You're never done," he says simply. "There's always another level."

COMMUNITY WITH INTENTION.

For Gokan, growth isn't optional. It's a necessity—an unspoken rule that applies to his drinks, his designs, and perhaps most of all, his people. These days, Gokan spends as much time mentoring his teams across his bars and his company, SG Group, as he does developing new cocktails or opening new spaces. His own transition from bartender to global leader was born from the same curiosity and instincts that first drew him behind the bar and the belief that success is a collective pursuit.

Gokan frequently rotates team members between different locations and takes them along on his travels and guest shifts. He sees these moves as essential to keeping people engaged, inspired and constantly learning. "If you're stuck in the same place too long, you get bored," he acknowledges. "So, we move people around. We give them new stages. They go to a new city, and work in a different bar, and suddenly everything is fresh again. You see how other teams operate and you pick up ideas, then you bring that knowledge back home."

5 S

"5S" are the guiding principles at the heart of SG Group, defining its approach to hospitality, design, and guest experience.

1. **SMILE**
2. **SHARP**
3. **SEXY**
4. **SUSTAINABLE**
5. **SPECIAL**

This cross-pollination has become a signature feature of his company and a crucial tool for retention in an industry where burnout is high, and turnover can be constant. "When you give people a path forward—when they can see a future for themselves beyond just tonight's shift—it changes everything," Gokan explains, noting that he's been intentional about creating opportunities for his staff to explore roles outside the bar itself. Some team members have moved into consulting, others into business operations or product development. There are paths into ownership, too. "We try to give people options," he says. "If someone wants to step off the bar but stay in the industry, we help them find what's next."

Gokan recognizes that most of his staff won't get to stand on stage at Tales of the Cocktail or 50 Best but believes they should all celebrated. This mindset has evolved into internal programs that reward excellence and commitment. His group runs its own internal awards system—a kind of mini version of the world's top bar accolades—where winners receive prizes like travel, education, and mentorship opportunities, using these global trips as opportunities to share insight, advice and encouragement along the way. "When I was coming up, I didn't have many chances to travel," he recalls. "I was working every night, every weekend. So, I want my team to have those experiences."

Gokan knows that his bars are only as strong as the people running them and, for a company that has expanded as quickly and widely as his, the danger of fragmentation—of losing what makes the experience special—is always looming. "The bigger you get, the easier it is to lose the culture," he says. "But that's why we have to keep communicating. Keep travelling. Keep sharing the philosophy."

As for the man who once imposed two-year limits on every stage of his life, he's perpetually chasing that elusive horizon. "There's always something else to do," he says. "Another idea. Another place. Another way to improve."

Follow @shingo_gokan

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BRIDGING INDIGENOUS FOODWAYS & CULINARY LEADERSHIP:

A CONVERSATION WITH CHEF CHRIS COMMANDANT

Tucked inside the National Arts Centre (NAC) in Ottawa, 1 Elgin is a culinary stage for Canada's diverse flavours. With a menu that evolves seasonally and a commitment to locally sourced ingredients, the restaurant offers a refined yet inviting dining experience, making it a must-visit for theatre-goers, food lovers, and top chefs from across the country. And in the kitchen, Sous Chef Chris Commandant has a lot on his plate.

A Kanien'keha:ka from the Wahta Mohawks First Nation near Bala, Ontario, Commandant is driven by a passion for preserving and sharing Indigenous culinary traditions. His work extends beyond the art of cooking—he is deeply engaged in conversations around Indigenous food sovereignty, food security, and traditional cooking methods.

His classical training enables him to seamlessly blend Haudenosaunee culinary heritage with contemporary techniques, crafting innovative dishes that honour the flavours and stories of his Muskoka terroir. At 1 Elgin, that means pushing boundaries while staying rooted in authenticity—an approach that defines not just his food, but his leadership.

As Ontario Director and Secretary of the Indigenous Culinary of Associated Nations (ICAN), Commandant is also a key figure in a movement to elevate Indigenous cuisine on the national stage. He's not just a chef—he's a steward of Indigenous foodways, a mentor, and a driving force behind a growing conversation about sustainability, authenticity and the intersection of food and cultural identity.

Commandant's path to becoming a champion of Indigenous cuisine was not one of early intent but rather one of discovery. "I was always hungry as a kid," he admits. "I thought, if I worked in kitchens, I'd never go hungry." Food, however, quickly became more than a means of sustenance. It became a source of fascination and, ultimately, an avenue for storytelling.



Raised in a household where food was both a necessity and a symbol of resilience, Commandant was instilled with an appreciation for the power of sustenance. His father, deeply connected to their Mohawk heritage, taught him that food is sacred, not to be wasted, and that harvesting should always be done with respect. These early lessons would later form the foundation of his cuisine. "Take what you need to sustain yourself, and leave some for the next generation," he says, echoing a philosophy that has guided his approach to both cooking and leadership.

Like many aspiring chefs, Commandant initially sought formal training in an unrelated field—journalism. But it was in the kitchens of Toronto, where he worked part-time in the late 1990s, that he found his true calling. "There's an energy in a kitchen that's addictive," he says. "The pace, the creativity, the problem-solving—it became clear that this was where I needed to be."

Yet, as an Indigenous chef entering the industry, he quickly realized that representation was lacking. "At the time, being an Indigenous chef wasn't something you advertised," he explains. "There was a stigma attached to it, and a lot of us felt the need to just blend in." That began to change as he reconnected with his roots and found his voice—not just as a chef, but as an advocate for Indigenous food knowledge.



A Defining Moment for Indigenous Cuisine

For Commandant, there has never been a better time for Indigenous cuisine to take centre stage. With consumer interest in Canadian experiences at an all-time high, the demand for Indigenous culinary tourism is surging. He sees a rare and urgent opportunity for Indigenous chefs and food entrepreneurs to redefine the national food landscape. "This is our moment," he says. "People are actively looking for authentic, locally-rooted dining experiences, and Indigenous cuisine offers a depth of storytelling and connection that no other food movement can replicate. This isn't just a culinary moment—it's a cultural shift. Indigenous food isn't niche; it's foundational. And now is the time to ensure it claims its rightful place in our national dialogue."

But this isn't just about food—it's about a complete ecosystem. Indigenous culinary traditions are inextricably linked to sustainable



agriculture, ethical foraging, and a holistic approach to hospitality. Commandant emphasizes that the industry must balance growth with responsibility, ensuring that Indigenous foodways remain true to their origins while adapting to modern demands. "The challenge is scalability," he explains. "Our ingredients—wild game, foraged plants, traditional grains—are not mass-produced, and they shouldn't be. We have a sacred supply of certain key ingredients, and the point is not to overharvest them to meet market demand. It's about maintaining that balance—honouring the ingredients while also finding ways to make the cuisine more accessible. But that means we need to innovate, educating consumers while finding sustainable ways to bring these flavours to a wider audience."

Commandant envisions Indigenous cuisine as a cornerstone of Canada's evolving food identity, not a passing trend. Through his work at the NAC, Commandant has helped introduce Indigenous ingredients to a new audience. He works closely with his team—many of whom are non-Indigenous—to educate them on the history and significance of Indigenous food traditions. "We're not all just wild rice, cranberries, and salmon," he emphasizes. "Our food culture is as vast and diverse as the land itself. Maybe it's not about using the exact same ingredient but about creating an experience that respects the original while allowing for sustainable substitutes. That's the challenge—how do we bring Indigenous cuisine into a broader culinary conversation without sacrificing its integrity?"

Leading Through Consensus

Commandant's approach to leadership is deeply influenced by his Mohawk heritage. "In our communities, leadership isn't about hierarchy or majority—it's about consensus," he explains. "If nine people say no, and one person says yes, we don't shut that one person down; we listen. Maybe they see something the rest of us don't."

This concept of "aggressive listening," as he calls it, has shaped the way he manages his kitchen and mentors his team. "It's about giving people space to be heard, even when their perspective challenges the status quo." This, he believes, leads to stronger teams and better outcomes. "When you create an environment where people feel valued, they invest more in the work they're doing. They care more."

He recalls one of the most pivotal moments of his career—a crisis that tested his ability to lead under pressure. A few years ago, a fire broke out at the NAC, leading to chaos in the kitchen. In the midst of the emergency, the executive chef suffered a cardiac event. "That was the moment I realized leadership isn't just about managing a team—it's about being the person they look to in times of uncertainty," he says. "I had to remain calm because they needed me to."

For Commandant, leadership is also about fostering respect—both in and out of the kitchen. "A simple 'good morning' can set the tone for the entire day," he says. "Acknowledging your team as people first is key. When people feel seen and heard, they perform at their best."

The Next Generation

As the Indigenous culinary movement gains traction, Commandant is optimistic about its future. "We're at a turning point," he says. "For the first time, we're seeing Indigenous chefs not just existing within the industry but thriving. Our food is no longer an afterthought—it's being recognized for what it is: an essential part of Canada's culinary identity."

He credits organizations like ITAC and ICAN and events like RC Show for helping to elevate Indigenous cuisine on a national scale. At this year's show, he will be leading a Chef's Table discussion on appreciation versus appropriation, a topic he believes is critical to advancing Indigenous foodways in a respectful manner. "It's not about gatekeeping," he says. "It's about education. It's about creating opportunities for non-Indigenous chefs to engage with our food in a way that honours its origins."

But for Commandant, the most rewarding aspect of his work is mentorship. "If one of my cooks leaves my kitchen because they've outgrown it and are ready for a bigger role, I've done my job," he says. "I want to see more Indigenous chefs leading kitchens, running their own restaurants, and teaching the next generation."

His vision is clear: a future where Indigenous ingredients and food traditions are not seen as niche, but as a fundamental part of Canadian cuisine. "Food is one of the most powerful ways we tell our stories," he says. "By keeping these traditions alive, we're not just preserving history—we're shaping the future."

Follow Chef Chris Commandant
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Eating Our Words:

In conversation with Gabby Peyton on How Food Writing Shapes Canada's Culinary Identity

Gabby Peyton knows what it means to grieve a restaurant. Not just the food, but the people, the rituals, and the way sliding into a favourite booth feels like coming home. A food writer, restaurant critic and author of *Where We Ate: A Field Guide to Canada's Restaurants, Past and Present*, Peyton isn't just fascinated with cataloguing Canada's culinary history—she's capturing something deeper: the way restaurants shape our collective memory, our identities and our sense of belonging.

In an era of vanishing neighborhood restaurants, Peyton doesn't just ask why—she asks what we're losing. She has written obituaries for shuttered diners, tracked the stories behind some of Canada's most iconic dishes, and revealed that the true soul of a restaurant isn't in the menu—it's in the community they build and nurture.

In this conversation, Peyton digs into the big questions about food, community, and the ever-changing landscape of Canadian dining, revealing why—despite the industry's tight margins and even tougher headwinds—people keep opening restaurants and welcoming us in.



MM You've had a fascinating journey through the food industry—from working in restaurants to writing about them. What first drew you to restaurants and how did that path lead to *Where We Ate*?

Gabby Peyton: *I've always loved restaurants. I worked as a server in high school and university—thought for a hot minute I wanted to be a chef, but once I saw how hard they worked, I was like, "Nope, not for me."*

I got into food writing because I loved the industry and wanted to understand restaurants better—not just the food, but how they actually work. At first, I thought I just wanted to be a restaurant critic, and as I started freelancing, I found myself really drawn to those longstanding, beloved places—the ones that are institutions in their communities. A few in St. John's had closed over the years, and that got me thinking about how important those places are.

I had been writing a column for Food Bloggers of Canada about the history of certain dishes—like how poutine came to be, how donairs started, or how the California roll was actually invented in Vancouver, much to people's disbelief. I attended a food blogging conference, where I met Robert McCullough from Random House, and kind of offhandedly pitched the book idea, like, "Hey, I think a book about restaurant history would be really great." And he said, "Yeah, that sounds awesome."

MM And then you were committed to produce it...

GP: *Yeah, and I completely spiraled into imposter syndrome. I kept thinking, "Who am I to write this book?" It felt like such a massive undertaking. Robert would check in every so often, and I'd always say I was too busy. In 2020, I was a critic for The Telegram, and due to the shut-downs—I was reviewing take-out containers instead of restaurants. I figured, well, maybe now's the time to write the book.*

It was an interesting time to do it because the industry was in this weird, constant state of flux, with new regulations every day. In a way, that helped me frame the book, helped me see why it mattered. I ended up doing 85 interviews over the course of that year. And honestly, there was so much I couldn't even fit in the book—so many deep conversations with restaurant owners about their families and their histories.

I just love restaurants, and I wanted to document them in a way that hadn't really been done before. When I was putting together the book proposal, they asked me to compare it to similar books, and I realized—there really weren't any. There are American books on restaurant history and other iconic restaurant books, but nothing like that for Canada. And I felt like these stories needed to be told, because a lot of independent restaurants never really get their due.

You live in St. John's, a city with a small-town vibe and a smaller food world. What's it like being a food critic when everyone must know who you are?

GP: *When I moved back home in 2017, there was this wave of travel writers coming through, writing about how amazing the food scene was—places like The Merchant Tavern, Raymonds—all these big names. And then in 2019, we had En Route's Best New Restaurants featuring local spots. For a city our size, we've got an incredible amount of talent in the food world, and so the way people here interact with food now is totally different from what it used to be.*

I knew I wanted to write about the food and food scene here. It felt like I should be the one to do it—because I'm from here, and I get it. At the time, the long-standing restaurant critic was Karl Wells, who had also been the CBC weatherman for 20 years, was retiring. So, I actually emailed The Telegram with the subject line: I should be your restaurant critic. I made my case, and they gave me the gig.

At first, it wasn't a big deal because I wasn't widely known outside of my blog. But as time went on, it definitely got trickier. I'd go to a restaurant, and people would straight-up ask me, "Are you reviewing us?" A lot of the time I was just there to eat. When I was reviewing, I'd time my visits for weeknights or when I knew the chef wasn't working or book reservations under my husband's name.

Being a critic is tricky—I think the word itself is tricky. I always looked up to critics like Soleil Ho at the San Francisco Chronicle—people who put restaurants in context rather than just rating them. I never gave stars. I wasn't about saying, "This is good," or "This is bad." It was more like, "Here's what this restaurant does, here's why it matters, and here's what they're doing that's interesting." To me, that's what modern criticism is—it's not that old-school approach of tearing places down. And honestly, there aren't many critics left. By the time I wrapped up last year, I was one of the last full-time restaurant critics in any newspaper across Canada, which is really sad.

What is it about restaurants that has kept your focus as a writer and a journalist?

GP: *I think restaurants are community spaces. They're third places—spaces outside of work and home where people can gather. Whether it's with family, friends, or even just being around other people, restaurants serve that role in a way we don't always acknowledge. In the introduction to my book, I talk about how commonplace conversations about food and restaurants are within our culture. Like, "Where'd you go for dinner last night?" "What did you eat?" These little exchanges are so woven into our daily lives that we don't always stop to recognize just how important restaurants actually are to society.*

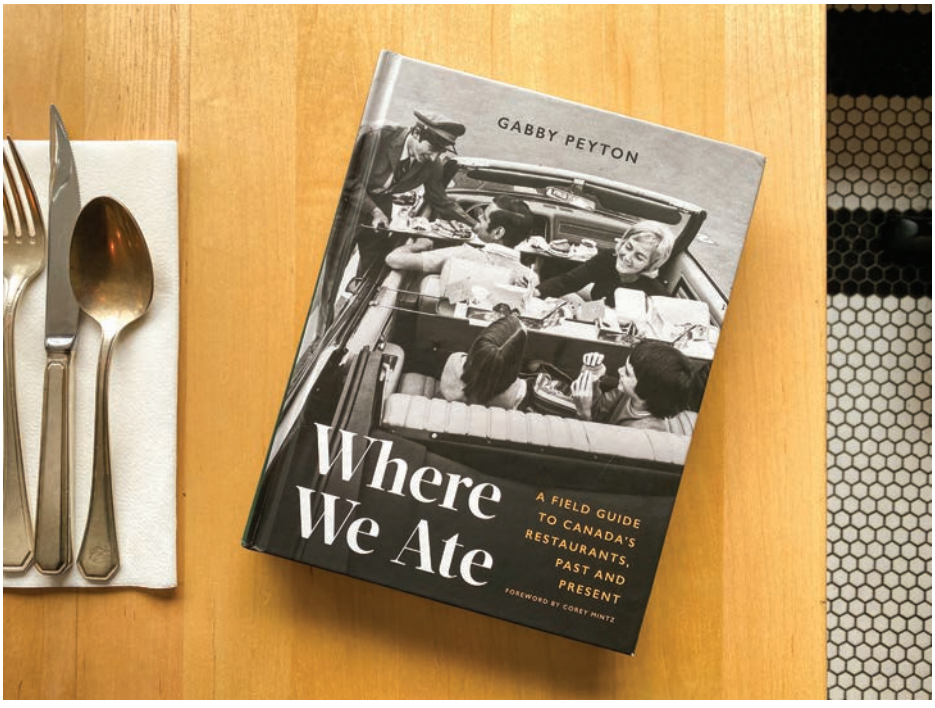
During the pandemic, we suddenly couldn't go to restaurants, and it hit differently. I remember when things started reopening. Canada had the Atlantic Bubble, so we were able to dine out again sooner than a lot of other places. On July 1, I went back to one of my favourite spots in the city, and it felt like coming home. The familiarity—the servers, the drinks, just being in that space again—was such a comfort.

So, restaurants are really about community. In every town—whether it's a big city or a tiny place in rural Canada—there's always that one spot that means something to the people who live there. A place where they meet, share ideas, spend time together. And I don't think we give restaurants enough credit for that.

Restaurants have long been spaces of migration, adaptation and reinvention. How do you see them as a reflection of Canada's evolving identity?

GP: *I think immigration has played such a huge role in shaping Canadian identity—especially when it comes to food. We've had waves of immigration long before Canada was even a country, and you can trace how people came here, what they decided to cook, and how that evolved into what we now consider Canadian cuisine. That's actually why I decided to structure the book chronologically. After interviewing so many people, I kept hearing the same story over and over: "We moved to Canada, we opened a restaurant, it became our family business." And when you start looking at those stories in the context of larger historical events, you see how world events influenced what we ate—but also how food itself shaped history in return.*

Take, for example, the waves of Ukrainian immigrants in the late 19th century and how they established a food culture in certain regions. Or Jewish families opening delis and bakeries in postwar Toronto and Montreal. And I think one of the most underrated



influences on Canadian dining is Greek immigration—their impact is massive. Greek immigrants founded Boston Pizza, they popularized the donair—they even invented Hawaiian pizza. If you go to small towns across Canada, you'll find that a lot of the longstanding, family-run pizza places are owned by Greek families. Even here in Newfoundland, one of the biggest pizza restaurants is Greek owned.

So yeah, immigration and food are completely intertwined. For a long time, when people talked about Canadian food, they meant butter tarts, pea soup and poutine—dishes rooted in English and French settler traditions. But that leaves out so many other communities that have been here, cooking incredible food for generations. It was only in the latter half of the 20th century that we really started recognizing that—and even then, for a whole mix of reasons, including racism, it took time.

MM The restaurant industry is often framed as volatile or risky, yet people continue to open them, invest in them, and fight to keep them alive. How do you account for the perennial allure of restaurants for entrepreneurs?

***GP:** I've thought about this a lot. So many restaurants closed during COVID, and yet, even in the middle of all that uncertainty, people were still opening new ones.*

I remember seeing it happen and thinking the pandemic made an already tough industry even harder. We saw a huge shift in the workforce—lifelong professionals who were amazing at their jobs, leaving the industry entirely. But at the same time, new restaurants kept popping up. And I think that speaks to something deeper. Like I said, so much of Canada's history—our identity, even—is wrapped up in restaurant ownership. For generations, restaurants were one of the only industries immigrants could enter easily, especially if their English wasn't strong or if they faced barriers in other fields. The more people I interviewed for the book, the more I saw that same story repeating: We moved to Canada, we opened a restaurant, it became our family's livelihood.

I reviewed a place a few years ago, Noodles Express, run by Weifeng Fan and his family who immigrated from China to St. John's. Their teenage son was serving, the eight-year-old was doing homework in the corner—it was a brand-new restaurant, but it already had that feeling of a family business. And you see that story everywhere.

So, I think people open restaurants because they need to. Not just financially, but emotionally. People want to feed others, to share the food they love, to create spaces where people can gather. That desire—to nourish people, to build community—doesn't go away, no matter how tough things get. It's just an incontrovertible fact.

> "There are American books on restaurant history and other iconic restaurant books, but nothing like that for Canada. And I felt like these stories needed to be told, because a lot of independent restaurants never really get their due."

MM You famously wrote a series of obituaries for restaurants that closed in your city—a bittersweet, yet powerful idea. Do you think losing a restaurant is something we truly grieve?

***GP:** Oh, absolutely—2022 was really the final straw for me. One of my favourite restaurants, Seto, closed that year, and it hit me hard. Kenny Pittman was the chef, and he named the place after his grandfather, who was one of the first Chinese immigrants to Newfoundland. The restaurant had this incredible menu—elevated food with Chinese influences, like his take on a Xiao Long Bao. It was fantastic.*

That was the first place I went to when restaurants reopened after COVID, and when it shut down, I realized I wasn't just mourning the food—I was mourning everything about it. Going there with friends, chatting with Kenny at the bar, discovering new cocktails. It felt like a real loss. I pitched this idea to The Independent—which used to be a newspaper but is now a news website—saying, "Hey, I want to write a list of obituaries for the five restaurants that closed that I really cared about." And Drew Brown, the editor, was immediately on board.



I wrote the stories like real obituaries, as if these restaurants were people. Because honestly, restaurants do have personalities. They live out lifespans. Some, like Raymonds—which closed during COVID but not because of it—just naturally come to the end of their run. We mourned it, but we understood. Others, like The Big R—this classic diner that had been around since the '50s—feel like losing a piece of the city's history. When it closed, it was all over the news. People were devastated. It was one of those places you could always count on—the kind where sliding into your favorite booth feels like getting a warm hug.

The response to the obituaries was overwhelming. CBC even interviewed me about them. And I think that just proves the point—restaurants aren't just businesses. They mean something to people. Restaurants have stories, they have identities, and when they close, it's a real loss.

MM You've written about how Canadian restaurants have evolved in response to historical andeconomic forces. Do you think restaurants are mirrors that reflect society, or do they play a more proactive role advancing communities and culture?

***GP:** I think restaurants are both a reflection of society at a particular time and place and potential agents of change. That duality is what makes them so compelling.*

For example, while I was writing, I thought a lot about Indigenous restaurants and included a note about why you didn't see many Indigenous-owned restaurants until the

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Meals & Snacks



2000s—aside from one in the '90s —at the beginning of the book. There were systemic barriers, structural inequalities and, frankly, a lot of terrible reasons for that absence. But now, thanks to incredible Indigenous chefs who are finally able to showcase their food on a platform that never existed before, there's been a real shift. At the same time, society has evolved to be more inclusive, creating space for that representation. So, it's a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation—restaurants both reflect and drive social change.

Even historically, you see this dynamic at play. In the 1950s or '60s, the Toronto Star wrote about one of the city's first Japanese restaurants, hyping the concept: "You get to use chopsticks. And don't be afraid to sit on the floor—there are tatami mats!" The restaurant itself was committed to authenticity, saying, "This is how we do things—traditional Japanese style—you're welcome to experience it." And the Toronto Star embraced that, essentially saying, "This is cool, let's showcase it." That moment captures how restaurants can introduce new ideas while also reflecting broader societal attitudes. It's all interconnected.

MM Much of your work highlights the untold stories behind restaurant owners, chefs, and immigrant communities. Why are those stories so important to the success of a restaurant and its visibility within its community?

GP: *Food media has traditionally focused on high-end restaurants and celebrity chefs, while smaller, independent spots don't always get—or even seek—the same recognition. But the people make a restaurant. Great food alone isn't enough; there has to be a sense of soul and community.*

That's why I think it's important for smaller restaurants to tell their own stories. Some do it through social media, but many owners still hesitate to put themselves out there. In St. John's, there was this great restaurant—the only spot in the city doing dim sum. The owner was reluctant to do an interview, but he did want his restaurant to succeed. That dynamic fascinates me.

"So, restaurants are really about community. In every town—whether it's a big city or a tiny place in rural Canada—there's always that one spot that means something to the people who live there."

At the end of the day, I want the essence of a restaurant to come through in the people behind it. That's what makes a place feel special—and what keeps people coming back.

MM If we think of restaurants as storytelling spaces rather than just places of commerce, how should that change the way we perceive, support and sustain them?

GP: *That's a tough question—but a good one. I think most restaurants exist because people want to feed and nourish others. But there are also places that are just businesses, where someone says, "I'm going to serve cheap food, undercut everyone else, and make a profit." And sure, maybe they last a while, but they don't mean anything to people. The restaurants that truly last are the ones that make people feel welcome, that create a sense of value—not just in terms of price, but in experience.*



Inflation is tough, and I get why people feel like restaurant prices are just going up and up. But the reality is, restaurants aren't just trying to take your money. Costs are high, margins are razor thin. There was a great breakdown in Toronto Life once, in an article by Corey-Mintz, where a restaurant took a loss on their most popular dish because it got people in the door. That's the kind of behind-the-scenes reality most diners don't think about. Todd Perrin, owner of Rabble restaurant here in St. John's, does a great job of explaining this—he's vocal about why he charges what he does, both in the media and on social media. And I think more restaurants could benefit from that kind of transparency.
If you tell people, "Yeah, this steak is expensive, but that's because I'm buying from the butcher down the street, supporting local farmers," it helps people understand where their money is going.

At the end of the day, people are more intentional about where they spend their money now—whether it's dining out, concerts, or travel. I'll spend on restaurants, but I won't splurge on concert tickets. That's just me.

So, if more restaurants can tell their story in a way that's approachable and honest, it might help bring people in, because they'll understand the true value of restaurants.

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Nestled in the heart of Toronto's Roncesvalles Village, Arbequina Restaurant is more than just a new dining destination—it's a bold reimagining of Levantine cuisine, brought to life by Chef Moeen Abuzaid and his wife and business partner, Asma Syed. Together, they have crafted an experience that seamlessly merges rich cultural heritage, fine dining and local cuisine.

For Chef Moeen, the journey to Arbequina began far from Toronto, in the bustling kitchens of Amman, Jordan. With little more than ambition and a dream, he moved to New York City in 2009, where he worked alongside some of the world's most revered chefs. There, he honed his craft, pushing the boundaries of Levantine cuisine with a fresh, international approach. From his acclaimed NYC pop-up, The Broken English, to his arrival in Toronto in 2019, Moeen's vision has been clear: to elevate his cuisine on a global stage while honouring its deep-rooted traditions.

Asma's path was equally unconventional. A Toronto native, she built a career working with the United Nations. Her background in international development and operations gave her a unique perspective on the intersection of culture, business, and sustainability. When she met Moeen in New York, their connection was immediate, and Asma now plays a pivotal role in the restaurant, managing everything from finances and hiring to branding and logistics.

At Arbequina, that vision is reflected in every detail. The menu is a testament to sustainability, built on seasonal, locally sourced ingredients, many of which come directly from their own garden. In a bold departure from industry norms, the restaurant also operates as a zero-proof establishment, crafting sophisticated non-alcoholic beverages designed to enhance the dining experience. Here, food isn't just nourishment—it's storytelling, innovation, and community in every bite.

Together, Moeen and Asma have navigated the challenges of breaking into Toronto's tight-knit food scene, carving out a space where tradition meets modernity. Their journey—one of risk, reinvention and resilience—is the foundation of Arbequina.



You and Moeen took an unconventional path to opening Arbequina—meeting online, marrying within three months, and eventually launching the restaurant together. How did your backgrounds and that whirlwind journey shape the vision for your business?

Asma: *Our story has always been fast-paced and a little bit fated. I was living in Copenhagen, working for the UN, travelling to over 37 countries, living my best life. Then I moved to New York for a year and met Moeen online. We got married three months later. I didn't even realize until after we were married just how much of a reputation he already had in the culinary world.*

What really connected us was this shared sense of adventure and purpose. Moeen was born in a refugee camp, took risks and worked his way up in some of the world's best kitchens—he had this incredible talent that was recognized by top chefs globally. I had spent my career working in HR and the development, sector, seeing firsthand how resilience and perseverance can shape people's lives. When we moved to Toronto, we always knew we wanted to open something of our own. But it took time because we did it independently—no investors, no shortcuts, just us putting everything into it. And when we found our space, it was owned by a husband-and-wife team, just like us. That felt like a sign.

For us, Arbequina isn't just a restaurant—it's the result of two people with completely different backgrounds coming together to create something new, something that didn't exist before. And that's exactly what we wanted.

Breaking into Toronto's food scene can be challenging, especially for chefs coming from international markets. What has that experience been like since opening last year?

Asma: *It's been one of the biggest challenges, honestly. When Moeen arrived in Toronto, a lot of people assumed he was just starting out, like he was a "new" chef, without realizing the incredible work he had already done in New York and internationally. He's incredibly humble, so he's not the type to go around saying, "Look at my résumé," but the reality is, he had already established a name for himself long before coming here.*

Toronto's food industry can feel very insular. People have their networks—their circles—and it's not always easy to break into that. But, we've found people who appreciate innovation and passion, and they've been incredibly supportive. A great example is how we connected with Restaurants Canada—a member of their team who lived in the neighbourhood happened to walk by when we were still under construction, knocked on our door, and we invited her in to see what we were building. That conversation opened up so many doors for us.

We believe in what we're doing, and we know that it takes time to build a real, lasting presence. What matters most is that our guests recognize the experience we're creating at Arbequina—and that's what keeps us going.

Moeen, you've cooked in some of the world's most prestigious kitchens. How does Toronto's restaurant scene compare? What unique strengths or opportunities do you see in the city's evolving culinary landscape?

Moeen: *I have observed that Toronto's restaurant scene is a dynamic, evolving tapestry—one that I'm still learning to navigate. Coming from the middle east and NYC, I'm sure my perspective on food is different. Toronto is a city of possibilities; I think there is a lot of untapped potential here; an opportunity to embrace the bold and innovative. The city seems ready for it. This is what makes Toronto so exciting. Its diversity and raw energy create a fertile ground for transformation. Every day, I see opportunities to push boundaries, refine our approach, and elevate the culinary conversation.*

I'm here to contribute to this culinary landscape and dialogue, to learn, and to inspire others to imagine what's possible. In this city, where every day is a new discovery, I'm excited to be part of shaping a future that's as innovative and vibrant as the community itself.

"Arbequina isn't just a restaurant—it's the result of two people with completely different backgrounds coming together to create something new, something that didn't exist before. And that's exactly what we wanted."

Chef Moeen, you've worked in world-renowned kitchens and have a deep appreciation for global flavours and culinary techniques. How do you balance honouring traditional Levantine cuisine while innovating in a way that excites a Toronto audience—and yourself?

Moeen: *My approach to cooking is deeply rooted in the soul of Levantine cuisine, but I see food as an ever-evolving art form. The Levant has a rich history of flavour, technique, and storytelling, and I honour that by sourcing high-quality ingredients, respecting traditional methods, and celebrating the essence of the region's dishes.*

At the same time, my experiences and exposure to global culinary techniques inspire me to push boundaries. Toronto is a dynamic, diverse city with a food culture that embraces creativity, and that excites me as a chef. At Arbequina, I balance tradition and innovation by reimagining familiar flavours in unexpected ways—refining classic dishes with modern plating, using local and sustainable ingredients in traditional preparations, and applying advanced techniques that enhance Levantine flavours without compromising their integrity.

This is not fusion—it's innovation. It's about evolving Levantine cuisine in a way that feels both deeply familiar and entirely new, while staying true to its roots. My goal is to create food that resonates emotionally, surprises the palate, and tells a story of both heritage and discovery.

MM Halal fine dining is still a relatively new concept in Canada. What challenges have you faced in shaping this experience, and how do you see the perception of halal cuisine evolving in the fine-dining space?

Moeen: *I'm really glad you asked this question. It's important to clarify that 'halal fine dining' isn't a concept—halal is not a cuisine, nor does it define a particular dining style. It simply refers to the way meat is sourced and prepared.*

Arbequina is an upscale dining restaurant that happens to serve only halal meat. This decision doesn't shape or limit my vision in any way—it only ensures that more people can experience the food I create. The flavours, techniques and creativity remain the same, and the integrity of my dishes is never compromised.

I think the conversation around halal in fine dining is evolving, and I welcome that. It's moving away from being seen as a limitation and instead being understood for what it really is—an inclusive sourcing choice that allows more guests to feel welcome at the table. In the end, great food is great food, and that's what truly defines the dining experience.

MM Chef Moeen, you've mentioned that you're inspired by traditional techniques but don't want to be confined by them. Can you share an example of a dish at Arbequina where you've taken a classic concept and given it an unexpected twist?

Moeen: *For me, I don't feel confined by the traditions. To me, it's about understanding the depth of tradition and using it as a foundation for creativity. At Arbequina, we honour classic Levantine flavours while reimagining them in ways that feel fresh and exciting. I've had someone tell me that the flavours in their mouth reminded them of home.*

One example is our Truffle and Mushroom Mutabbaq with Smoked Kashkaval and Lemon. Mutabbaq is traditionally a stuffed and folded pastry, often filled with spiced meat or cheese. We've taken this classic and refined it by using earthy truffles and mushrooms, elevating the richness with smoked Kashkaval cheese, and balancing it all with a bright hit of lemon. The result is something deeply familiar yet entirely new—a dish that feels rooted in

6 QUESTIONS: with Chef Moeen Abuzaid & Asma Syed

CHEF MOEEN ABUZAID

Secret ingredient?
Koji.

Favourite cookbook?
Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work, a cookbook by Aki Kamozawa and H. Alexander Talbot.

Favourite saying?
There are years that ask questions and years that have answers. (Zora Neale Hurston)

Greatest influence?
Chef Munier Alsallaq, who is also an Olympic wrestling judge. He taught me my way around the kitchen and coached me in the sport. I am forever grateful to him.

Most cherished possession?
My grandmother's mortar and pestle —the pestle is made from olive tree wood.

Most memorable meal?
Paris, Les Ombres, a restaurant which is overseen by Chef Alain Ducasse.

ASMA SYED

Secret skill?
Connecting with people.

Favourite book?
Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*.

Favourite saying?
No two things have been combined better than knowledge and patience.

Greatest influence?
My years working for the UN and the opportunity to travel both personally and professionally. From Lyon to Timbuktu to Myanmar, I've seen an entire world filled with the most beautiful parts of humanity.

Most cherished possession?
Does my son count...? I don't have any cherished possessions otherwise.

Most memorable meal?
Barcelona in 2018, Chef Albert Adria, Tickets.





tradition but speaks to a more modern, refined palate.

For dessert, our Baklava Mousse with Booza and Pistachio plays on nostalgia while defying expectations. Baklava is known for its crisp, syrup-soaked layers, but instead of simply serving it as is, we transform its essence into a delicate mousse, capturing its flavours in an airy, luxurious texture. The addition of Booza, a traditional stretchy Middle Eastern ice cream, ties it back to its roots, while pistachios add the signature crunch.

These dishes reflect what excites me most about cooking—taking something people think they know and giving it an unexpected, memorable twist.

The definition of "Canadian Cuisine" has long been a topic of significant debate and evolution. Where do you see Middle Eastern gastronomy fitting into this story?

> "We invest time in reading, researching and testing flavours from around the world. We distill our own unique flavour extracts and press our own juices to capture the freshest, most vibrant notes that harmonize with our menu."

Moeen: *As someone who arrived in Canada just five years ago and has spent 15 years on this continent, I don't know if I would try to define Canadian cuisine. What I do see is a country that beautifully celebrates the diversity of the people who live here. The food landscape is shaped by so many cultures, histories, and influences, and that's what makes it special.*

Middle Eastern cuisine has naturally become part of this evolving story, just as so many other global cuisines have. The spices, techniques, and traditions we bring with us add to the broader culinary fabric of this country. As for halal, I think it's important to clarify that halal gastronomy isn't a thing, it's not a cuisine—it's simply a way of sourcing and preparing meat. The focus, instead, should be on how Middle Eastern gastronomy continues to be expressed, appreciated and celebrated in Canada.

I respect and admire those who have been part of defining Canadian cuisine, and I celebrate the many ways people choose to interpret it. What makes Canada's food culture so beautiful is its openness—the way it makes space for so many traditions to coexist, evolve, and thrive. I'm happy to be part of the cooking here and to make to my contributions to this story.

Having worked in high-pressure, Michelin-starred kitchens, how do you approach mentorship and kitchen culture at Arbequina? What lessons from your past experiences have influenced how you lead your team?

Moeen: *I view mentorship as an essential ingredient in creating a thriving culinary family. My time in high-pressure, Michelin-starred kitchens—especially working with visionaries like Wylie Dufresne at wd-50 in New York—taught me that excellence isn't just about technical precision; it's also about kindness, support and the willingness to learn.*

When I first arrived in New York City in 2009 as a non-English speaking immigrant, I had to hustle, observe, and absorb everything around me. That experience instilled in me the importance of a learning environment with high expectations, where every member of the team is given the space to grow, make mistakes, and ultimately excel.

At Arbequina, I strive to build a kitchen culture that feels like an extension of home—a family where each person is valued and supported in their personal and professional journey. I want to inspire excellence not just through our dishes, but through the way we work together. Whether it's tailoring guidance to individual dreams or mitigating some of the challenges I once faced, my goal is to empower every member of my team to become not only a skilled chef but also a leader in their own right.

In our kitchen, excellence and kindness go hand in hand. That's the legacy I want to pass on, ensuring that every person who walks through our doors has the opportunity to thrive.

Arbequina offers a dining experience without alcohol—how do you approach crafting zero-proof cocktail pairings that enhance the meal just as much as wine or cocktails traditionally would?

Moeen: *We view the absence as an opportunity for creative expression. Our zero-proof cocktail pairings are crafted with the same passion and precision as traditional wine or spirit selections. We invest time in reading, researching and testing flavours from around the world. We distill our own unique flavour extracts and press our own juices to capture the freshest, most vibrant notes that harmonize with our menu.*

Every mocktail is meticulously designed to match the palette of our dishes, ensuring that each sip enhances the overall dining experience. It's all about celebrating flavour in its purest form and creating a multisensory journey that we hope is enjoyed by our guests.

Asma: *Being alcohol-free is a deliberate choice. Not because we're against alcohol, but because we wanted to create an experience where people who don't drink—whether for religious, cultural, or personal reasons—don't feel like an afterthought. Many fine-dining experiences are built around wine pairings, and we wanted to rethink that by focusing on an equally refined, curated non-alcoholic beverage program.*

What's been really rewarding is seeing the diverse mix of guests in our dining room. We have halal diners, we have people who have



> "What's been really rewarding is seeing the diverse mix of guests in our dining room. We have halal diners, we have people who have chosen sobriety, and we have locals who just love great food."

chosen sobriety, and we have locals who just love great food. We've had guests visit from Kuwait, Dubai, Detroit—people seeking out something they don't often find. It's about creating a space where people can have a high-end dining experience without feeling like they're missing out.

You co-created Arbequina as a true partnership. Can you describe how your roles complement each other and why that dynamic is essential to the restaurant's success?

Asma: *I always say there's no restaurant without Moeen, and there's no restaurant without me. He is the creative genius behind the food, but I make sure the bills get paid, the grease trap is cleaned, payroll happens, and the social media runs smoothly. We are a true partnership—he brings the culinary vision, and I make sure Arbequina functions as a business. What's beautiful about our dynamic is that we are equally invested, but in different ways. I don't need to be in the limelight—I'm happy championing his success from behind the scenes.*

I also have a full-time job and a child, so balancing everything is a constant focus, but it's something we're both committed to.

Beyond the food itself, what kind of overall hospitality experience do you want guests to have at Arbequina?

Moeen: *Our goal is to make every guest feel like they're stepping into an extension of our home. We want you to know that you belong here—we're genuinely grateful that you've chosen our space, and we hope you'll come back again and again.*

Ultimately, it's not just about the food—it's about creating an atmosphere where every detail is considered, ensuring that your experience with us feels both personal and memorable.

Arbequina is a thoughtful restaurant, that speaks to principled, warm and elegant cuisine in the spirit of true hospitality. Beyond its success, what impact do you hope to have on the broader food world?

Moeen: *I aim to honour my heritage and make my community proud by showcasing how our landscape, traditions and flavours can be transformed into a culinary art form that resonates with everyone. I'm committed to a path of continuous learning and creative exploration—pushing the boundaries of my cuisine while staying true to its authentic roots.*

Ultimately, I hope to inspire young chefs to innovate boldly, blending tradition with progress, and to remind the broader food world that beauty can be found in both heritage and innovation.



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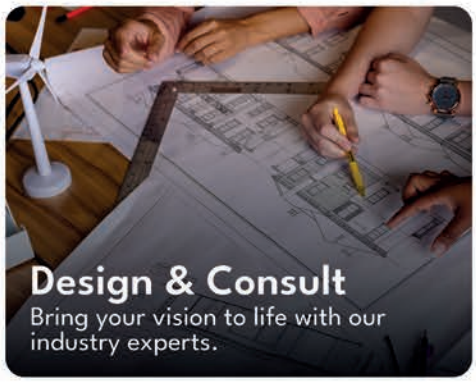
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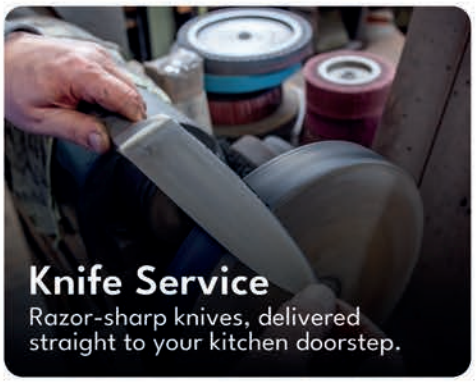


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Chuck Ortiz, founder of The Food Runners



TFR



THE LONG RUN:

The Food Runners Movement is Gaining Ground on Mental Health & Wellness for the Hospitality Industry

For years, Chuck Ortiz, founder and creative director of Back of House (BOH), has captured the essence of restaurant culture—both its triumphs and its hidden struggles. What started as a magazine exposing the unspoken realities of the industry soon evolved into something far more tangible: ***The Food Runners****, a Toronto-based running crew designed for chefs, bartenders, and hospitality workers looking to break free from the cycle of long hours, late nights, and burnout.*

Ortiz never set out to start a movement. But a decade later, The Food Runners has grown into more than just a running club—it's a community. A space where industry professionals can connect, reset and prioritize their well-being. From securing early partnerships with major sportswear brands to a new collaboration with Smart Serve Ontario aimed at providing mental health resources, Ortiz is proving that the best ideas don't just stay on the page—they hit the ground running.

MM You've been doing this for over a decade—what inspired you to start The Food Runners, and what has kept you going?

Chuck Ortiz: *In 2014, I was running a self-published food magazine, Acquired Taste, and it was hugely inspired by the 'underbelly' of the food industry, in the style of Anthony Bourdain. The magazine was about diving into people's stories about the industry—the raw, not-so-pretty stories and interviews—addictions that can come with it and the things a lot of my friends were, at the time, going through. I had the thought that, rather than exposing the underbelly, we should instead create something to help bring attention to it, but in a positive way that could help address it. I've been deeply involved in the food industry since 2007–08, not just working in it but also as a go-to photographer, so when this idea came up, I knew exactly who to tap into.*

I approached Nike with the idea of creating an initiative to help chefs stay active. Initially, we considered basketball or another sport, but running was the most accessible—everyone has shoes, and all you have to do is get out and run. Nike loved the concept immediately, and since they were heavily promoting their run clubs at the time, the timing was perfect. We launched with a core group of about seven chefs, including Rob Gentile, Grant van Gameren, Rob Rossi, and Dustin Gallagher—industry names who helped spearhead the movement. From there, we hit the ground running—literally.

MM Were you a runner before this?

CO: *No, not long distance. In high school, I was great at short distance, you know, like 100 to 400 meters, but running more than a kilometre would kill me. So, this was a new thing not only for the original run crew, but for me too.*

MM Obviously, there's a fitness and physical health component to this, but from what you've shared, mental health seems to be a major focus. From an organizational perspective, what is the broad mission of The Food Runners and why do people join the running crews?

CO: *We're creating a healthier outlet that supports overall well-being from multiple angles. Running is the foundation—it gets people moving, whether it's a 1K, 5K, or even a marathon. There's no pressure; everyone starts where they're at, and we guide them along the way.*

Beyond running, we provide access to additional wellness resources. For example, we collaborate with Othership, which offers meditation and contrast therapy (hot and cold rooms) to help stabilize the mind before the chaos of a restaurant shift. It's about giving people a moment to reset before diving into a high-stress environment. And we're also finalizing a content production program with Smart Serve Ontario for an initiative called Smart Serve Cares, which provides free mental health counseling and resources for our runners and others in the industry, providing greater access to support systems they might not otherwise have, and we want to work with them to help them to increase awareness.

The content series we're planning will feature interviews with members of our run crews focusing on their stories, what they've gone through and their mental health journey. We want to highlight people's stories through a really raw lens to address the stigma around mental health and mental health in this industry in particular. We want to get past the idea that chefs are rock stars or superhuman. I think we have to move past that narrative.

"Running was the most accessible—everyone has shoes, and all you have to do is get out and run. Nike loved the concept immediately, and since they were heavily promoting their run clubs at the time, the timing was perfect."



MM When you were running the magazine and immersed in the broader foodservice and culinary world, how did this issue first come onto your radar? Were people openly talking about mental health, or was it something you observed?

CO: *Being in the industry, I saw friends struggling with heart issues and addiction. Late nights and post-shift drinks were the norm, and at some point, I had to stop and ask myself, "What am I really doing?" It wasn't uncommon to be out at 3 AM, drinking, without considering the toll it was taking. One of the most influential chefs I know—someone who helped put Toronto on the global culinary map—has a well-documented story about suffering a heart attack and the challenges he faced as a young cook. It's no secret in Toronto's restaurant scene that many people are going through similar struggles.*

MM Over the past decade, what impact have you seen The Food Runners have on its members and the community? Beyond the running itself, what have you observed in terms of personal growth, camaraderie, and overall well-being?

CO: *Over the years, we've realized there are so many layers to the impact we're having. At first, the idea was simple—get chefs running to improve their health and follow it up with a smoothie. But as time passed, we saw something much deeper happening. We've met people who have struggled with alcoholism and seen them achieve milestones like seven years of sobriety. Some have even credited Food Runners as one of the catalysts that helped them get there. Others have battled different addictions, and while I can't speak on specific cases, I've seen firsthand how being part of this community has helped people take on those challenges. That, to me, is huge.*

Beyond the physical benefits, Food Runners provides something the industry often lacks: community. It's easy to feel isolated in this business, working long hours with little time to form friendships. Many people join not just to improve their fitness, but because they're looking for a sense of connection and belonging. And now, with the addition of mental health support and counseling, we're able to offer even more. The industry is still struggling, especially post-pandemic. The economy is uncertain, restaurants are facing challenges, and job security isn't what it used to be. Whether you're a line cook or a restaurant owner, these pressures affect everyone. The Food Runners isn't just about running—it's about creating a space where people can take care of themselves, feel supported, and know they're not alone.

MM Do people normally join alone or with friends or coworkers?

CO: *Some come with a friend or two, but most come alone, especially when they're new. They want to see what it's about, get a feel for the community, and then, naturally, they start bringing others. Some arrive with a friend or two, but it's primarily an individual decision to show up. And, unlike other run clubs where*

"The Refuel evolved into a space for creativity, allowing chefs to reimagine what healthy eating could look like. It's not just about smoothies or standard "healthy" meals. We're showing that balance and creativity can coexist in food."

groups tend to form within the larger crew, we emphasize running together as a collective. There are no cliques—just one community. That's why we encourage people to ditch the headphones and stay engaged. It's not just about running; it's about connection. If you're with us, you're part of the team.

MM Has your growth mainly been driven by word of mouth?

CO: *Growth has largely been driven by word of mouth. We're not actively promoting it as a club people should join—aside from sharing our runs on social media. The beauty of it is that people come and go. Some join at a point in their lives when they need this kind of community, and then they move on to do incredible things. Others step in to take their place.*

Not everyone from year one is still running with us, but they remain part of the family. They come back occasionally, sometimes even hosting runs. One great example is our friend Coulson Armstrong, who has been with us since the beginning. Every year, he puts together the best Refuel, and we often go to his restaurant for special occasions—anniversaries, Food Runners milestones, or major activations. He's proud to be part of the crew—we call members like him the Food Runner OGs.

MM What are the people who join the run crews looking for, and what's the onboarding experience like?

CO: *The first concern people usually have is about the run itself—we get emails all the time from industry folks, especially chefs, who aren't necessarily runners. The most common question is, "I'm not really a runner—am I going to be left behind?"*



I always reassure them that running is just the entry point—it's a way to bring people together. What they'll really get out of it is the camaraderie, the community, and the conversations. And of course, there's the food. We showcase ways to eat healthier, but not in the typical juice-bar, post-run smoothie way. We have some incredible chefs in our crew who push the boundaries of what healthy, nourishing food can be—offering dishes during Refuels you wouldn't normally think of after a run.

Ultimately, The Food Runners is about more than just exercise. It's about building relationships within the industry, learning from others, and finding ways to grow both personally and professionally.

MM Let's talk about the Refuel. It's clearly more than just a great meal at the end of a run. What's the bigger purpose behind it?

CO: *When we started, the goal was simple—give chefs a healthier way to start their day. After a run, we'd 'Refuel' with something nourishing. But over time, it became so much more. The Refuel evolved into a space for creativity, allowing chefs to reimagine what healthy eating could look like. It's not just about smoothies or standard "healthy" meals. We're showing that balance and creativity can coexist in food.*

Beyond nutrition, the Refuel is symbolic. The industry takes a toll—physically, mentally and emotionally. This meal is a way to nourish not just the body, but the soul. It's a moment to sit together, break bread and connect. There's something deeply human about sharing a meal, especially with people you've just met. It creates an instant sense of belonging.

MM The Food Runners started as a group of chefs, but over time, it has grown to include a more diverse mix of professionals. Obviously, chefs are still a big part of it, but has that shift made it harder to maintain a cohesive culture, or has it evolved naturally and successfully?

CO: *It has grown naturally while still staying true to its original purpose, mainly because I'm very clear about our ethos. I make it a point to remind people that while we're inclusive, this crew exists for the food industry—chefs, bartenders and others in hospitality. If someone outside the industry wants to join, I tell them to be mindful that they're taking space that could go to an industry professional.*

That said, non-industry participants still find ways to contribute, by hosting our Refuel sessions at their favourite spots or introducing us to restaurant owners who can support the initiative. Everyone who joins understands that The Food Runners is, and always will be, rooted in the hospitality community.

MM You've come a long way. Do you have plans to expand The Food Runners model in other cities?

CO: *Right now, we get messages from people across Canada—and sometimes internationally—asking about starting their own Food Runners chapters. The challenge is finding the right city and the right setup to replicate what we do in Toronto. The key to making it work is having strong restaurant partners—whether a single restaurant, a group, or just industry leaders—who can drive the initiative. I can't be everywhere, so each location would need*



dedicated run captains to organize weekly runs and sustain the community.

But this isn't a franchise and it's not about business—it's about community and industry support. The culture we've built is specific, and finding the right person to lead in another city is tough. It has to be someone who isn't in it for the spotlight, who understands that this is about chefs and restaurant workers, not personal branding or profit. I've never made a cent from this, and that's intentional—this is about giving back to the industry that's given me so much.

MM What do you feel The Food Runners has accomplished in terms of bringing mental health and wellness conversations to the forefront? Not just on a broad societal level, but specifically within your community—the people you run with and serve?

CO: *I think the biggest impact we've had is creating a space where people feel comfortable being open about their mental health and overall well-being. The industry has long had a tough, "bro-ey" culture where everyone pretends they're fine, no matter what they're dealing with. I think we've helped shift that mindset. Every week, when we gather, there's always someone going through something—and they know they're not alone. Just having a space where people can talk, share, and support each other has been huge. Destigmatizing these conversations is one of the most important things we've done.*

MM Have you found yourself becoming a go-to person for people in the industry who are looking for support? If so, has that been difficult for you, or does it validate the need for the original Food Runners concept?

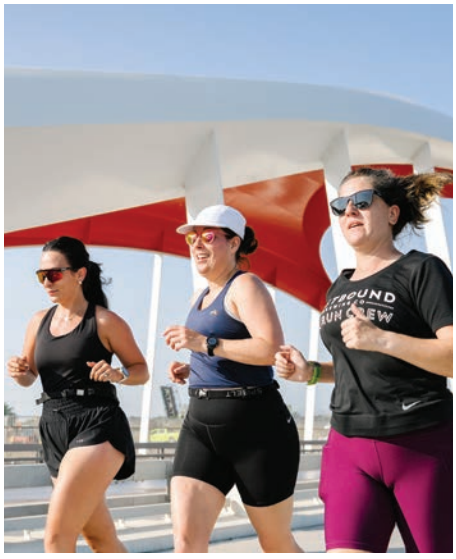
"Ultimately, The Food Runners is about more than just exercise. It's about building relationships within the industry, learning from others, and finding ways to grow both personally and professionally."



CO: *It's not about people saying, "Oh, you have an issue? You need to go to Chuck Ortiz." That's not the goal. I want The Food Runners to be the thing people turn to, and if my role means being more visible and leading the charge, I welcome it because my priority is to help people. I truly feel called to do this. I've been committed for years, even driving in from Stouffville every week, because I feel a deep responsibility to this community.*

Also, I see a future where The Food Runners grows beyond me. That's why we've brought on two new run captains—we're laying the foundation for something that can scale. And I would love The Food Runners to be top of mind for industry employers. When they're thinking about staff wellness, onboarding or benefits, I want our initiative to be part of that conversation. We want their staff to be encouraged to come to the runs—not just for fitness, but for the community and mental health support we provide.

The Food Runners has been completely free for 10 years because we believe in making it accessible to industry professionals who work incredibly hard, and often don't have benefits. We've had great partners over the years—Nike, Lululemon, and others—who have supported us in various ways. But the reality is, whatever isn't covered comes out of my own pocket, through my company. I do it because I believe in this so deeply. But for us to grow and reach more people, we need more partners—brands willing to support the people behind the scenes who make this industry thrive, the chefs and hospitality professionals who create and deliver the incredible events that attract some of the world's biggest companies.



MM Your humility and dedication—10 years of doing this with no financial gain—is incredible. What drives you to keep going?

CO: *Thank you. Honestly, running helps me with my own personal health, you know? So, that's what I get out of it—I get to run.*

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The Food Runners Refuel
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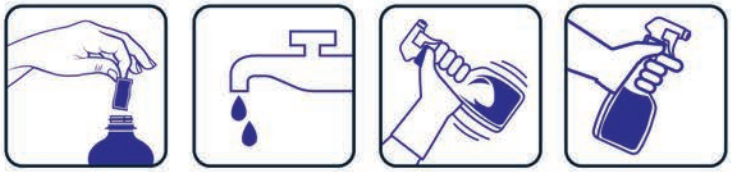
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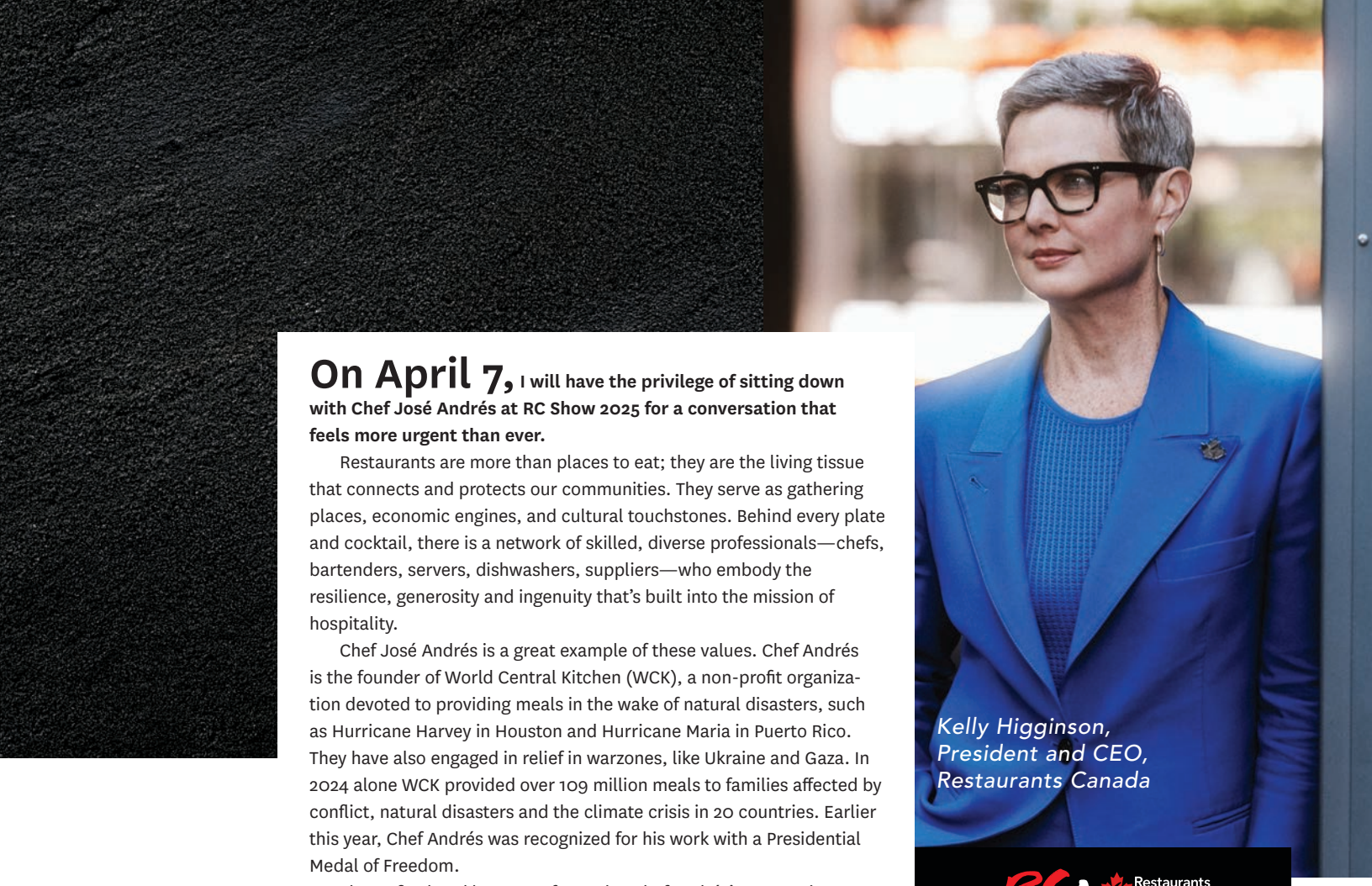
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BY KELLY HIGGINSON, PRESIDENT AND CEO, RESTAURANTS CANADA



Kelly Higginson, President and CEO, Restaurants Canada

On April 7, I will have the privilege of sitting down with Chef José Andrés at RC Show 2025 for a conversation that feels more urgent than ever.

Restaurants are more than places to eat; they are the living tissue that connects and protects our communities. They serve as gathering places, economic engines, and cultural touchstones. Behind every plate and cocktail, there is a network of skilled, diverse professionals—chefs, bartenders, servers, dishwashers, suppliers—who embody the resilience, generosity and ingenuity that's built into the mission of hospitality.

Chef José Andrés is a great example of these values. Chef Andrés is the founder of World Central Kitchen (WCK), a non-profit organization devoted to providing meals in the wake of natural disasters, such as Hurricane Harvey in Houston and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. They have also engaged in relief in warzones, like Ukraine and Gaza. In 2024 alone WCK provided over 109 million meals to families affected by conflict, natural disasters and the climate crisis in 20 countries. Earlier this year, Chef Andrés was recognized for his work with a Presidential Medal of Freedom.

I know firsthand how transformative Chef Andrés' perspective can be. That's why welcoming him to speak at the 80th RC Show, the largest trade show in Canada and the foodservice industry's premier annual gathering this April is so significant. His work doesn't reinvent the work this industry does—it amplifies it. He has taken the essence of hospitality and applied it on a global scale, proving to the world that this sector has the power and expertise to transform lives.

WCK's mission extends beyond providing meals and comfort in the eye of the storm and returns to the core of what it means to provide hospitality: rebuilding communities, restoring economies and strengthening local food systems for long-term resilience. This work mirrors what restaurants do every day, transforming communities and emotionally impacting the day to day lives of citizens.

What Chef Andrés has done has shown the world the full potential of this industry at scale. He has turned our everyday work into a global force for good, demonstrating that hospitality isn't just about service—it's about leadership.

This is a conversation I believe we all need right now.

FUEL THE PASSION & POTENTIAL OF FOODSERVICE

Chef Andrés' work proves that foodservice professionals have long been at the centre of change, making a difference every day. It's time to celebrate our full potential, seeing beyond survival, and embrace our role as the community leaders and champions we already are. And, in doing so, redefine the influence and role of foodservice in society itself. Chef José Andrés will speak on Monday, April 7, at 3:00 p.m. at RC Show, at the Enercare Centre in Toronto. I hope you'll join us.

RC Show — Restaurants Canada

RC Show 80th Anniversary Headliner

Chef José Andrés

Speaker Stage | Monday, April 7 at 3:00 PM

Presented by:

Restaurants Canada

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Rise and Dine: Breakfast Trends in Foodservice

Canadians love their breakfast. This occasion has long been a foodservice staple, maintaining the largest share of traffic at 29% of visits. Despite being among the hardest-hit dayparts in the early days of the pandemic, **breakfast has the greatest recovery story: up 261 million visits versus 2019,** and continuing as the fastest-growing daypart at commercial foodservice through 2024. Innovative foods, unique beverage programs, and an influx of Gen Z consumers have contributed to breakfast's resilience.



45% — **45% of breakfast consumers seek food and beverage equally,** emphasizing the need for a strong beverage program.

+110% — **Non-carbonated soft drinks have grown** servings the fastest versus 2019, outpacing the other up-and-comer, iced coffee.

+62% — **Breakfast wraps servings growth outpaced the beloved English muffin breakfast sandwich** by more than three times compared to 2019.

+66% — **Gen Z grew breakfast visits the most** among generation cohorts versus 2019, accounting for 225 million visits.

Breakfast also includes brunch and morning snack.
Source: Circana, CREST®, Canada, YE December 2024 vs. 2023

261M↑ visits



Perhaps the biggest change driver in the breakfast landscape is the rise of Gen Z consumers.

They're entering the workforce and reshaping breakfast trends by not sticking to convention. The most apparent difference compared to other generational cohorts is their purchases of traditional coffee, which accounts for 45% of total breakfast beverage servings but only 19% among Gen Z. On the food side, Gen Z's burger servings at breakfast grew 30% in the past year and have made it into the cohort's top 5 foods at this daypart. There will be major shifts as this generation continues to gain buying power and shapes the market with unique preferences.



19%
Traditional coffee



+30%
Burgers at breakfast



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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MORNING FUEL

What's Driving Canada's Breakfast Sandwich Boom?

Breakfast is back in a big way, and the undisputed star of the morning revival is the breakfast sandwich. Once a simple grab-and-go staple, this handheld powerhouse has evolved into a creative, crave-worthy canvas for chefs and restaurateurs looking to stake their claim in the growing morning daypart. As consumer habits shift and operators look for new revenue streams, the breakfast sandwich is proving to be the ultimate fusion of convenience, versatility, and profitability.



THE BREAKFAST BOOM

The morning rush isn't just about caffeine anymore. According to Restaurants Canada's Foodservice Facts, breakfast is the fastest-growing daypart in Canadian foodservice, with traffic surging by 12 per cent in 2023, outpacing lunch and dinner growth. Fuelled by shifting work habits, the rise of all-day breakfast offerings, and the demand for high-quality, portable options, restaurants are capitalizing on a breakfast surge that shows no signs of slowing down.

A recent survey by the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University, in partnership with Caddle, reveals that 57.2 per cent of Canadians eat breakfast daily, while another 25.7 per cent consume it multiple times a week. Yet, 5.8 per cent skip it entirely, with Gen Z leading the way in skipping (9.0 per cent) and the Greatest Generation remaining the most consistent consumers (74.8 per cent). Regionally, Newfoundland and Labrador reigns as Canada's breakfast stronghold (69.4 per cent daily consumption), while British Columbia leads in breakfast skippers (9.0 per cent).

Despite its enduring popularity, most Canadians—80.3 per cent—still eat breakfast at home, and just 2.3 per cent turn to restaurants for their morning meal. That presents a massive opportunity for foodservice operators looking to convert home eaters into loyal customers. The survey confirms that Canadians crave familiar, high-protein, and grain-based options, with toast and bagels (40.6 per cent) leading the pack, followed by eggs with bacon, ham, or sausage (37.5 per cent) and cereal and granola (29.7 per cent). Across all generations, toast and bagels dominate—except among the Greatest Generation, who prefer cereal and granola.



With breakfast traffic climbing 12 per cent in 2023, the morning daypart is a promising daypart ripe for innovation; however, with such a low percentage of Canadians currently eating breakfast at restaurants, the challenge for operators is to disrupt morning routines with irresistible, on-the-go offerings. Enter the breakfast sandwich, an ideal format that delivers portability, protein, and customizability—key attributes that align with what Canadians already eat at home. Fast-casual concepts and independent cafés can differentiate with premium, chef-driven takes, while QSRs and convenience chains can capture volume with speed, consistency, and drive-thru accessibility.

With quick-service giants and independent innovators competing for dominance, the battle for Canada's best breakfast sandwich is fiercer than ever. Tim Hortons, McDonald's, and A&W continue to raise the stakes, rolling out premium ingredients, bold menu innovations and aggressive promotions to capture morning traffic. Tim Hortons has upgraded its lineup with freshly cracked eggs and a Farmer's Breakfast Sandwich with avocado on a brioche bun, while McDonald's keeps its all-day breakfast strategy front and centre, ensuring fan favourites like the Egg McMuffin remain accessible beyond the morning rush. The chain also announced it had reached its goal of sourcing 100 per cent Canadian free-run eggs for its breakfast lineup. A&W, well known for its commitment to grass-fed beef and antibiotic-free ingredients, has carved out a loyal following with its classic Bacon & Egger and all-day breakfast menu.



Meanwhile, indie hotspots and chef-driven eateries are rewriting the breakfast sandwich playbook, proving that consumers will pay more for high-quality, crave-worthy creations. In Montreal, Passé Composé's signature Bagel Passé Composé serves up basil cream cheese, Lox Box smoked salmon, fried avocado, red onions, radishes, jalapeño salsa, niçoise, jalapeño and lime yogurt on a St-Viateur bagel. Toronto's Egg Club (now also in Vancouver and Calgary!) has built a cult following with its thick-cut egg sandwiches on Japanese milk bread with unique combinations like Chipotle Lobster, while Gold Standard in Toronto has gained a reputation for its no-frills, perfectly executed breakfast sandwiches featuring scrambled eggs, bacon (or kale), kosher pickles, aïoli and hot sauce on an English muffin. Clementine Café in Winnipeg turns tradition on its head with its handheld wonder with a spiced lamb patty, jammy egg yolk, Vadouvan curry aïoli, pistachio dukkah with red onion, soft feta cheese and herbs. Saskatoon's Living Sky Café's breakfast menu subtly elevates the classic fried egg sandwich with the Sky Sammie, drawing crowds with scratch-made biscuits and farm-fresh ingredients, creating elevated, locally inspired breakfast sandwiches that stand out in a competitive market.

Wrap your menu around eggs

4 in 5 Canadians are interested in eggs outside of breakfast[1]



Put eggs on your menu all day and give your customers what they want, when they want it. Canadian eggs are versatile and work with any meal, for dine-in or take-out. Whether in a breakfast sandwich, inside a wrap, or placed on top of the ultimate burger, there are endless options when you start with eggs.

Eggs Are At The Centre

For more insights and menu inspiration, visit:

foodservice.eggs.ca

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[1]Environics Analytics (September 2024), Egg Consumption Omnibus survey [unpublished data]. Prepared for Egg Farmers of Canada.



Whether it's a fast-food heavyweight scaling up its offerings or a small-batch disruptor crafting chef-driven, Instagrammable masterpieces, one thing is clear—Canadians are obsessed with breakfast sandwiches, and the battle for the best one is only getting more intense.

A CANVAS FOR CULINARY CREATIVITY

The core of the breakfast revolution is the sandwich. Portable, convenient, customizable, and packed with flavour, it's a menu MVP that's redefining how and where Canadians eat their first meal of the day.

The brilliance of the breakfast sandwich lies in its adaptability. While the classic bacon, egg, and cheese on an English muffin remains a fan favourite, today's culinary innovators are taking things further—introducing bold new flavours, premium ingredients, and global influences that keep customers coming back for more.

Restaurants are elevating the humble sandwich with:

Bread Upgrades: Buttery croissants and brioche, and crispy hash brown buns, house-made biscuits, flat breads and wraps, and milk bread rolls bring texture and a premium touch.

Protein Innovations: Classic bacon and sausage now share the stage with smoked salmon, chorizo, slow-cooked pork belly, and plant-based alternatives.

Egg Evolution: From fluffy scrambled to jammy soft-boiled and crispy fried, the egg is no longer an afterthought.

International Inspiration: Korean gochujang mayo, Mexican-inspired huevos rancheros sandwiches, and Japanese tamago-style creations bring global flair.

Health-Conscious Takes: Keto-friendly wraps, high-protein and gluten-free options, and veggie-packed iterations cater to an increasingly mindful audience.

The ability to layer textures, premium ingredients and unique flavours has turned the breakfast sandwich into more than just a morning essential—it's now a restaurant signature, a social media sensation, and a key differentiator in a competitive market. Brands like Toronto-based Egg Club, Gold Standard and Bad Egg, Montreal's Olive et Gourmando and Passé Composé, or Saskatoon's Living Sky Café have built cult followings around their high-quality breakfast sandwiches, proving that thoughtful execution can turn a simple concept into a category leader.

As more Canadians embrace breakfast beyond the traditional morning rush, the staying power and convenience of the breakfast sandwich is undeniable. Whether served as a grab-and-go staple, an all-day menu highlight, or the centrepiece of a chef-driven competition, this humble yet endlessly adaptable item is defining the next era of foodservice innovation.

RC Show Restaurants Canada

THE FUTURE OF BREAKFAST IS HANDHELD

Breakfast Sandwich Competition
Presented by Stonefire, Egg Farmers of Canada, and Maple Leaf Foods
Wednesday, April 9 | Culinary Stage | 11:30 AM – 1:30 PM

With the breakfast sandwich cementing itself as a culinary icon, it's time to put Canada's best to the test. The RC Show 2025 Breakfast Sandwich Competition is set to be a high-energy showdown where four finalists battle to claim top honours for morning cuisine.

Participants will be tasked with crafting an innovative, flavour-packed sandwich that not only delivers on taste and presentation but also reflects the biggest trends shaping breakfast today. Hosted by Chef Marissa Leon-John, the competition will be determined by a panel of esteemed judges that includes food culturalist Ryan Hinkson, Chef Tawnya Brant and Chef Imrun Texeira. Whether it's a reinvention of a nostalgic classic or an unexpected take with bold, international influences, the final four will have the chance to showcase their talents in front of an industry audience eager for fresh ideas.

For restaurant operators, this competition isn't just about who wins a share of $5,000 in cash, prizes and bragging rights—it's a front-row seat to the future of breakfast, offering inspiration and insight into how a simple sandwich can be a business game-changer.

Scan the code to **REGISTER NOW**.

Feeding People's Love of Local Food Thanks to Canadian Egg Farmers

Over recent years, Canadians have been seeking out fresh, locally sourced foods—not only when grocery shopping but also when dining out at restaurants. In fact, according to the 2023 Survey on Consumer Perceptions of Food by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada[1], the vast majority of respondents (86 per cent) revealed they seek out locally produced food sometimes to always.

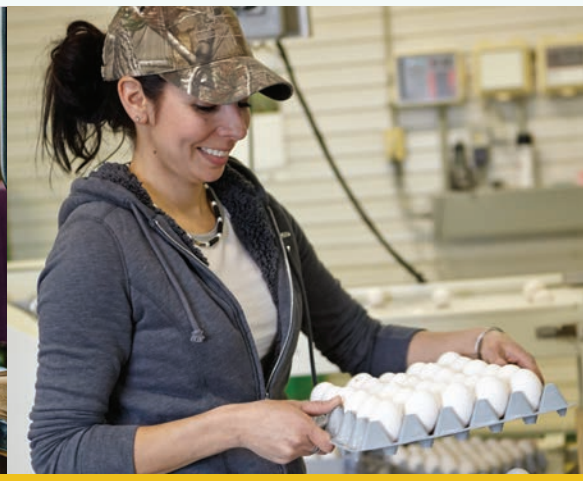
With this in mind, many talented chefs are taking strides to include regionally sourced ingredients on their menus. Chef Dale MacKay is no exception. A seasoned restaurateur, past winner of *Top Chef Canada* and chef ambassador for Egg Farmers of Canada, Chef MacKay has been championing made-in-Canada food for decades. His popular eateries in his hometown of Saskatoon and nearby Regina regularly feature dishes made with ingredients produced in Saskatchewan, such as fish, lentils and eggs—the latter of which are produced in every Canadian province, including the Northwest Territories, thanks to the hard work of more than 1,200 egg farmers. Outside the kitchen, at culinary-centric events such as Canada's Great Kitchen Party, Chef MacKay gives people a "taste" of how delicious fresh, local ingredients can be, especially Canadian eggs which stand out because of their versatility.

"Bar-none, eggs are one of the most important ingredients in my repertoire and in the culinary world. They're a staple in so many of our favourite dishes, from eggs Benedict to cakes, pasta and even soufflé. I'd also argue that there aren't many things more satisfying than a perfectly cooked sunny-side-up egg!" says Chef MacKay.

What's driving Chef MacKay's enthusiasm for homegrown food? It's the notion that "...we have to support each other to be successful long term." He comes by this notion and his appreciation for Canadian farmers honestly. "I spent a lot of my childhood on a farm and my family ran a few small businesses. I could see the importance early on of what it means to support local."



Chef Dale MacKay at Avenue Restaurant in Regina, Saskatchewan.



Canadian egg farmer, Tonya Haverkamp, at her farm in Listowel, Ontario.

And who is behind all of those made-in-Canada eggs? Canadian egg farmers like Tonya Haverkamp, that's who. Having grown up in an egg farming family in rural southwestern Ontario, the barn feels like home to Haverkamp who, like Chef MacKay, finds motivation in helping to feed her community. "There are not a lot of people who can say they help feed their neighbours," Haverkamp says proudly. "Eggs are in so many products and dishes, from simple, made-at-home meals to more sophisticated culinary creations from Canada's talented chefs. We're a small part of a big picture, and it's kind of neat to be part of it."

A lot of care goes into Canadian egg farming, and what makes Canadian eggs unique is that egg farmers like Haverkamp work together under Canada's system of supply management to produce enough eggs to meet the demand from their surrounding communities and province, helping fuel restaurant kitchens and ultimately feed people. That, and also all regulated Canadian egg farmers follow rigorous national standards to care for their hens. They must also meet strict food safety standards, assuring that made-in-Canada eggs served up to customers are safe and high-quality, as indicated by the Egg Quality Assurance™ (EQA®) certification mark on the carton.

Using local ingredients in your dishes is a powerful way to support Canadian farmers and communities. "If we [chefs and farmers] support each other, we can all do what we love!" Chef MacKay emphasized. "Cooks get to cook using amazing products, and we both get to feed our communities delicious food by working together."

[1]Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Consumer Perceptions of Food 2023, December 2023.

Visit **eggfarmers.ca** to learn more about what makes Canadian eggs special and the care that goes into egg farming in Canada.

EGG FARMERS OF CANADA

The Silent Influencer:

The Hidden Power of Tableware in Dining Design

Tableware is more than just a vessel for food—it's an integral part of the dining experience, shaping everything from aesthetics to perception. While chefs and restaurateurs obsess over ingredients, plating techniques and ambience, there's an often-overlooked element that plays a crucial role in how a meal is received: the plate itself.

To uncover the hidden influence of tableware in restaurant design, we spoke with Erwin Sohal, Director of Sales for Tableware Solutions, a Mississauga, Ontario based master importer and industry leader in sourcing exceptional ceramics, glassware and serving pieces.

Sohal doesn't just sell plates—he shapes dining experiences during tours of their impressive showroom and warehouse filled with every conceivable type of plate, vessel and cutlery set sourced from around the globe. He began his career in glassware decoration, mastering the art of branding and high-impact visuals before expanding into the broader world of tableware. Now, with over 13 years in the industry, he operates at the intersection of design, durability, and storytelling. As a trusted advisor to chefs, hoteliers, and restaurateurs, he helps them choose tableware that enhances the guest experience—elevating presentation while meeting the rigorous demands of high-volume service.



Erwin Sohal, Director of Sales, Tableware Solutions

Psychology & Performance on the Plate

When a dish arrives at the table, a guest's first impression isn't just about the food—it's about how it's framed. "A plate is a canvas for the chef," says Sohal. "But beyond aesthetics, it impacts how a guest perceives flavour, portion size and even value."

Studies in gastrophysics—the science behind the psychological effects of the combined inputs that influence the perception of a meal—have demonstrated that plate size, shape and colour can alter a diner's sensory experience. Softer, organic shapes can make a dish feel more artisanal and intimate, while angular plates add a modern, high-energy feel. Dark plates, once a major trend, tend to make vibrant food colours pop, while classic white remains the preferred choice for emphasizing purity and contrast. "Your brain processes information about a dish before you take a bite," Sohal explains. "A heavy plate, for example, makes the meal feel more substantial. A delicate, textured ceramic piece creates a sense of craft and care. These details are subtle, but they affect how guests interpret the experience."

While aesthetic drives many decisions, restaurant operators must also consider function. "A dish needs to survive more than just service," says Sohal. "It has to withstand high-volume kitchens, constant dishwashing, and the occasional drop."

This is where material selection becomes critical. Fully vitrified ceramics, such as those produced by Continental China, offer a chip-resistant structure built for durability. Meanwhile, high-end European porcelain and handcrafted stoneware bring an elevated touch, often at a premium cost. "For casual concepts, durability is often the first concern," says Sohal. "For fine dining, it's about artistry. The challenge is finding pieces that balance both."

New Technologies in Tableware

With increased demand for personalization, more restaurants are investing in custom tableware that reflects their brand ethos.



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Custom photo-printed plates are adding customization and distinction.

Advances in photo-printing technology allow high-resolution designs, logos and intricate patterns to be embedded directly onto ceramic and porcelain surfaces, a technique Sohal is really excited about.

Unlike traditional decals or surface glazing, this process fuses the image into the material during firing, ensuring longevity and resistance to wear. "This technology has completely changed what's possible for branding and personalization," explains Sohal. "A restaurant can now have plates that reflect their exact aesthetic—whether that's a subtle textured finish or a bold, statement-making design. It's also a game-changer for large hospitality brands that want consistency across multiple locations." The durability of photo-printed plates means they can withstand high-temperature dishwashing without fading, making them ideal for high-traffic establishments looking to merge artistry with function.

While traditional ceramics and glassware have long been the backbone of restaurant table settings, emerging materials are redefining durability without compromising presentation. Next-generation vitrified ceramics are leading this evolution, offering plates and bowls that are significantly lighter yet more impact-resistant than conventional porcelain. By refining the firing process and incorporating advanced clay blends, manufacturers are producing tableware that maintains the delicate, artisanal appeal of handcrafted pieces while standing up to the rigors of commercial kitchens. These innovations reduce breakage, minimize replacement costs, and improve handling for servers who need to carry multiple dishes at once. "Chefs and operators don't want to be constantly replacing plates," says Sohal. "Durability is a huge concern, especially in high-volume restaurants where dishes are moving at a fast pace. The last thing you want is to invest in beautiful tableware that chips or cracks too easily. The latest ceramics give you that high-end look with real resilience."

On the glassware side, shock-absorbing glass composites are making waves in high-volume bars and restaurants. These materials incorporate flexible yet ultra-strong elements, allowing glasses to bend slightly upon impact instead of shattering. Some brands are even utilizing borosilicate glass, the same material found in lab equipment, which offers extreme thermal resistance and break protection. For establishments where glassware replacement costs add up quickly—especially in fast-paced, high-turnover environments—this shift toward impact-resistant, ultra-lightweight materials is proving to be a game-changer.

The Evolution of Plating Trends

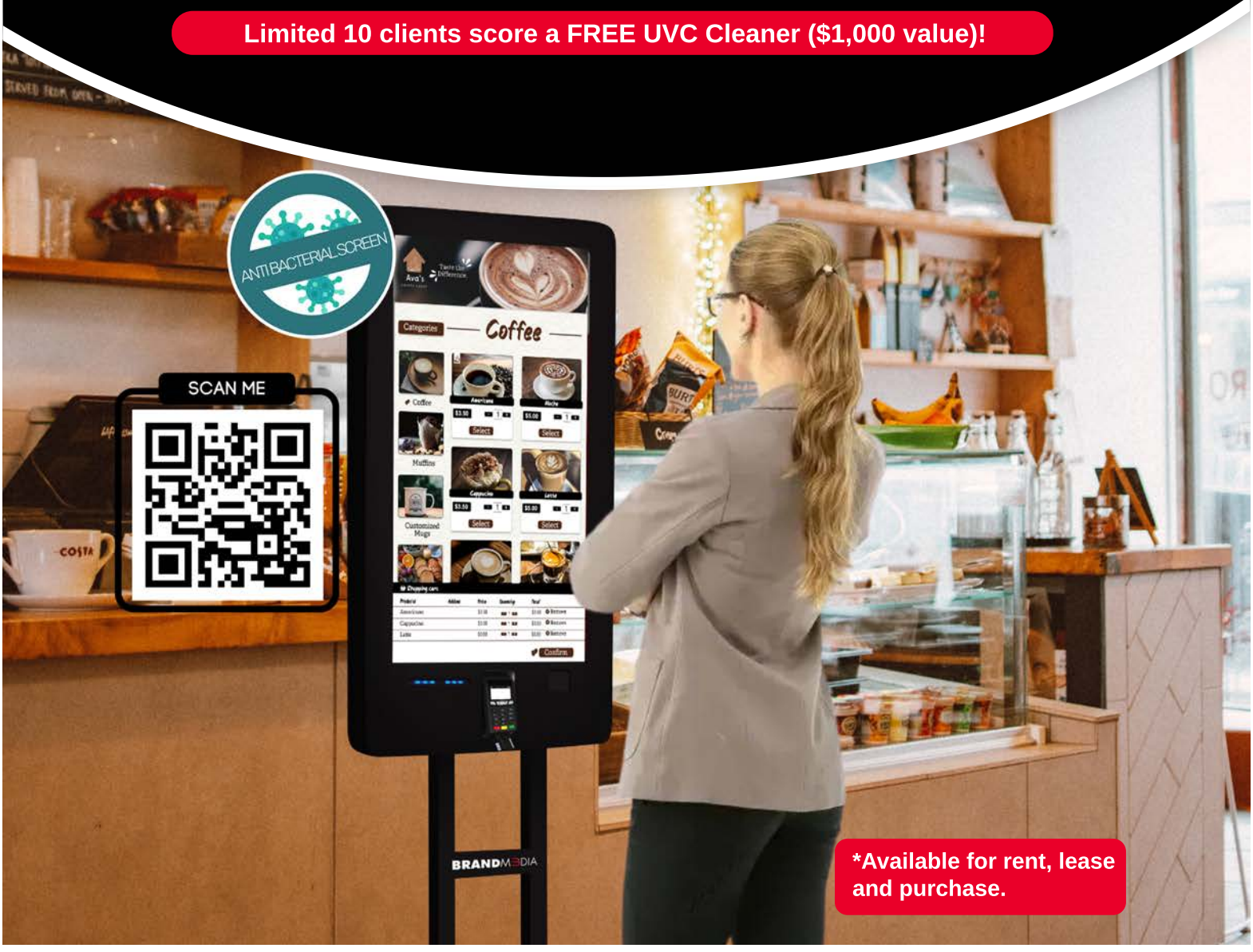
Tableware trends, like food trends, evolve alongside cultural shifts. "Minimalism

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TOP TABLEWARE TRENDS FOR 2025

1. **Handcrafted Aesthetics** – "Textures, asymmetrical edges, and handmade looks are becoming the standard as restaurants look to create more warmth and authenticity on the table."
2. **Earthy, Muted Tones** – "Terracotta, sage, and deep charcoals are replacing the stark minimalism of the past decade, giving plates a more natural, organic feel."
3. **Customization** – "Restaurants are investing in personalized plates with their branding, wallpaper patterns, or unique designs fused into the ceramic for a seamless look."
4. **Unexpected Vessels** – "Chefs are getting creative—coffee mugs for desserts, wooden boards layered with smaller dishes, even metal tins for seafood presentations."
5. **Social Media-Driven Plating** – "Presentation is now as important as taste. Plating must be visually engaging because guests are experiencing their meals through their camera lens before taking their first bite."
6. **Sustainability** – "More operators are looking for long-lasting, high-quality ceramics and alternative materials like bamboo-fibre plates to reduce their environmental footprint."



dominated for years," Sohal notes, referencing the once-ubiquitous preference for clean, white plates. "Now, we're seeing a return to warmth—textured stoneware, earthy tones, and asymmetrical shapes that mimic the feel of handcrafted pottery."

This shift aligns with the rise of experiential dining. Guests today crave sophistication and storytelling, and tableware plays a silent but essential role in that narrative. "If you're serving Turkish cuisine, your presentation should reflect that heritage," says Sohal. "The plate can reinforce the story just as much as the flavours do."

Sohal notes that chefs are increasingly using atypical vessels to surprise and delight guests, transforming the dining experience into a moment of discovery. One operator opted for a charcuterie board as a base for an elaborate entrée, layering plates and ramekins to create a visually striking tablescape. "It was unexpected," Sohal recalls, "but that element of surprise became part of their brand identity. The dish took off on social media, and now it's what they're known for. We've even had an operator use traditional Indian copper bowls for poutine. It's all about contrast. When you present something in a way diners haven't seen before, it elevates even the simplest ingredients."

Sohal has also seen an operator repurpose an oversized ceramic coffee mug as a serving dish for a decadent dessert, creating a nostalgic, playful moment for guests that got everyone talking and notes that even fine dining establishments are thinking beyond the white plate. "We've worked with Michelin-starred chefs who want bespoke serving pieces—things you wouldn't even think of as tableware," Sohal says. "One restaurant used polished river stones to serve amuse-bouches, another used a slab of reclaimed wood as a serving board for dry-aged beef."

"Chefs are artists," Sohal says, "and we give them the tools to present their best work."



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