

MENU

CANADA'S FOODSERVICE MAGAZINE

THE CONVERSATION:

A FEAST OF IDEAS: CHEF JOSÉ ANDRÉS AT RC SHOW 2025

SPOTLIGHT ON:

ENGAGEMENT + EXPERIENCE

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Dear Readers,

Welcome to our *Engagement + Experience* issue—an exploration of connections and sensory details that turn everyday hospitality interactions into lasting memories. Throughout these pages, you'll meet some of the people who craft those moments with purpose and creativity.

Summer also means Pride season, and we're proud to share a conversation with **Tash Raposo**, Program Manager of the **Rainbow Registered Program**, developed by Canada's **2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC)**, and learn how two Rainbow Registered hospitality businesses are proving that inclusion isn't just a value—it's a social and operational advantage. **You can follow this ongoing series on menumag.ca over the months to come!**

We're still riding the energy of **RC Show 2025**, a record-breaking edition packed with live competitions, standing-room-only stages, and a roster of champions you'll find in these pages. You'll also learn why **RC Show is moving to Toronto's International Centre in 2026**—a bold step that will expand the floor plan, welcome more national and international operators and suppliers, and make the experience more accessible for everyone. While you're there, savour exclusive excerpts from **Chef José Andrés'** keynote and read reflections on his message to the foodservice sector from audience members and industry leaders.

Chef Romain Avril opens up about his professional evolution, mentorship and why championing the next generation is essential to Canada's culinary future. **American Express Canada guest experience expert, Kim Kuzmak**, shares insights on how great bars and restaurants can transform everyday touchpoints into loyalty, and we raise a glass to three of Canada's 100 Best Bars—**Bar Pompette** in Toronto at No. 1, **Prophecy** in Vancouver at No. 7 and Calgary's **Missy's This That** at No. 8—digging into the experiences they deliver and philosophies that propel them.

We take a deep dive into **sensory design with Tara Witt** of Tru Contract Interiors, and members of the passionate team behind **La Tablée des Chefs' Kitchen Brigades** show us how teaching high school students to cook is sowing seeds of leadership, resilience and a brighter, more food-literate future.

Finally, get all the details and mark your calendar for **One Table, Restaurants Canada's new signature gathering in Toronto on September 16, 2025**. The evening will debut insights from ***Foodservice Facts 2025***, honour the winners of the **Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence**, and dive into a lively and insightful **panel discussion with the Awards of Excellence winners** on the most pressing issues facing our industry. I hope to see you there for an incredible evening of connection, conversation and artful hospitality!



Kelly Higginson
President & CEO

Summer 2025
Volume 10 Number 3

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

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10.3

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Cover Photo by Josh Telles

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THE PASS

ONE TABLE

AN EVENING OF **CONNECTION, COLLABORATION & CELEBRATION.**



ONE TABLE is a bold new gathering from Restaurants Canada—where industry leaders, innovators, and changemakers come together to connect, collaborate, and celebrate.

Set against the backdrop of an unforgettable evening, guests will enjoy thought-provoking conversation, meaningful networking, and a hospitality experience designed to fuel ideas and forge partnerships. The night includes a special preview of Foodservice Facts 2025—Restaurants Canada's flagship foodservice research report—and honours the exceptional individuals and organizations shaping our sector through the Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence.

Following the awards presentation, this year's winners will take the stage for a candid panel discussion, sharing their insights on the biggest challenges—and boldest opportunities—facing Canadian hospitality today.

One Table is more than a dinner. It's a catalyst for connection—and a shared commitment to advancing the future of foodservice and hospitality in Canada.

Learn more and register at:

Your support fuels the work Restaurants Canada does year-round to advocate for our industry, deliver critical research, and create opportunities for connection and growth.

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LES GRANDES TABLÉES IS BACK THIS FALL

La Tablée des Chefs



Les Grandes Tablées is La Tablée des Chefs' signature fundraising event—a celebration of food, flavour, and community. This unforgettable evening invites the business community to savour a gourmet meal crafted by brigades of renowned chefs, each dish inspired by their world and culinary influences.

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Toronto | Tuesday, November 18, 2025
The Westin Harbor Castle, Toronto, Ontario

Montreal | Monday, November 24, 2025
Montreal Convention Centre, Montreal, Quebec

Learn more and reserve your seat at: tableedeschefs.org/en/les-grandes-tablees/

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Your ticket includes breakfast, lunch, and a lively networking reception, plus a front-row seat at the CAC 2025 Awards celebrating coffee industry excellence.

Learn more and purchase tickets at: coffeeassoc.com/annual-conference/

RESTAURANTS CANADA WEBINARS

REGISTER NOW: Service with Security: Navigating Fraud Trends in the Restaurant Industry | **July 23, 2025 | 1:00PM EDT**

Presented by Moneris, a Restaurants Canada Preferred Partner

In today's rapidly evolving restaurant landscape, fraud continues to pose a significant risk to both operational integrity and customer trust. Stay up to date and in the know on anti-fraud protocols and procedures will help you safeguard your business and stay ahead of emerging threats.

WATCH ON DEMAND: Mismanaging Tips Can Cost You Over $30K for Every $1M in Sales – PART 2

Presented by Atlas, a Restaurants Canada Preferred Partner

Back by popular demand – join Afshin Mousavian, Co-Founder of Atlas and James Rhodes, Principal Lawyer of Taxation Lawyers, for a practical look at how automated tip management is transforming the industry. If you missed PART 1, don't worry — this session will catch you up and move the conversation forward with actionable solutions.

Scan the code to register or watch on demand:

THE VOICE OF FOODSERVICE, AMPLIFIED.

The *MENU Unplugged Podcast* is back with a new format, new hosts, and fresh momentum.

The *MENU Unplugged Podcast* has returned—with new purpose, edge and relevance.

Restaurants Canada relaunched the podcast in early June in collaboration with hospitality consulting firm Benchmark Sixty, founded by Jim Taylor, who now co-hosts the show with Derek Smith, founder of Canopy Metrics.



MENU UNPLUGGED PODCAST HOSTS

"We're always evolving how we show up for our members and the broader foodservice community," says Tracy Macgregor, Restaurants Canada's Chief Operating Officer. "The new approach to the MENU Unplugged podcast is part of a larger strategy to meet operators where they are—offering content that's not only timely and relevant, but also accessible and action-oriented. Whether you're an independent restaurateur, a multi-unit leader, or a supplier navigating the same economic headwinds, we want this podcast to be a space where real conversations happen. It's about amplifying diverse voices, surfacing practical insights, and building a deeper sense of connection across our industry."

Taylor and Smith bring complementary expertise to the mic, aiming to elevate conversations that matter to Canada's foodservice operators with a tone that's candid, constructive, and Canada-centric. Taylor is a seasoned operator, co-owner of Vancouver's Le Crocodile, and a respected consultant known for surfacing real-world insights. Smith, an industry veteran turned data analyst, translates complex metrics into actionable strategies that restaurateurs can use. Their shared goal: to cut through the noise and deliver content that offers operators clarity, direction, and support.

JIM TAYLOR
Founder, Benchmark Sixty

DEREK SMITH
Founder, Canopy Metrics

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Like many great collabs, Taylor's journey to the host's chair was a happy accident borne out of a casual conversation with Restaurants Canada President and CEO, Kelly Higginson. "We were chatting about the podcast, and I just said, 'Would you like us to host for you?'" he recalls. "The industry doesn't need more top 100 lists. It needs a mirror—and a microphone. We want to make sure there's a really good balance of celebrating the positive that's happening in the industry... and deep discussion about real challenges."

The new podcast dropped in early June with a candid, "state-of-the-foodservice-nation" conversation featuring Kelly Higginson. The launch package also included on-site recordings from RC Show 2025 with Debbie Shing, founder of boutique wine agency Quvé, WSET educator, and co-founder of Vinequity; Chef Joel Gray and Hannah Harradine of Down Home Restaurant, (a Michelin-recommended spot in Ontario's Grey Bruce region), and David Hopkins, President of The Fifteen Group, restaurant profit maximalization experts.



"WE KNOW WHAT KEEPS OPERATORS UP AT NIGHT. WE WANT EACH LISTENER TO WALK AWAY WITH SOMETHING THEY CAN TRY—TOMORROW—IN THEIR BUSINESS."

- DEREK SMITH

Taylor and Smith work closely with Restaurants Canada's content team to source and shape industry stories through a structure inspired by MENU magazine—but delivered with the immediacy and intimacy of audio. Episodes often conclude with Taylor's signature closer: "If I'm an independent operator, how do I apply what you just said in my business?" That spirit of practicality guides each episode, ensuring that whether the guest is a multinational CEO or a first-time café owner, listeners leave with something they can actually use.

"We know what keeps operators up at night," says Smith. "We want each listener to walk away with something they can try—tomorrow—in their business. Restaurants Canada is as big as it gets, and what excites me most about *MENU Unplugged* is the opportunity to have Canadian conversations about Canadian issues—with operators who truly understand this market."

The hosts are especially passionate about supporting independent operators—the backbone of Canada's foodservice economy. "The majority of restaurants in Canada are small businesses without internal analysts or big marketing teams," Smith notes. "They're doing their own scheduling, ordering, and P&Ls. They deserve content made for them."

Unlike the overly scripted conversations common to industry podcasts, MENU Unplugged keeps it real. Smith's own background helps keep the tone accessible. A former server turned analyst, he co-founded a "Profit Committee" during his time at Cactus Club that analyzed everything from labour hours to janitorial fees, driving measurable margin gains. Today, he works with operators across Canada to help them make sense of their data—and their opportunities. "Because we're used to working with restaurants directly, we can keep it casual but impactful," says Smith. "You're not going to need a dictionary or an MBA to follow along. We break down technical terms and avoid jargon so that even operators with limited time and resources can tune in and benefit."

While the show's guests will range from independent chefs and chain executives to economists and sustainability leaders, every conversation is rooted in what operators need right now: clarity, confidence, and connection. "We're focused on real talk for real operators," says Taylor. "And part of that is talking about wins—not just challenges. There's still a lot of innovation and optimism out there."

The 2025 lineup features powerhouse guests like Sash Simpson, Mo Jessa, and Meeru Dhalwala, diving into essential topics such as labour cost strategies, guest experience, economic forecasting, and leadership development. The podcast will also spotlight intersectional stories shaping the future of hospitality—from women in foodservice to Indigenous culinary leadership.

"The industry's tough, but you don't have to go it alone," says Smith. "This podcast is about peer-to-peer mentorship—real operators sharing what works, what doesn't, and what's next."

"WE'RE FOCUSED ON REAL TALK FOR REAL OPERATORS, AND PART OF THAT IS TALKING ABOUT WINS—NOT JUST CHALLENGES. THERE'S STILL A LOT OF INNOVATION AND OPTIMISM OUT THERE..."

- JIM TAYLOR



KEEP YOUR EARS TO THE GROUND

Streaming now on Spotify, MENU Unplugged is more than a podcast—it's a growing community of operators navigating challenges together and celebrating what makes this industry worth fighting for.

GET:

Hear from the frontlines of Canadian foodservice.
Gain direct access to unfiltered conversations with operators, leaders, and innovators across the country—sharing what's working, what's changing, and what's coming next.

Walk away with ideas you can use.
Each episode is designed to deliver practical, actionable insights —whether it's a new strategy, a shift in perspective, or a better way to navigate daily challenges.

Join a conversation that reflects your reality.
Hear candid, relatable conversation grounded in the real experiences of Canadian operators, experts and changemakers.

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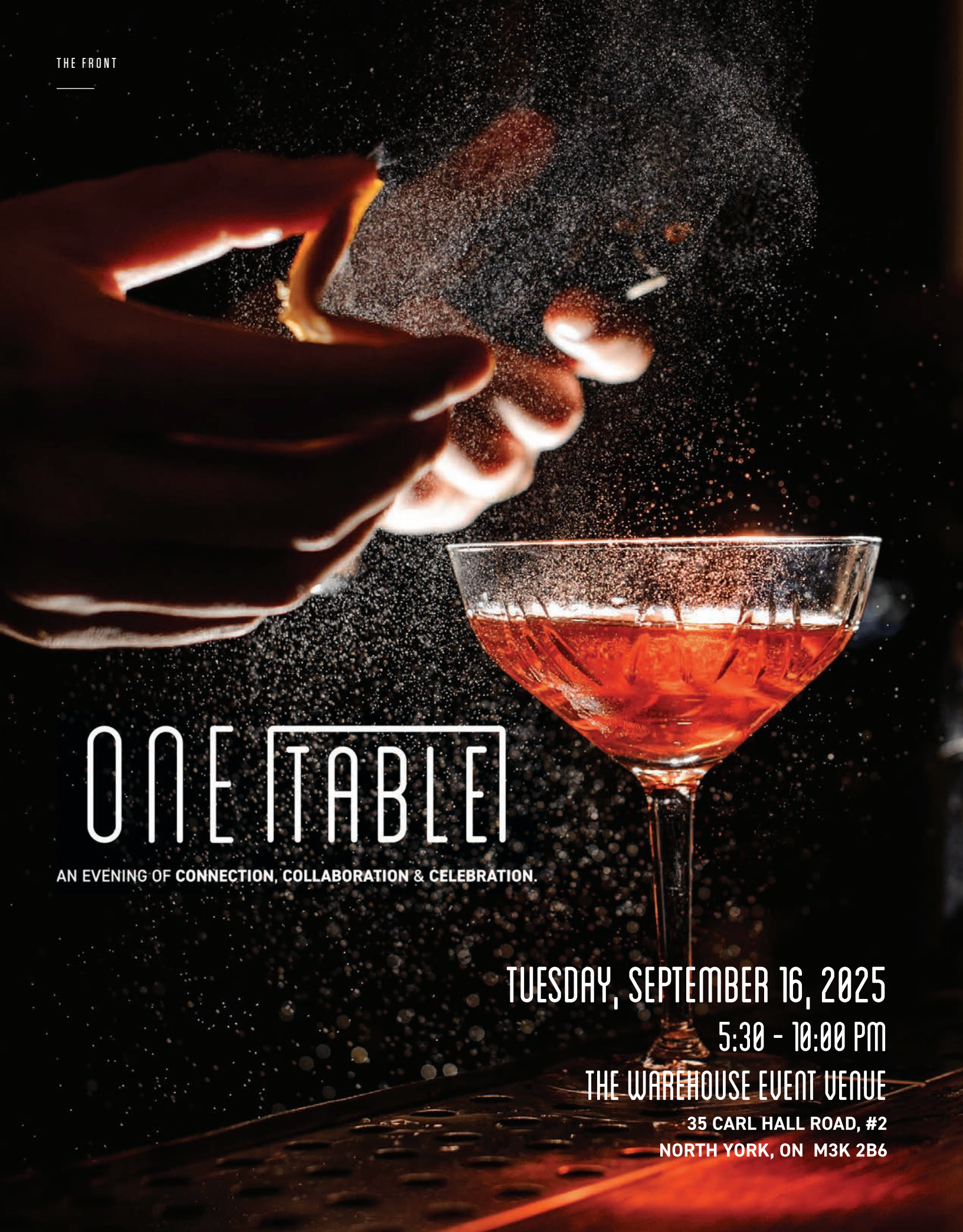
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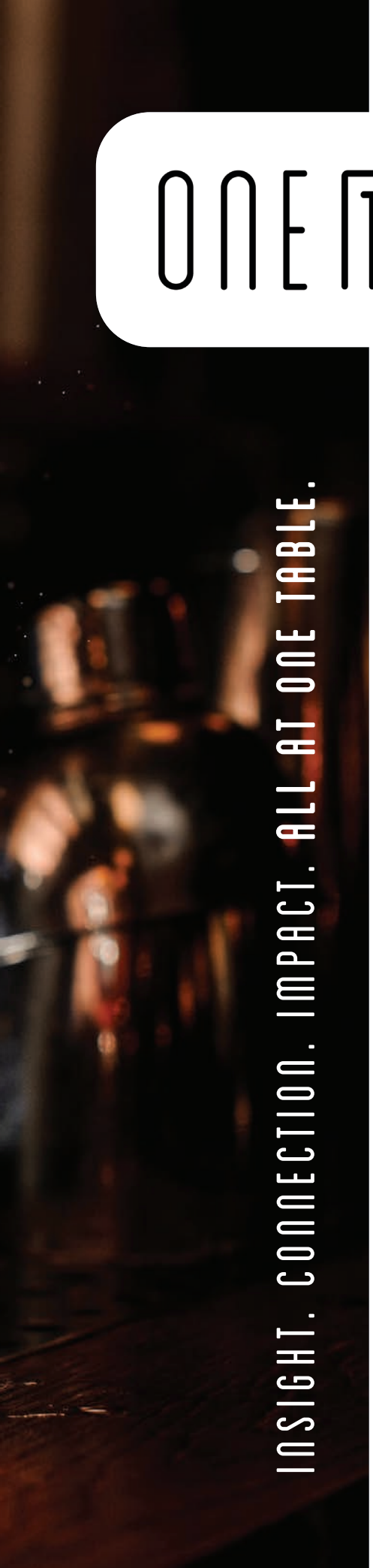
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ONE TABLE

Crucial conversations about the foodservice industry are happening everywhere—but not in the same room.

That's why Restaurants Canada created One Table.

In an industry that's been buffeted by accelerating change, unprecedented innovation, and a fury of headwinds, genuine dialogue and purposeful connection can feel like luxuries. But as the pace of change increases, Restaurants Canada believes creating moments and spaces for leaders and thinkers to connect are necessities, and One Table is their inspired solution to addressing challenges and harnessing the potential of the moment.

Debuting this fall at The Warehouse, a vibrant venue that fuses industrial elegance with creative energy in Toronto's historic Downsview Park, One Table aims to disrupt the typical gala format. Forget stuffy speeches, tepid plates and predictable programs—this night is about sparking meaningful conversations, transformative ideas, and new collaborations to drive Canada's foodservice and hospitality sector forward.

"This is a moment of profound transition—not just in the economics of our industry, but in its values, its structures, its sense of purpose," says Kelly Higginson, President and CEO of Restaurants Canada. "Crucial conversations about our industry are happening everywhere, but not in the same room. That's why we created One Table to bring our leaders, visionaries and changemakers together to share the powerful ideas and forge new connections to help move foodservice and hospitality forward."

Hosted by acclaimed broadcaster Pay Chen, the evening's agenda balances structure with spontaneity. Following an elevated networking event, guests will receive **early access to the 2025 edition of *Foodservice Facts***, Restaurants Canada's flagship industry economic forecast and research report, equipping attendees with data and analysis to help inform bold decision-making. Chris Elliott, Restaurants Canada's Chief Economist & Vice President, Research, and Richard Alexander, Executive Vice President, Government Relations & Public Affairs will present the opportunities and strategies behind the numbers in the influential, must-read report.

The winners of the 2025 **Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence** will be announced and recognized on stage, followed by a special session. These changemakers, innovators, and industry-defining leaders will participate in an unfiltered **Awards of Excellence panel** discussion, diving deep into the industry's toughest challenges and greatest opportunities. Expect insights that inspire, ideas that disrupt, and collaborations that catalyze real change.

The dress code is cocktail attire—with a creative twist. Showcase your distinctive style and bring the vibrant energy and individuality Canada's hospitality industry is celebrated for. Think little black dress with an edible headpiece or a jacket with a creative, garnish-inspired pocket square.

One Table is more than an event—it's your chance to sit down at the epicenter of industry innovation. Don't miss the conversation that's shaping tomorrow's hospitality.

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THE INTERVIEW
~WITH~
CHEF ROMAIN AVRIL

Few chefs can claim to have stepped into a professional kitchen at 13. Fewer still can say they spent the next two decades immersed in the pursuit of Michelin stars, executive titles, and ultimately, restaurant ownership. Chef Romain Avril's career has been nothing short of extraordinary—not just for how early it began, but for how boldly it's evolved.

A gifted young chef who rose through the ranks with rare speed, Avril has long been celebrated for his technical precision and creative finesse. But it's the evolution of his leadership—and his growing commitment to lifting others up—that truly defines his influence today. Disillusioned by the systemic inequities and outdated power structures he encountered in fine dining, Avril stepped away from the traditional restaurant model just before the pandemic. In its place, he's built a new kind of career—one that fuses entrepreneurship, education, and advocacy.

From the collapse of his own restaurant venture during COVID to a reimagined business grounded in private dining, consulting, and media, Avril has forged a path that honours both his craft and his conscience. Central to that journey is a deep dedication to the next generation. Whether he's in a classroom, on set, or mentoring young chefs in the kitchen, Avril is focused on sharing what he's learned—about success, failure, reinvention, and the values that matter most.

In this conversation, he reflects on the lessons of an early start, the urgency of generational change, and why building a better kitchen starts with the people coming up next.



Photo by Igor M Aldomar

MM You've really transformed the focus of your career over the past few years. Had you already been exploring consulting and private chef work before the pandemic—and COVID simply accelerated that shift? Or was it more of a direct response to what happened during that time?

Romain Avril: *Absolutely a consequence. I think for a lot of people, COVID got us out of our regular shell and showed us a world that was very different. I mean, I started culinary school at 13, so I didn't really have a full teenage experience or youth. I was always in the kitchen. Don't get me wrong—it's not a sad story. I'm really happy with where I am and how I grew. It allowed me to get to higher positions much younger.*

That said, I think I would have appreciated having more time to think about other options—other ways of being in the kitchen and in hospitality. COVID gave me that pause for the first time in 20 years. It let me reflect on my life, my health, my mental health, and my physical health. I made a lot of changes in both those areas, which I don't think I would've done if I were still stuck in that grind—getting up in the morning, going to the kitchen, cooking, going home, repeat.

So yes—one million percent—it was the breaking point that changed everything in my career and my life.

MM You're originally from France, where the perception of chefs and the culinary arts is quite different. What was it like when you came to Canada? What stood out to you in terms of how chefs are regarded in Europe versus here?

RA: *Night and day. I mean, that's the best way to describe it. I almost packed my bags after a couple of months. I felt like a coward for even thinking that—but maybe it was just too much. I mean, when I moved here, I was 25. I already had 12 years of cooking under my belt—12 years of hard labour, of being appreciated and recognized.*

I came to Canada in 2010 and walked into my first kitchen here and thought, "Oh my God, it's like starting over." There was just such a world of difference, and I didn't know if I wanted to do that—to start from scratch again. In Toronto especially, I felt like there was no real connection between guests and food. People cared more about the look of the restaurant, about trying new things—they didn't care about the food itself. You could serve them an overcooked steak with fries, and they'd be happy.

One of my first jobs was at Colborne Lane, where we were doing molecular gastronomy—highly technical, tweezered-out plates—because that's all I knew. But we had to shut down because people didn't understand what we were serving. And I honestly thought, maybe this country isn't for me. But instead of quitting and going back to what was familiar, I decided to stay, thinking I might be able to help shape a different kind of industry here.

It wasn't about me trying to change the world—it was more like, "Let's see how this evolves." And 15 years later, the industry and the relationship between people and food have changed tremendously. I'm really glad I stuck around. People here are valuing food in a much deeper way than when I first arrived.

So yes—there was definitely a big difference. But also, the world has changed. And outside of hospitality, just in terms of culture and geography, it was good for me to learn that there isn't just one right way. There are many ways—and they all deserve to be embraced and appreciated equally.

MM You've talked so much about elevating Canadian culinary talent on the world stage. As an immigrant and top chef, what do you wish the global food community understood about what Canada has to offer?

RA: *We're in a moment not unlike where Denmark was 15 years ago. Back then, people underestimated Nordic cuisine. Then restaurants like Noma put it on the map—and suddenly everyone was paying attention to the ingredients, the technique, the philosophy. Canada has that same potential. Our geography, our climate, even our culinary DNA—it's all here. But we're still waiting for the world to recognize it.*

I was recently blown away by a tasting menu at Joni, in Toronto. The chef, Jonathan Williams, created a meal that perfectly embodied what modern Canadian cuisine could be: precise, ingredient-driven, balanced, expressive. It was refined without being showy. If that restaurant were in Copenhagen or Tokyo, it would already have a Michelin star or two.



Photo by Chef Romain Avril

But Canadian fine dining still doesn't always get the recognition it deserves—especially when it's rooted in Canadian identity. Restaurants that proudly showcase Canadian ingredients and culture often go unnoticed, especially if they aren't part of the traditional fine dining mould.

And we need to change that. Canada has world-class lamb, beef, wild game, fish, berries—you name it. In some ways, we have the land and resources to be one of the most sustainable food cultures on the planet. But we need to invest in showcasing it, both at home and internationally.

Because when our own chefs don't feel recognized, they leave. They go to Europe, Asia, the U.S. We lose our best talent. But if we can celebrate what makes Canadian food unique—and tell that story with pride—then we can build an ecosystem that nourishes talent, keeps it here, and helps it thrive.

MM Let's talk a bit about the lingering misconceptions around culinary and hospitality careers. You teach, you mentor—you've supported a great many young chefs. Based on your experience, especially coming from France where

the culinary arts are often held in higher regard, what are you hearing from young people today? What are the myths or perceptions that hold them back from fully pursuing careers in this industry?

RA: *The two biggest misconceptions I still hear are about the long hours and the low pay—and unfortunately, they're often true. I've spent a lot of time thinking about how we can shift that. In Europe, especially in France, change has come through government intervention. Chefs were required to limit staff to 35–38 hours a week, so they restructured schedules—working longer days over fewer shifts. It wasn't perfect, but it was a step in the right direction.*

Here in Toronto, the cost of living makes it incredibly hard for people in hospitality to get by—especially when wages haven't kept pace. I've seen firsthand how hard it is to pay people fairly and still keep the business afloat.

In my view, the true root of the problem is the cost of rent. If operators had more manageable overhead, they could invest in higher wages and better staffing. I've run the numbers—what really puts pressure on restaurants isn't the food or labour costs, it's the rent. Until that changes, it's difficult to make the kind of improvements we need to retain talent and build more sustainable careers in hospitality, especially in large cities.

Are these ideas partly what first drew you to teaching?

RA: *I come from a family of teachers—my mother and brother both teach—so education has always been a big part of my values, even though I wasn't exactly a model student. I was the kind of kid who got bored easily, disrupted class, and cracked jokes. But I still loved learning, especially once I got into culinary school. Later, I even went back for management training and university courses. So while I wasn't the best classmate, I deeply respected the value of education.*

That's why it bothers me when I see people online saying things like, "School is useless—I didn't learn anything." You absolutely can learn, and what's most important isn't just the cooking—it's everything else. In France, our culinary schools were rigorous. We studied geography, math, economics—things that have nothing to do with cooking, until suddenly they do. When you become a chef or run a kitchen, you need those skills. You're dealing with formulas, inventory, costing, staffing—things that aren't taught when you're just peeling potatoes at 15.

> "Our geography, our climate, even our culinary DNA—it's all here. But we're still waiting for the world to recognize it."

Why do you believe accessible education is so critical to the future of the hospitality industry?

RA: *Here in Canada, I think we're still catching up. I often hear from mentees who are already in leadership roles but don't know how to build a cost sheet or manage inventory—because they never learned it in school. That gap between school and the reality of the industry is something we really need to close. We should be preparing students not just to cook, but to lead, to run a business, to thrive in the real world of hospitality. Teaching has become a passion of mine. It's not about the money—it's something I do for the joy of it. The feedback I get tells me my approach is different—I'm not rigid, and I try to go beyond the curriculum to bring real-world context. That's what we need more of: not just teaching what's on the page but preparing people for what it's really like out there. And we also need to ensure the industry is ready to receive them. The better we align education with reality, the stronger our sector will be.*

Alongside teaching, you've also leaned into competition, media, and social platforms. These are areas many chefs are exploring more and more—especially when balancing multiple career paths. How do those experiences fit into your own journey, and how do they help emerging talent break through?

RA: *For me, those experiences have been essential. I did my first cooking competition at 15 or 16. It's not for everyone, and that's okay, but I think everyone should try it at least once. I was a shy kid, especially in the kitchen, and competing really helped me come out of my shell. It gave me confidence and pushed me to grow into a leader.*

But competition shouldn't be about ego. It's not about being "the best"—that means nothing to me. It's about being better than you were yesterday. If more people approached it that way, the industry would be less ego-driven and more collaborative. That mindset—of continuous self-improvement—is something I try to pass on.

Competitions can also shine a light on untapped talent. I'm currently involved with Bocuse d'Or Canada, which is about showing the world that Canadian chefs are a force. We've had incredible candidates making it to the global top 10, and that kind of recognition matters—not just for the individuals, but for the national culinary identity.

Some of the most talented chefs in the world will never be seen, simply because there's no spotlight on them. Media visibility can help create those opportunities—whether it's a career breakthrough, a job offer, or simply the chance to be recognized. And I've seen the impact firsthand. In England, I once competed in a year-and-a-half-long program where 12 sous chefs were selected from across 50 hotels. We met regularly, learned about local farming, business, and cooking—and the winner was promised their own hotel. It was intense and incredibly motivating. I was leading the competition, but chose to move to Canada before it wrapped. They weren't thrilled with me—but I have no regrets.

Competitions like that can unlock potential and offer real growth for people who might otherwise go unnoticed. That's also how I lead. I've never been the type to hide recipes or hold back knowledge. I want my team to know everything—because when they succeed, we all succeed. I never understood the idea

of hoarding information. I'd rather come in at 9 a.m. and have a well-oiled kitchen than hide a technique and make everyone's life harder.

MM You work closely with emerging talent. What should restaurant operators understand about this next generation—and how can they better prepare to welcome them into the workplace?

***RA:** That's a great question, and honestly, I'm still figuring it out myself. There's a real generational gap right now—20 or even 30 years between the people who own restaurants and those just entering the workforce. And the codes, the communication styles, even the values are different. As someone in my late 30s, I already feel a disconnect when I return to my old culinary school each year to speak with students. The first few times, they were curious about my work. Now, the focus is more on social media—"Can I get a photo with you?"—and less about the craft itself.*

But that's not a criticism. It just means we need to adapt. The best thing operators can do is focus on communication. One-on-one check-ins. Saying hello and goodbye. Asking how someone's day is going. We need to treat staff as individuals, not as a single group. You might have a 17-year-old, a 30-year-old, and a 50-year-old all on the same team. They'll each bring different expectations and communication styles. So don't treat them the same. Meet them where they are.

The more we personalize our approach, the better our kitchens will function—and the more successful we'll be at bridging that generational gap.

MM As a chef and a leader, what would you say are your most deeply held values—and how do you instill those in your staff and students?

***RA:** My values in the kitchen are the same ones I live by outside of it. I don't think we should check our principles at the door when we come to work. I've heard too many times, "He's a great guy, but in the kitchen—watch out." That's not okay. You shouldn't be two different people. If you're respectful at home, be respectful at work.*

I try to lead by example. I keep my private life fairly private, even on social media, but my approach is consistent. I also believe strongly in respecting the country I live in. I'm an immigrant, so it's important to me not to walk into a kitchen and say, "Well, this is how we did it in France." Instead, I adapt to my surroundings and make sure my team feels comfortable and safe.



Photo by Chef Romain Avril

I grew up in a socialist family, so fairness and equality are at the core of everything I do. That means making space for everyone—regardless of gender or background. My kitchens have always been close to 50/50 in terms of gender, and that's not by design, it's just what happens when you hire based on merit and create an inclusive culture. Same goes for race and background. If you're good, you're good—end of story.

When I was younger, I saw how toxic and discriminatory kitchens could be. I've had to fire incredibly talented staff because they crossed a line with a female colleague. I won't tolerate that. Kitchens need to be safe spaces. If something happens, people need to know they'll be heard, and that we'll take action. That's non-negotiable. And I know this might sound idealistic, but I really believe it's possible. And it's why I speak up—especially to the next generation of white male chefs. We need to model a different kind of leadership. If I can leave behind even a small shift in mindset—that it's not about ego or dominance, but about integrity and respect—I'll be happy with that legacy.

MM Was there a moment early in your career where a mentor really shaped how you show up for younger chefs today?

***RA:** Honestly, I didn't really have a mentor. I have one now—in the cannabis culinary space, where I'm still learning—but earlier in my career, no. I had chefs who praised me constantly, and at the time it felt great. But looking back, it created an inflated sense of ego. I was being told I was the best student, the best cook, the best everything—and that's dangerous. It made me arrogant. I've since learned that the better message is: "You've got potential, and if you keep working, you'll go far."*

That's how I try to mentor now. I want to help young chefs avoid the mistakes I made. I know I'm midway through my career—and I don't want to take up space forever. There are people in this industry who are holding on to the spotlight for too long. I want to pass the mic. I'm happy to be in the wings, to support the next generation and help them shine.

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People *Perspectives*

MANIFESTING CULTURE TO BUILD TOMORROW'S HOSPITALITY LEADERS

BY VAL UPFOLD, PRINCIPAL, VAL UPFOLD INC.



I've been in the hospitality industry long enough to watch the cycle repeat: panic over staffing shortages, a scramble to recruit, and the inevitable turnover that comes from treating retention like an afterthought. Lately, I hear the same refrain from operators across Canada: "We're hiring—but we can't seem to find the right people." The job boards are flooded with resumes, but most applicants aren't sticking. And those with real potential? They're often gone before they've had a chance to grow.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: our biggest workforce issue isn't recruitment. It's retention. And perks aren't going to fix it. If you want people to stay, you have to give them something worth staying for.

The industry loves to talk about culture—which is great—but if we don't back it up with real action, it's just chatter. I'm not talking about staff outings, trust falls or well-crafted mission statements. I'm talking about a living, breathing work environment that makes people feel seen, supported, and proud of what they do.

For too long, the hospitality industry has been saddled with a reputation for offering jobs, not careers—a narrative rooted in outdated ideas about long hours, low pay and limited opportunities to advance. But that perception belies the truth of a dynamic and vibrant industry rich with unique career opportunities few other sectors can match—especially for those with ambition, creativity, and a passion for people. It's one of the rare

fields where talent and tenacity can outpace traditional credentials, enabling rapid career growth from entry-level to leadership. It provides a dynamic environment where entrepreneurial thinking is rewarded, whether by climbing the ranks within a global brand or launching a business of your own. The industry also opens doors to international mobility, diverse specializations—from operations to events, culinary arts to technology—and the chance to shape guest experiences in meaningful, memorable ways. Above all, hospitality is a people-first profession that empowers individuals to lead teams, build communities, and drive cultural and economic impact.

If hospitality is to retain the talent it desperately needs, industry leaders must take responsibility for rewriting the story. That means more than recruitment campaigns or policy changes—it starts with modelling the belief in the long-term value of sector careers, beginning with their own. When leaders openly invest in people, prioritize mentorship, and demonstrate that success in hospitality is not the exception but the expectation, they create a culture that attracts—and keeps—the next generation of passionate professionals.



> “At the heart of retention is one word: belonging. When people feel part of something real—when they’re seen, respected, and part of a clear purpose—they stay. They show up for each other. They go the extra mile. But when culture is unclear, and the business and roles within it feel transactional, all the perks in the world won’t keep them.



If you’re serious about keeping good people, start here.

1. CREATE CLARITY—AND STICK TO IT

When I consult for restaurant groups, I always ask about training. Nine times out of ten, what I find is chaos disguised as flexibility. Schedules are vague. Expectations are unclear. Advancement is talked about but never clearly mapped out. And the impact is predictable: good people burn out, disengage, or leave for something more structured.



What today’s workforce—especially Gen Z—wants isn’t platitudes and perks. It’s clarity. The younger generation craves structure, not because they lack initiative, but because the rest of the world is so noisy and uncertain. In an environment that’s constantly in motion, clarity is a form of psychological safety.

That means documenting your values, defining what success looks like, and outlining a path forward. If someone wants to move from host to manager, do they know what it takes? Do they know when the opportunity might arise? Or are they stuck performing the right moves and hoping you’ll “see their potential” before they give up or burn out?

You don’t need a corporate HR team to put clarity into practice. You just need to be clear, consistent and honest.

2. BE THE CULTURE YOU KEEP TALKING ABOUT

Culture isn’t defined by your décor, your menu, or the clever tagline on your website. It lives in the energy of your team during the Friday night rush. It shows up in how you communicate, how you respond when someone calls in sick, and how you handle mistakes. Culture is built through everyday behaviours that quietly say, “You matter here.” That’s not just culture—that’s leadership.

If you’re constantly frazzled, reacting to fires, and just skating by, you’re not just surviving—you’re shaping a culture of disengagement. Energy is contagious, and inconsistency sends the wrong kind of signal.

The strongest leaders I've worked with rarely need to talk about culture. They live it. They model the standards they expect. They take their role seriously. They communicate clearly. They celebrate the small wins. And above all, they show their team what it looks like to lead with pride—even in the chaos of service.

> "This isn't about chasing the next perfect hire. It's about cultivating a team that's proud of what they're building together and can't imagine working anywhere else.



3. MENTORSHIP ISN'T A LUXURY—IT'S A LEVER

The word mentorship can feel intimidating, conjuring up ideas of formal programs, outside consultants, or hours of structured one-on-ones. But in restaurants, real mentorship often happens in the flow of service: trusting someone with a new task, asking their opinion, or inviting them to learn something new. These small moments build confidence, capability and connection.

At its core, mentorship is about spotting potential early and acting on it. When a server is invited to shadow a manager or a line cook is asked to train a new teammate, it's not just delegation—it's a signal: We see you. We believe in you. You matter here. These gestures build a sense of progress, one of the most powerful motivators at work. And if hospitality is truly about people, then nurturing our teams must be just as intentional as caring for our guests.

4. DON'T CONFUSE PAY WITH *VALUE*

Compensation matters, but it's not the whole story. I've seen operators offer above-market wages and still struggle to keep staff. I've also seen restaurants where the pay is just "okay," but turnover is low, and loyalty runs deep. The difference? Culture.

Employees tend to stay longer where they feel like part of something. Where they're treated as people, not just labour. Where the shift feels purposeful—not like a grind. Places like Gusto, Terroni, or The Keg are known for their high retention. They haven't nailed culture by accident; they've built it intentionally. It's not flawless, but it's consistent. And people stay not for the paycheque, but for how they *feel*: seen, valued, and part of the team. The biggest mistake operators make is assuming retention can be bought. But belonging doesn't show up on a pay stub.

5. ADAPT OR BE LEFT BEHIND

Hospitality never stands still. There's always a fire to put out, a shift to fill, a delivery that's late. In the chaos, it's easy to slip into survival mode. But constant reaction leaves no room for momentum, and momentum is what fuels culture, development and retention.

Great leaders don't just put out fires—they build fireproof systems. They stay curious, revisit what's working, and adjust when feedback shifts. They recognize that different generations, backgrounds and personalities are motivated in different ways, and they lead accordingly, recognizing that adaptability is the engine of a successful and well-staffed hospitality workplace.



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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The Profit Potential of Social Dining

Canadian diners are going out to restaurants for more than just meals – they're looking for connection. According to Circana's **Future of™ Foodservice** Consumer Survey, the top reason consumers enjoy going to restaurants is spending time with family and friends. Whether it's couples connecting, brunch with friends, birthday dinners, or team celebrations, foodservice has always been an environment for socializing.



When Canadians go out for social or connection visits, they tend to spend more. According to Circana's CREST® data, social visits result, on average, in a **24-33% higher check size per guest** depending on the segment. These visits also **average one more item per guest,** particularly appetizers and beverages, especially alcohol.

24% to 33%
higher check size per guest

Guests are also less sensitive to price when dining in groups. When guests are with friends or loved ones, they focus more on the experience rather than the cost. **Deal rates for social visits are 26%, compared with 30% for total visits.** The deals for social gatherings also tend to be standard combos or daily specials, rather than coupons.

Despite financial benefits, social dining often fails to drive repeat business. According to CREST®, motivators for social visits include "special occasion/holiday," "wanted a different/ new place," and "recommendations".

How can operators turn group visits into repeat visits, beyond providing a great meal or ambiance?

Get personal with a custom-made dessert for special occasions or send thank you notes to group bookings.

Send bounce-back coupons to groups – bonus points if the deals are tailored to their order.

Encourage sharing on socials with brand-specific hashtags and Instagram-worthy menu options to drive visibility.

Offer group dining packages that loyal customers can give their friends or consider for next time.

Social dining boosts spend but comes with the challenge of converting these occasions into consistent brand loyalty. Restaurants that understand this dynamic can benefit from strong single-visit revenue while staying in their guest's rotation, even after the celebration ends.

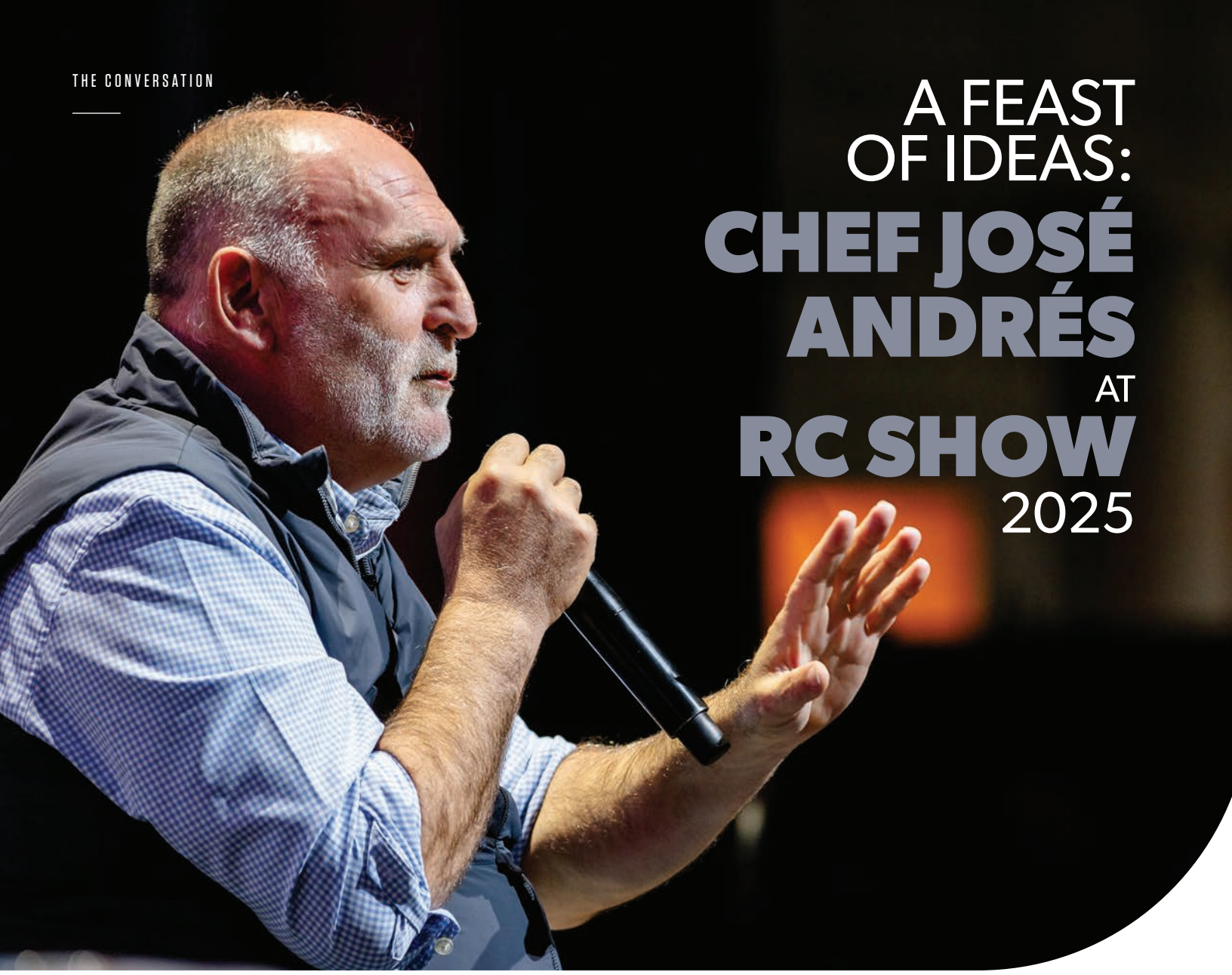
About the Author

Tate Bastien, Foodservice Industry Specialist, Circana, 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.



Circana.

Source: Circana, CREST®, Canada, April 2025, Source: Future of™ Foodservice, Canada, Aug. 2024



A FEAST OF IDEAS: CHEF JOSÉ ANDRÉS AT RC SHOW 2025

Presented by Restaurants Canada and High Liner Foods, the RC Show 2025 keynote unfolded as a compelling fireside chat between Chef José Andrés and Kelly Higginson, President and CEO of Restaurants Canada. What followed was an hour of candid, wide-ranging insights from one of the world's most influential chefs, activists and thinkers.

Having recently spent six weeks filming a new show with Martha Stewart in Toronto, Chef José had taken time to explore celebrated local restaurants like Shoushin, Masaki Saito, LSL, and Actinolite, and paid visits to retail food haunts like The Cheese Boutique and St. Lawrence Market. But it wasn't the shout outs to where he'd been or what he'd eaten that made the room lean in.

With humour, humility and conviction, Andrés spoke in stories—moments from his life that revealed deeper truths about the state of food, the restaurant business, and humanity. From learning to cook with imaginary shrimp in culinary school, to being told he wasn't ready to stir the paella, to navigating the logistics of feeding millions through World Central Kitchen and when and how foodservice should think about showing up to feed communities, he painted a picture of a profession that is as fragile as it is vital.

What followed was less a prepared speech, but rather a series of bold ideas and vivid reflections—on food, on failure, on community, and on what it truly means to lead with purpose.

On finding lessons in the kitchen—and in the fire.

My mother was a nurse, and my father was a nurse. I was born in northern Spain in a region called Asturias—it's very much like Canada. Very green, with a lot of lakes and rivers, though not as big as yours. I moved to Catalonia when I was five, so I guess I've been an immigrant all my life. Even though Spain is very small, Asturias and Catalonia could not be more different. Different language, different foods, different landscape, and different traditions.





I grew up watching my mum cooking from Monday to Friday and my father on Saturday and Sunday. My mother was more in charge of feeding the family, and my father was in charge of feeding the family along with friends and our larger family. So, my mum cooked for the few, and my father for the many.

My mum was a magician who could make anything from nothing—some flour, some butter, oil and milk to make a béchamel, adding any leftovers from the fridge. When the béchamel got cold, she'd make it into balls, rubbing them in flour, egg and breadcrumbs from stale bread. She'd fry those croquetas and my three brothers and I would be fighting for that one extra croqueta. She would always give it to the best-behaved brother that day. These were the dishes at the end of the month when the fridge at my house was very much empty. We were a working family, and we lived well, but at the end of the month, the fridge was empty.

I don't remember any of the dishes at the beginning of the month—the steak or the fish. We were all waiting for the end of the month to eat croquetas. Now, my daughters all do the same.

Every time my father would make a big paella, I would help him with the fire. He would make a traditional paella with chicken and rabbit, but he never let me put the spoon in— I just helped with the fire. One day I got very upset because I wanted to help with the cooking. He told me it was too windy, so I needed to help with the fire. I kept complaining, and he sent me away. I was 11 or 12 at the most and, when everyone was eating, my father pulled me aside. He told me he knew I wanted to do the cooking, and that that's what everybody wants to do, but the most important thing in life is controlling the fire. It's understanding and mastering your fire. Once you do that, you can do anything you want with your life.

This was a little lesson for a young cook in the making, but in a way it's a metaphor for life itself.

On the people who shape us (whether we remember their names or not).

We all have mentors and people we meet along the way in our careers or maybe we read their book or see them on TV. We become who we become thanks to those people we have around us, even the ones whose names we've forgotten. Those who listened to us and let us know that we matter.

Obviously, I've been very lucky in my life. I've had many of those people. I have friends I began cooking with 37 or 38 years ago and we're still friends. When I go to Barcelona, I can go to almost any restaurant and see old friends from school.

I went to a place called elBulli, and many of you will know Ferran Adrià. Ferran became everything to me. We are best friends today, but in the early days we were eight years apart, and when I was 16, eight years apart was a lot of years. I was very lucky to be at elBulli at the time he launched an entire revolution in new modern cooking.

To this day, Ferran Adrià is a brother, a father, a mentor, a chef—and not just to me, but to many. He taught me what it means to be generous. I remember the days when the chef had the recipes and wouldn't let you see the book. But Ferran, from the very beginning, shared everything with everybody. Not just in the restaurant, but at conferences too. Every technique he developed, he shared with everybody. This is where I learned the importance of giving of yourself to others.

Culinarily, and in everything I try and do in life, he taught me to try and open myself up to everyone to help make everyone around me better. This is always something that will come back to you in good ways.



On survival, generosity, and the brutal beauty of the food business.

I think the most important thing for everybody in the food business is that your restaurant or business does well. Paying the bills is the most important thing. You don't always have to focus on helping others, because just keeping your restaurant open or maintaining your farm is a miracle unto itself sometimes.

Food businesses are beautiful businesses, but behind the TV shows and the beautiful dishes, there is a lot of failure. I think it was Winston Churchill who said (or is credited with saying), "Success is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm."

So, embrace the failure. It's going to happen, and in a big way, but make sure that failure is not what brings you down, but what lifts you up. Do you know how many restaurants fail in the first year or three years? How many restaurants open and close each year in our industry? How many bills and salaries sometimes go unpaid? I don't blame the profession I love. We are in one of the most beautiful businesses in the world. But it's actually brutal.

You don't have to support community with money or by doing a dinner to raise funds—just donate your time. Don't do things that cost money when your business is having a hard time paying the bills. Your community needs you to be successful. That's already amazing.

I was 23 when I arrived in Washington, D.C. I always saw nurses and doctors in hospitals as heroes because it always seemed they were doing more than necessary. We saw it during the pandemic. Generosity was everywhere.

Our profession is one of the most generous professions. Restaurants are always donating meals for people we don't even know. If you feel you can, then do it. But the ways to give back to your community are plentiful, and most restaurants are already doing it.

On meeting your moment to serve.

There's one great Ethiopian-born chef, who was adopted in Sweden, and ended up in America. He opened one of the most successful modern Scandinavian restaurants—Marcus Samuelsson. He's a very talented chef. One day, he was a little bit upset with me because, once World Central Kitchen was founded, many chefs wanted to participate. I always told them, "Don't worry. The day you need to participate, you will know it."

I said this to Marcus numerous times, and he said, "Chef, it seems you don't want me to help." I said, "On the contrary. On the day you will be called to help, believe me, the energy you are going to have to put out is going to be so much. It's okay that you are not helping right now."

Then, COVID happened. Marcus found himself the lead chef doing hundreds of thousands of meals in the Bronx, and hundreds of thousands (that turned into millions) of meals in Newark, New Jersey. For him, and for many others in Canada and around the world, the moment will come. With World Central Kitchen, I saw the power of our profession. When there is an earthquake, you call search and rescue teams. When there is a fire, you call the firefighters. If there is an emergency, and people need to eat, who do you think is the most prepared? The restaurant industry.



During the L.A. fires, we had more than 80 food trucks ready to be deployed to any of the fires, to any of the shelters, to any of the neighbourhoods. We were using food trucks like fire trucks, but instead of stopping the fire, we were feeding people. We started this in Haiti in 2010, and in Ukraine we've done more than 300 million meals, in Turkey we've done 80 million meals, in Gaza we've done more than 110 million meals, in Israel we've done 3 or 4 million meals. In America, we've responded to every earthquake, hurricane and tornado in the last fifteen years. In Canada, we had a hurricane that made it all the way to Nova Scotia.

The need to serve communities is always going to be there, but don't hurt your business to do it. Everything has a moment in life. First, make your business, yourself and the people around you successful. You'll always find a way to give back, but the best gift you can give to your community, your family and co-workers is to become successful today.

Tomorrow is another day.



On fake shrimp and real lessons.

I left school when I was very young, and my father sent me to cooking school. It was a new school. You had to be 18 to join, but I was only 15 or 16. The school was private though, so they'd take anyone who would pay. But the school was not finished. In cooking class, we'd be at the table with pans and the teacher



would say, "Okay, sauté the shrimp… Add the salt now." But everything was imaginary. I was like, "What the heck is this s*&t?"

Every hour I had, I was working somewhere, whether or not I was getting paid. I'd cook anywhere they'd let me cook. I did military service, and they had me cooking for the admiral. When I came back from service, I was supposed to graduate, but I was tired of the fake shrimp. So, I failed three things: cooking, English, and accounting—maybe because I didn't really go to any of the classes.

We need to control every dollar, and I wish I knew 30 or 40 years ago what I know today.

If restaurants fail, the entire food chain fails. The farmer fails. The fisherman fails. The employees and people driving the produce to the big city and import and distribution companies fail. Everybody fails. So, it's vital that restaurants succeed.

How do we do this? We make sure we're highly prepared when we open a business. Whether it's a great hot dog stand, a food truck or a high-end restaurant, we need to make sure we put a lot of time into the numbers before we sign the lease. Very often, the failure of a restaurant lies in the fact we signed a lease the business cannot sustain. Even restaurants that have line-ups down the street can fail because the numbers were not aligned.

Learning about cooking, amazing produce, doing the best job you can—go for it. But make sure the numbers are sound and solid. That's probably the most important thing I would do today if I could go back to when I was 16: spend the time to learn the numbers. If you don't like the numbers, you need to marry the best CFO or accountant. I always tell people, "If you're going to marry somebody, marry a chef. The next best thing is to marry somebody who knows the numbers."

We have to make sure that the people who feed the world are able to feed themselves, for the well-being of everybody.

On redefining food as policy—and as a solution to everything.

For many years, I've been saying that food can be the solution to many of the problems every country faces. Food is handled by the department of agriculture (or what in America we call the USDA), but food is so much more than that.



Food is immigration, food is culture, food is defence and national security, food is science, food is history, food is urban housing development. I created two classes—including one with Ferran Adrià at Harvard's school of physics, where we taught cooking explained through physics. Everything from roasting a chicken to making mayonnaise has a physics explanation. The second, A World on a Plate, teaches how food impacts everything from the environment, energy, health…everything.

We created the Global Food Institute at George Washington University, which is to start writing and shaping future policies where food is no longer the problem, but the solution. I began asking that every president of every country read an 1826 book by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*. Tell me what you eat, I'll tell you who you are. He said that the future of nations will depend on how they feed themselves.

Not too long ago, the United States of America ran out of baby formula. That's food. We say we have too much food and we have an obesity epidemic, but at the same time, we have a hunger pandemic in some parts of the world. We throw away food because we produce more than we consume. What happens if one day we wake up and we don't have enough food to feed our country?

Recently, Japan had to release rice into the market because prices are going up because there's not enough rice. Countries like Ukraine feed 500 million people, but they're at war. We have typhoons, hurricanes, and droughts. We have pests. What happens if the perfect storm comes along one day and there is not enough food?

This is why we have to think about food differently and define our business within the policy of food. Good food policy will make every city better, every country better, and the world a better place.

Please note this transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

FOLLOWING CHEF JOSÉ ANDRÉS' KEYNOTE CONVERSATION, INDUSTRY LEADERS AND AUDIENCE MEMBERS REFLECT ON THE IDEAS THAT RESONATED MOST.



When I sat down across from Chef José Andrés for our keynote fireside chat at RC Show 2025, I wasn't just speaking with a world-renowned chef. I was speaking with a man who has redefined what it means to lead in this industry. I was truly honoured, but also deeply humbled.

Chef José doesn't separate food from the world around it. To him, it's not just about what's on the plate—it's about the entire system that supports it, and the centrality of that system to nearly every facet of human life. He sees food as infrastructure, as policy, as a tool for connection and resilience. And in a time when so many operators are facing pressure from every direction, that message felt more important than ever.

What struck me most was not his storytelling (though he's an extraordinary storyteller), but his insistence on ambition. Chef José challenged us—not just to care, but to stop thinking about food insecurity and kitchen closures as parallel problems and start recognizing them as symptoms of the same broken system. His message was clear: we can't keep doing more with less. We need to build systems that are strong, scalable, and equitable, and that starts with sustainability—not just environmental, but operational. He talked about the hard realities of keeping a restaurant open, about how food businesses are beautiful and brutal in equal measure. And he reminded us that before we can give back, we need to build businesses that can stand on their own two feet. That's not selfish. That's foundational.

At the same time, he called on chefs, owners, and suppliers to see themselves as part of a broader solution. Not just service providers, but catalysts for change. That kind of thinking shifts the entire conversation around what foodservice can—and should—be, and the true value and impact of our $120 billion dollar sector.

The 80th anniversary of RC Show was such a fitting moment to reflect on how far we've come, and how much more is possible when we work together. Our industry is full of problem-solvers. Of people who care deeply. Of people who show up.

Feeding people will always matter, but feeding possibility is what changes the world.

Kelly Higginson, President & CEO
Restaurants Canada

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



As a long-time participant and partner of RC Show, High Liner Foods always looks forward to the exciting three-day event for the chance to spotlight our seafood products, strengthen industry connections, and draw inspiration from food industry leaders. This year was particularly exciting as we worked in concert with Restaurants Canada to bring the esteemed chef and humanitarian José Andrés to the Canadian foodservice audience.

It was an honour to welcome Chef Andrés and hear firsthand about his culinary journey and the impact of his efforts through World Central Kitchen. His engaging and insightful keynote reminded us of the role the foodservice industry plays, extending far beyond simply being a business, but also in supporting the well-being and strength of our communities.

Chef Andrés passionately underscored the impact that the industry can achieve when we lead with purpose. Whether its nourishing neighbours in crisis, creating a welcoming space for connection, or implementing sustainable practices, we can be a force for meaningful change while still delivering an exceptional food experience. This dedication to culinary innovation and social impact resonated with us as we strive to embody this through our own purpose - Reimaging Seafood to Nourish Life. Our purpose guides every decision, whether that be our commitment to supporting our communities, promoting employee well-being, or regenerating ecosystems to ensure we have the resources to provide seafood for generations to come.

We also had the pleasure of hosting a meet-and-greet with Chef Andrés, serving seafood canapés expertly crafted by High Liner's culinary team. It's one thing to hear from such a renowned chef, but to personally meet and share our food with him was an unforgettable experience. The opportunity to connect with influential figures like Chef Andrés encourages Canada's foodservice and hospitality community to push the boundaries in thinking about food differently. His stories truly captured the essence of this year's RC Show theme, *FUEL*, offering exactly the kind of inspiration that's needed to navigate the often challenging and ever-evolving landscape of the foodservice industry.

My High Liner colleagues and I left the event with renewed motivation and enthusiasm for the future of foodservice.

Anthony Rasetta,
Chief Commercial Officer
High Liner Foods

HIGH LINER FOODSERVICE

I've been following Chef José Andrés for years. He's one of the leaders I've always looked to when it comes to mobilizing chefs for something greater than food alone. People talk about his celebrity, his accolades, his success—but what inspires me most is his ambition to solve real problems—not just talk about them.

When I started La Tablée des Chefs, it was with a similar belief: that chefs, cooks, and the broader food industry could be mobilized to address food insecurity and food education in tangible, lasting ways. That's what we're doing with the new kitchen we're building—to prepare soup for Canadian schoolchildren who go hungry every day. Because yes, in Canada, there are still thousands of kids showing up to school without lunch. And someone needs to do something about that.

What I admire in Chef José is how unapologetically bold he is about this work. In the non-profit world, we're used to doing miracles with crumbs—scraping together goodwill, volunteers, and modest grants. But he's not afraid to ask for more and demand real resources. Because that's what it will take to move the needle on food security, food literacy, and culinary independence.

His leadership is catalytic. He convinces other chefs that these issues and the work we do matters. The ripple effect of the idea we can each give a little of our time, our voice, and our energy to something bigger than our own kitchens is far-reaching. Manufacturers, distributors, processors, philanthropists, even policymakers start to follow when the industry aligns around a shared purpose.

I see it in our own work at La Tablée des Chefs, too. When I approached a manufacturer recently to sell us soup kettles at cost—a request he'd never entertained before—he said yes. Not because he'd make money, but because he could be part of something meaningful. That's corporate social responsibility in action, and it didn't require a donation. It just required a different way of thinking.

What Chef José models so well is how to speak to power as a peer, not as a petitioner. He doesn't ask for charity—he challenges institutions to recognize food as the critical infrastructure it is. And when he started World Central Kitchen, he didn't have foundations or billionaires lining up to support him. He put in his own money.

He travelled relentlessly. He took the risk. And eventually, the world caught up. That story resonates deeply with me, because I've lived it too.

At La Tablée, we started with $32,000 in the bank. Today, we're a $10 million operation with 67 staff, working coast to coast. There's so much still to be done. I could double in size and still not be where I think this organization needs to be in this country. I don't believe our next chapter will be built on one person's name. I believe it will be built on a movement driven by chefs who will bring in other people to build something that lasts.

Because this isn't about heroics. It's about doing the work—together.

Chef Jean-François Archambault,
Founder & CEO
La Tablée des Chefs

La Tablée des Chefs

Chef José Andrés has given so many interviews on so many topics that it was hard to predict what direction his fireside chat with Kelly Higginson, President and CEO of Restaurants Canada, might take. Would he spotlight one of his many ventures? Fundraise for World Central Kitchen? Revisit the highlights of his storied career?

Instead, what emerged was something quieter, more grounded—and deeply resonant for everyone in the room. Chef Andrés reminded us that at heart, he is a restaurateur and practitioner who believes that professional kitchens are, above all, places of generosity. Where time, knowledge and effort are shared in service of something greater.

Amid all the innovation and inspiration of RC Show 2025, it was striking—and refreshing—to hear him focus on the fundamentals. Not just the creative or cultural value of restaurants, but their role as economic anchors. He urged operators to know their numbers, plan before they leap, and build not just beautiful concepts, but sustainable ones. In a business where passion often outpaces planning, it was a powerful reminder that purpose must be matched with precision.

Chef Andrés also acknowledged the impulse so many hospitality professionals feel to give back, volunteering, donating or showing up in moments of crisis. But he offered a quiet caution: make sure your own business is healthy first. Only then can you truly support those around you. Success, in his view, isn't about ego or empire—it's about creating stability for your team, your community, and the larger food system we all depend on.

In the end, he brought the conversation full circle: restaurants are fragile. They are beautiful, brutal businesses. And they matter deeply. When one fails, the ripple effects stretch far beyond the dining room. Everyone feels the impact.

And that, perhaps, was the biggest takeaway: that doing well isn't just a goal. It's a responsibility. For the people we feed, and the ones who help make that possible.

Chris Szego, Hospitality Writer
MENU Magazine

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TOGETHER, WE FUELLED THE INDUSTRY.

RC Show FUEL

Thank you to the **27,000+ industry professionals** who came together at RC Show 2025—along with our valued partners, sponsors, exhibitors, hosts, speakers and judges —for your energy, ideas and commitment to moving hospitality forward. The 80th-anniversary edition of RC Show turned Toronto's Enercare Centre into a 350,000-square-foot ideas marketplace for three days of connection, collaboration and inspiration. Local, entrepreneurial offerings were in demand and on display in every corner as attendees scoured the Show floor for new and innovative ideas.

Ontario Premier **Doug Ford** and Finance Minister **Peter Bethlenfalvy** opened the show, reiterating the province's plan to raise the LCBO wholesale discount to 15 per cent—an $8,000–$10,000 annual boost for the average dining room and a tangible win for Restaurants Canada's advocacy team.

An Emphasis on Connection & Collaboration. A Triumph of Inspiration.

Onstage energy never dipped: eight live culinary, bar, and coffee competitions buzzed between an unprecedented slate of four keynote speakers. Chef and humanitarian **José Andrés** urged the crowd to lead with purpose; **Michèle Boudria**, President and CEO of McDonald's Canada, unpacked the art of scaling culture; global bar luminary **Shingo Gokan** translated cocktail craft into entrepreneurial insight; and viral chef-creator **Tuệ Nguyễn** (better known as @TwayDaBae) showed how social clout can power restaurant success—proof that RC Show's stage programming is as electrifying as its show floor.



A new, standout feature was **Innovation Alley**, presented by **Interac** in partnership with the **Canadian Food Innovation Network (CFIN)** and **Restaurants Canada**. Founders demoed autonomous delivery rovers, plant-based salmon, and AI-driven menu tools—proof that start-ups can accelerate when they plug into RC Show's power grid of mentors, media and potential buyers.





The **RC Pop Up Experience**—a collaboration between **Restaurants Canada**, **Drinks Ontario** and **Ontario Craft Wineries**—quickly became the show's unofficial meeting hub. At any moment, guests could move from a **Mother Parkers** espresso to a pour of VQA chardonnay, slurp a **Raspberry Point** oyster, or grab a pastry from the all-day **RC Café** service. New this year, the **Chef's Table Stage** added an interactive edge: chefs shared techniques, cost insights and tasting plates in real time, keeping the crowd engaged between sips. The re-imagined space also hosted a trio of intimate networking gatherings: the **Food Runners Refuel** meet-up with Toronto's hospitality run crew; the **Bar & Beverage Keynote Reception**, where global cocktail icon Shingo Gokan swapped ideas with local bartenders; and **The Chef's Exchange**, presented by **Garland Canada**, which welcomed a who's-who of Canadian culinary talent alongside the freshly crowned winners of the **Garland Canada Culinary Competition**.

The ever-popular **Food Truck'N Experience**, presented by **JB Innovative Solutions Inc.**, and featuring produce, products, and ingredients from **High Liner Foods**, **Bondi Produce & Specialty Foods**, **Conagra Foodservice**, and **Maple Leaf Foods** returned, bringing a world of flavours from 21 of the GTA's hottest food trucks to inspire the senses at the 80th edition of RC Show. The trucks also fuelled the 2,000+ guests at **Opening Night Reception** as guests mingled beneath a gorgeous, 20-foot-tall cherry blossom tree provided by stage decor sponsor **Vintage Connection Inc.** and danced to live music on the speaker stage, designed by **Opening Night Flowers Inc.**





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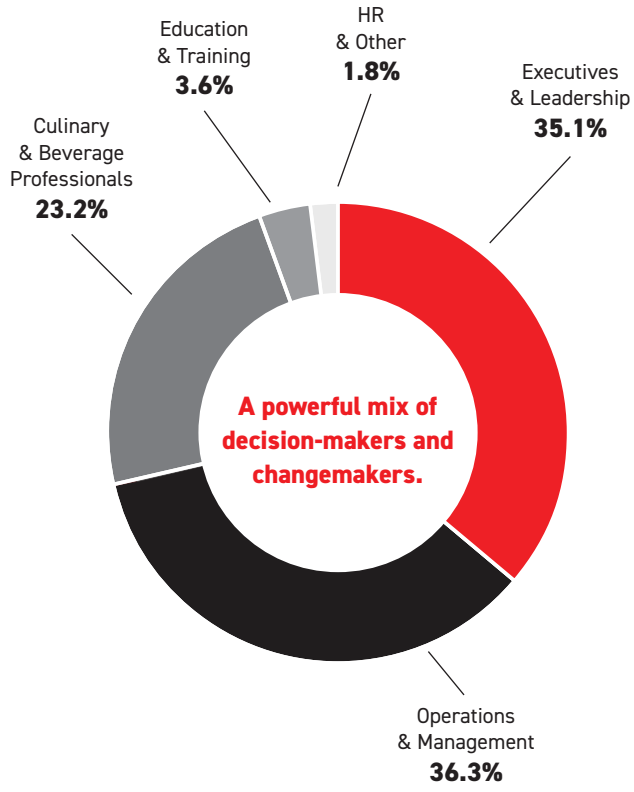
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As a not-for-profit organization, Restaurants Canada reinvests every dollar—from tickets, sponsorships, exhibits and activations—into advocacy, research and programs that strengthen and support our members and the national foodservice community.

BIG MOVES, BOLD NEW VISION:



RC SHOW 2026 HEADS TO THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

After selling out the show floor two years in a row, RC Show is making a bold move. In 2026, Canada's leading hospitality and foodservice event is relocating to The International Centre in Mississauga—a decision driven by growth, accessibility, and the ambition to deliver more value for attendees, exhibitors and sponsors alike.

"We had taken every square inch we could at the previous venue," explains RC Show Director Lerna G., CEM. "We needed space to expand—not just for the trade floor, but for education, competitions, partner summits, and new show experiences."

With nearly 500,000 square feet across multiple halls and the Conference Centre, The International Centre unlocks fresh potential for programming and discovery. "Our competitions and stage sessions have become extremely popular," Lerna says. "We didn't have space to add seating or bring in like-minded suppliers to support the categories. Now, we do."

The move also responds to evolving industry needs. "We want to offer more robust conference programming—to grow our national presence and enhance the return on investment for operators to send their teams," Lerna adds. "You can come to the show, spend three full days, and get everything you need. That's how we help employers retain and inspire their people."

WHY MISSISSAUGA?

With five major highways, GO Transit access, nearby hotels, and complimentary parking, The International Centre makes it easy and affordable for operators across Canada to attend. "We needed a solution that was future-forward," Lerna shares.

That includes shifting the show slightly earlier in the calendar to mid-March, giving patio suppliers and seasonal buyers more time to act. "In the past, we've disappointed some seasonal suppliers who wanted to exhibit at RC Show but couldn't because the April dates were too late. They couldn't fulfill orders in time," says Lerna. "Operators often plan and make buying decisions during the winter slow-down, so this new timing will really align with their needs."

A REIMAGINED GATHERING PLACE

The new RC Show layout also promises a more fluid and exciting attendee journey. "The space gives us the opportunity to re-create 'zones' to help people navigate more intuitively and discover more," says Lerna. "Multiple entrance points, clear theming by hall, and enhanced wayfinding and reimagined feature areas will all contribute to a more dynamic experience. Whether you arrive through Hall 1 or Hall 5, you're on a journey," she says. "Even longtime attendees will discover things they've never seen before."

The move also brings greater flexibility to evolve the experience year over year. "We can completely change how the show feels. That's exciting," says Lerna. "We're planning a new show experience—taking the best of what we've done and using this space to build something even more inspiring."

From elevated education sessions, action-based programming, and expanded seating at live competitions, to thoughtfully curated zones for tech, coffee, leadership, and regional showcases, everything at RC Show 2026 is being designed to meet the moment.

"We're not just growing for the sake of it," says Lerna. "We're creating more reasons for the foodservice and hospitality industry to connect, grow, learn, and be wowed."

RC Show — Restaurants Canada

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Attendee registration opens in early October, 2025.

PLATED, POURED, PERFECTED:
CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE AT RC SHOW 2025

BY CHRIS SZEGO

From the heat of the kitchen to the bright lights of the stage, culinary and beverage competitions offer more than bragging rights—they ignite innovation, foster community, and push chefs to new creative heights. They're a proving ground for emerging talent and a celebration of craft, culture, and courage.

At RC Show 2025, the energy was electric as a full slate of live competitions brought Canada's culinary talent into the spotlight. From finely plated entrées to intricately poured lattes and lightning-fast oyster shucks, the Show highlighted just how deep—and diverse—the country's foodservice talent truly is.

GARLAND CANADA CULINARY COMPETITION

PRESENTED BY

GARLAND CANADA

Restaurants Canada

The Garland Canada Culinary Competition is an electrifying celebration of the ingenuity and skill of emerging Canadian chefs. On April 8th, 2025, competing chefs used every bit of their culinary expertise, innovation and style to bring a top-quality, restaurant-suitable dish to life on the plate.

Garland Canada has connected Canadian chefs with world-class cooking equipment and solutions for more than 125 years. With this competition, they continue their commitment to Canada's ingenious and inventive culinary community. Fifty per cent of competition space is held for women and BIPOC talent to maintain their strong commitment to diversity and inclusion.

FROM COAST TO COAST TO COAST

Chefs from all across Canada applied to compete. Garland's culinary school partners (BC Chef's Table, Conestoga College, Georgian College, McMaster University, Niagara College) assessed the entries, with 12 finalists selected to compete live on stage at RC Show.

Each chef had one hour to tell a story through their creativity, expertise and technique. Using a black box of must-use ingredients and either Canadian chicken or beef, the competitors focused all their culinary skills to present the judges with an original dish that embodied the Show theme: *FUEL*.

Each chef had a volunteer sous-chef to support them. These talented volunteers made a huge difference to the competitors.

DELICIOUSLY ENTERTAINING

Chef Devan Rajkumar and Cristina Carpio ably hosted the competition on the Culinary Stage, introducing each chef, monitoring progress, and assessing each presentation to the judges.

Midway through the day, chefs Tuệ Nguyen and Wallace Wong teamed up for The Social Chef Revolution, presented by the Chicken Farmers of Canada. Together, they served up Vietnamese bites and shared tips for succeeding in the creator economy.





A KEEN EYE FOR QUALITY

Experienced judges weighed the appeal, execution and presentation of each dish: **Chef Eva Chin**, Executive Chef at Hong Shing Restaurant Group and Yan Dining Room; **Chef John Higgins**, Chef in Residence at The Centre of Hospitality and Culinary Arts, George Brown College, and the CHCA Brand Ambassador; and **Chef Missy Hui**, Culinary Instructor at George Brown College and co-owner and Executive Chef at And/Ore Restaurant.

The judges examined each competitor for how creative they were with the black box ingredients, the precision of their kitchen skills and techniques, their attention to hygiene and sanitation, how their dish looked and sat on the plate, and how well each competitor incorporated the theme into their dish.





Breaking Barriers & Turning Heads:

Women Chefs Dominate in the Garland Canada Culinary Competition

MAYA PETTEN | 1ST PLACE

Maya Petten, from The Merchant Tavern in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, won first place, which came with a $5,000 cash prize and an all-expenses-paid entry to the Garland Canada International Chef Challenge at the PEI International Shellfish Festival.

Winning was amazing, but Maya took home much more from the experience than the prize. "I gained valuable connections with other chefs, mentors, and even potential employers, which is something that can really shape your career. More personally, I walked away with a renewed sense of confidence. I tend to doubt myself, but this competition showed me that I'm on the right path and that what I bring to the table matters. I also felt a real sense of pride. The dish I created was inspired by my childhood in Newfoundland, and it meant so much to me to share that part of my story. To have it appreciated and recognized made me feel proud not only of the dish, but of where I come from. It was an honour to represent my province."

Maya feels that contests like the Garland Canada Culinary Competition are important for emerging chefs. "The chance to connect with potential employers and other passionate young chefs is invaluable. Attending RC Show also opens up new opportunities to find unique suppliers and ideas to fuel your own restaurant plans."

"One of the biggest takeaways, though, was having the freedom to create and present a dish that was entirely my own. When you're early in your career, it often feels like you're executing someone else's vision. This was a chance to take an idea from start to finish and put my own voice on the plate. That kind of creative freedom, and a chance to be recognized for it, is a huge confidence boost."



TIA HUSZCZO | 2ND PLACE

Tia Huszczo, from Spencer's at the Waterfront in Burford, Ontario took home second place and $3,000.



CLEO MARIZ VALERIO | 3RD PLACE

Third-place honours and $1,500 went to Cleo Mariz Valerio, from Mildred's Temple Kitchen in Toronto, Ontario.



ALIJAH CASELLAS | RUNNER-UP

Alijah Casellas, from the Westin Harbour Castle in Toronto, Ontario, was the Runner-Up, winning $500.

The top three finishers also won a matching knife set from DICED knives worth $645, and a prize pack from Club House for Chefs. **KIRAN RUHELA**, from the Royal Canadian Yacht Club in Mississauga, ON, won the $500 **FAN FAVOURITE** award, voted on before the competition.

FOOD CAN BE ART:

BOCUSE D'OR AND WORLD PASTRY CUP CANADA FINALISTS CROWNED AT RC SHOW 2025



No one knows this better than Chefs Canada, who hosted two top-level competitions on the Culinary Stage on April 7th to select the culinary teams who will represent Canada at the world's most prestigious culinary competitions.

The Bocuse d'Or is the Olympics of culinary events, and the most demanding cooking competition on earth. Chef Keith Pears, Executive Chef of Accencis Group in Richmond Hill, was selected to lead Team Canada in the 2027 finals in Lyon, France.

Chef Christophe Sportellini, owner of Confiserie Nani Nono in Val-des-Monts, QC, and Chef Nicolas Belorgey, chef-instructor at Le Cordon Bleu in Ottawa, ON, were chosen to steer Team Canada in the World Pastry Cup.

BEYOND THE RAIL COCKTAIL COMPETITION

PRESENTED BY

The Beyond the Rail Cocktail Competition showcases more than just technical bartending skill—it also demonstrates each competitor's depth of knowledge, passion, and storytelling style.

On April 9th, talented Canadian competitors presented the judges with a flight of three cocktails celebrating local ingredients and sustainable sourcing.

Host Monique Godhino, of Sunny's Chinese in Toronto and a four-time winner of Beyond the Rail in her own right, steered the talented competitors through their rounds and interactions with the judges on the Bar & Beverage Stage:

- **Juliana Wolkowski** of CJMW Consulting & Beverage Director at Hoof Cocktail Bar in Toronto
- **Lindsay Jones**, founder of The Ostrich Club in Halifax, an APS Certified Sommelier voted Halifax's Best Bartender in 2018
- **Shingo Gokan**, founder of SG Group, global cocktail champion; Bartender of the Year; Bartender's Bartender and Industry Icon; listed in both Asia's and the World's 50 Best Bars for multiple years running



JAE HAN | 1ST PLACE

Jae Han, Bar Manager at Slice of Life in Toronto, won first place and the top prize of $3,000 for his craft and style mastery.



NICK BENYAMEN
2ND PLACE

Nick Benyamen, from 416 Snack Bar/ Short Turn in Toronto, came second, winning $1,500.



HANNAH KIVLIN
3RD PLACE

Hannah Kivlin from Spencer's at the Waterfront in Burlington, ON, took third place, winning $500.





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BREAKFAST SANDWICH COMPETITION

PRESENTED BY

Hosted by **Chef Marissa Leon-John** and media personality and restaurant advocate **Cristina Carpio**, four finalists went head-to-head to reimagine what a breakfast sandwich can be in the new Breakfast Sandwich Competition held on the Culinary Stage on April 9, 2025. Each competitor had four sponsor ingredients to incorporate into their dish, 45 minutes, a full pantry, and the chance to showcase their skills, originality, and flair.

Expert judges **Chef Tawnya Brant**, food culturalist **Ryan Hickson**, and **Chef Imrun Texeira** assessed each delicious creation for sandwich storytelling and ingenuity, use of the four sponsor ingredients, sanitation and safety, presentation, and balance of flavours.







ALEEM SYED | 1ST PLACE

Aleem Syed, Managing Partner and Executive Chef, THG Hospitality Group, took first place honours, winning $3,000. Chef Aleem was eager for the battle. “I have a fire in my heart for cooking competitions—it’s been inside me for a very long time. Some cooking shows have declined my applications due to my wheelchair. So once I was allowed to compete, I had to try.”

“Culinary competitions keep the passion and fire burning within,” said Chef Aleem, who also announced his plans to donate his winnings. “Cooking in front of audiences can increase our confidence and inspire us to do more. Being in a wheelchair, I have to not only represent myself but also a whole world of people with disabilities, physically and mentally. This proves that you can accomplish anything as long as you put your mind to it.”



PRATHAMESH PATIL | 2ND PLACE

Prathamesh Patil, from Mumbaikar Indian Restaurant and Bar, took second place, with a prize of $1,500.



RISHIKA BHANSALI | 3RD PLACE

Third-place finisher Rishika Bhansali, of Pigeon Café & Bar, won $500.

Each of the top three also took home a set of matching DICED knives, culinary gear and cookware from Get Cracking, and a vintage prize cooler, gear and spices from Club House for Chefs. **RUNNER-UP BRI BULLARD**, of Authentique Delights Inc., won a prize pack from Club House for Chefs.

RESTAURANTS CANADA PIZZA COMPETITION

PRESENTED BY

Eighty-one per cent of Canadians eat pizza at least once a month. At RC Show 25 we celebrated our love for pizza with two competitions, April 7th and 8th. Using their own supplies along with pro pizza tools from **Gi. Metal** and **Faema** pizza ovens, each entrant had 20 minutes (including cleanup) to make and present two identical pizzas—one for the judges and one for the audience.

In the **Traditional Pizza competition**, pizzaiolos could use only a traditional red tomato sauce and two toppings from a carefully curated list. Judges **Rocco Agostino**, Executive Chef and Partner at Pizzeria Libretto; **Alida Solomon**, award-winning chef and owner of Tutti Matti; and **Hassi Sadri**, founder of the Napoli Culinary Academy, tasted and assessed 20 entries.



BART NADHEMY | 1ST PLACE

Bart Nadhemy, owner of Son of a Peach Pizzeria and Sunshine Doughnut Co. in Burlington, ON, won first place. Bart took home $3,000 in cash; a 3-Day Buyer Pass to Pizza Expo 2026 in Las Vegas; and a guaranteed entrance for the International Pizza Challenge; as well as matching knives from DICED Knives.





KATELYNN DINGWELL | 2ND PLACE

Katelynn Dingwell, from Whistle Bear Golf Club in Cambridge, ON, won second place, with a prize of $1,500 and a set of DICED Knives.

JORDAN CHIN-TING | 3RD PLACE

Jordan Chin-Ting, of Chef Greedy Bites serving the GTA, took home third, winning $500 and a matching knife set from DICED Knives.

The **Creative Style Pizza competition** builds on pizza's long history and pushes it forward into the future. Competitors were free to choose their dough, toppings, and cooking styles. Judged by **Dominic Primucci**, President of Pizza Nova; **Hassi Sadri**, founder of Café Napoli and the Napoli Culinary Academy; and **Matthew Sullivan**, founder of Mel's, the judges assessed each of the 21 entries in this category.



KYLE MACKAY | 1ST PLACE

Kyle Mackay, from MaiPai in Hamilton, took home first place, winning $3,000 in cash; a 3-Day Buyer Pass to Pizza Expo 2026 in Las Vegas; a guaranteed entrance for the International Pizza Challenge; and a knife from DICED Knives.

Kyle's chosen pie was a feature he created a couple of years ago—the feedback from his customers has been outstanding. "I can't deny that the prize money is great, but I gained much more valuable things from this win. The accolade will forever be a part of my résumé. It has boosted my career by a substantial amount—my name is recognized throughout Hamilton and I've stamped my name into the pizza world. Next year I'll be representing MaiPai and the city of Hamilton in Vegas at the International Pizza Expo and I am very excited. Stay tuned!"

ANNE TURCIC | 2ND PLACE

Anne Turcic, of Anne & Company in Stoney Creek, ON, won second place, with a prize of $1,500 and a knife from DICED Knives.

JIE YAN | 3RD PLACE

Jie Yan, of Son of a Peach in Burlington, ON, finished third, winning $500 and a knife from DICED Knives.

John Gutekanst, owner and CEO of Avalanche Pizza in Athens, Ohio, hosted both days of competition. A national and international competitor himself, John was excited by the talent on display. "Pizza competitions like this are a celebration of independent pizzerias. You folks keep the industry growing."

JOHN BIL OYSTER SHUCKING COMPETITION

PRESENTED BY

Raspberry Point Oysters

Named for the admired and much-missed restaurateur and oysterman John Bil, this competition was furiously fast fun. On April 8th, shuckers showcased their incredible speed, precision, and presentation on the Bar & Beverage Stage. Each competitor was provided with 14 oysters, of which they shucked and plated 12 on a platter of coarse salt as hundreds of spectators watched on, enjoying Oyster Crackers from Westminster Bakery, the original snack of choice at an oyster shucking competition.

In addition to the all-important numbers on the timer, judges **James Power**, General Manager of Raspberry Point Oysters; World Champion Oyster Shucker **Patrick McMurray**; and CEO & President of Langley Foods, **Chef Charlotte Langley**, examined each entry for skill, completeness, and presentation.



EAMON CLARK | 1ST PLACE
Eamon Clark, of Rodney's Oyster House, won first place, $1,000, and an entry spot to the Tyne Valley OysterFest plus $1,000 for airfare and accommodation. A ten-time Canadian Oyster Shucking Champion, Eamon is also the founder of Little Kitchen Academy, which provides Montessori-style cooking classes for children.



CHRIS MANOCCHIO | 2ND PLACE
In second place, Chris Manocchio, also from Rodney's, took home $500. Chris is himself a two-time Canadian Oyster Shucking Champion.

BROOKE KOTAK | 3RD PLACE
Brooke Kotak, from Rodney's, took home third place and $250.

TRISTAN MCCONNELL, of Tide and Vine Oyster House in Niagara Falls, claimed the $100 award for cleanest plate.

LATTE ART COMPETITION

PRESENTED BY

Specialty Coffee Association Canada · Dairy Farmers of Canada / Les Producteurs Laitiers du Canada · Lavazza Torino, Italia, 1895

Hosted and judged by the **Specialty Coffee Association, Canada Chapter**, the Latte Art Competition, held April 7–9 on the Coffee Stage, saw baristas from across the country compete for the chance to represent Canada at the World Latte Art Championship in Geneva, Switzerland, June 26–28, 2025.

Each barista presented two separate sets of free-pour lattes, followed by one set of designer lattes, all of which matched previously submitted photos of the same design. With 15 minutes total to make and pour their lattes, each competitor was assessed by four judges on both the technical and visual aspects of their performance.

KEVIN YIP | 1ST PLACE
Kevin Yip, of 10dean in Toronto, was declared the Canadian Champion, and will go on to compete in Geneva. "I've been in the coffee industry for about five years and started competing in 2022. I'm drawn to competition as a way to challenge myself creatively and technically, and to be part of a community that constantly inspires growth and innovation."

WANYING WANG | 2ND PLACE
Wanying Wang, who has been with Little Victories Coffee in Toronto for more than five years, placed second.

EHSAN KHATIB | 3RD PLACE
Ehsan Khatib, of Brewing Brokers, placed third—his second time in the top three.





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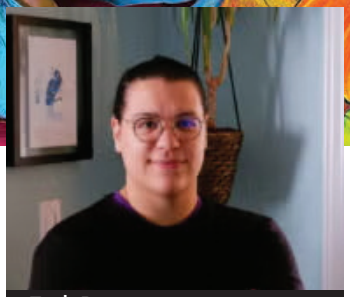
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FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE:

WHAT DOES IT TRULY MEAN TO BE A WELCOMING SPACE?



Tash Raposo,
Program Manager,
Rainbow Registered

A CONVERSATION ON CGLCC'S RAINBOW REGISTERED PROGRAM AND NEW FRONTIERS FOR INCLUSIVE HOSPITALITY.



For many businesses, especially in hospitality, inclusion starts with good intentions—a Pride flag in the window, a statement on the website, a belief that "everyone is welcome here." But when it comes to building trust with 2SLGBTQI+ customers and staff, intention isn't enough. And that's where Rainbow Registered comes in.

Developed by Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC), the Rainbow Registered accreditation program helps businesses turn values into fluid systems—moving beyond a flag or a sticker on the door to create environments that are genuinely welcoming, friendly, and accountable. The process isn't a checkbox. It's a framework for cultural change, backed by rigorous assessment, ongoing education, and a commitment to growth.

The Rainbow Registered program helps businesses move from intention to action—transforming values like inclusion and respect into real, everyday practices. But the real impact is cultural. Staff feel confident, empowered, and more supported within a system of defined and consistent organizational values—leading to higher morale and better retention. Guests feel genuinely welcomed, which builds trust and loyalty. And if tough situations arise, teams know how to respond, because they've had those conversations before.

Rainbow Registered helps businesses set—and rise to—a higher standard of hospitality and care. That standard isn't limited to 2SLGBTQI+ guests or staff; it elevates the experience for everyone. When inclusion is baked into your culture, operations run smoother, teams feel supported, and guests feel truly welcomed. The result? A stronger, more resilient business.

To better understand how Rainbow Registered works, and why it matters now more than ever, MENU sat down with Tash Raposo, Rainbow Registered Program Manager. A lifelong educator and advocate, Raposo brings both lived experience and professional insight to the conversation—offering a powerful perspective on what inclusive hospitality really looks like in practice.

Let's start with a little about you—what brought you to CGLCC and to your current role?

Tash Raposo: *I joined CGLCC about a year ago—this July will mark my first full year, which is really exciting. My background is actually in child and youth care, with a strong focus on education, recreation, and sport. Education and EDI—equity, diversity, and inclusion—have always been big pillars of my work, even if they weren't always labelled that way.*

I spent a lot of time managing programs for youth, and we baked inclusivity into everything we did. Whether we were talking about culture, identity, or access, it was all about planting seeds—giving young people a foundation so that later, in their own careers and communities, they could carry those values forward.

I loved that work, but I was ready for a change. When I saw the opportunity at CGLCC, the Rainbow Registered program really stood out to me—as a queer person myself, I know how hard it can be to move through the world and not know whether a space will be safe or accepting. This program tries to close that gap.

What does the Rainbow Registered designation actually signify for a business?

TR: *It's more than just a symbol. The program is designed to make sure that if something happens—if someone is made to feel unsafe or unwelcome—there are real policies and practices in place to back them up. It's about leadership and accountability. Is that business truly inclusive, not just in name but in action?*

The application process is thoughtful and thorough. It's designed to help businesses take a close look at their policies, training, and customer experience. For some, that process can take up to a year, especially if they're starting from scratch. For businesses with strong foundations already in place, it can be completed in less than a month—it really depends where they're starting from.

Once they're accredited, my role kicks in. I support them in continuing that journey—through education, monthly webinars, and one-on-one support. Our team doesn't act as consultants per se, but we do get a lot of requests. "Hey, this happened—any advice?" "We're preparing for this—do you have a resource?" We're here to guide them, connect them with tools, and help them live up to what the designation promises.

So the designation is just the beginning?

TR: *Exactly. One of the biggest things we emphasize is that this work is ongoing. The queer community is not a monolith—it's vast, complex, and constantly evolving. Language changes. Cultural norms shift. Concepts we talked about five years ago might have been replaced or expanded by now. So staying current is essential.*

We do a lot of the groundwork—keeping up with changes in the space, staying informed on emerging best practices—and then we bring that back to our members. Maybe a new accessibility standard has come out. Maybe a leading consultant has introduced a new framework for inclusive hiring. We'll develop programming around that.

It's also about helping members move from statements to systems. A lot of businesses have policies like "We don't tolerate discrimination." That's great. But what happens if discrimination actually occurs? Do you know what to do? Do your staff know how to respond? Our job is to support you in getting the support and tools you need to ensure success in these difficult situations.

What sets the Rainbow Registered program apart from similar diversity initiatives?

TR: *I think it's the emphasis on accountability. When we talk to businesses, we don't just say "You're going to be a welcoming space." We say: "You're committing to being a welcoming, friendly, and accountable space." That last word really matters.*

Anyone can say they're inclusive. The Rainbow Registered program helps businesses prove it—and keep proving it. For our communities, that can be the difference between showing up—or staying away.

Can you explain what that accountability looks like in practice?

TR: *It's about recognizing that policies and procedures don't always cover what actually happens in the moment. Take a hotel, for example—you can't control who walks in the*



door. So if a guest says something harmful to a staff member, what matters is how the leadership responds. Does the team feel confident that their manager has their back?

That's why we use language like welcoming, friendly, and accountable—not "safe spaces," because we can't guarantee safety for everyone. What feels safe for me may not feel safe for you. It depends on our lived experience, and on intersecting identities like race, gender, religion, or ability.

Rainbow Registered encourages businesses to lead with humility. To say, "I might not know everything about your experience, but I'm here to support you—and I'm learning." That openness goes a long way.

MM Is Rainbow Registered geared toward all businesses, or mainly those in the tourism and hospitality sectors?

***TR:** It's definitely for all businesses. That said, its roots are in tourism—that's where it gained momentum early on, especially with support from organizations like ACOA (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency) and FedDev Ontario. We've worked with a lot of DMOs and tourism partners, and the program really took off there. But it's grown far beyond that.*

Even though it started with the traveller in mind, what we've seen is the internal impact on staff teams. It boosts morale. It creates trust. When people feel their employer stands behind them, they bring that energy to their work.

MM What would you say to operators who are worried about getting it wrong?

***TR:** I'd say: lead with curiosity. You don't have to know everything. In fact, it's better if you assume you don't. That feeling of discomfort—of not being sure how to address someone, or how to support them—that's okay. It's not something to panic about. Being uncomfortable is a step toward progress.*

What matters is how you respond. Ask questions. Be open. Let your guest or team member show you who they are, instead of making assumptions. That openness creates trust—and it goes both ways.

*It's about meeting people with respect and saying, "Tell me what that looks like for you." It's no longer about treating others 'the way you want to be treated.' It's about treating them the way **they** want to be treated.*

That mindset is the foundation of inclusive service—and it's how we all get better, together.



IS YOUR BUSINESS READY TO BECOME RAINBOW REGISTERED?

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR OPERATORS READY TO LEAD WITH INCLUSION

Whether you're a restaurant, hotel, tourism provider, or other service-based business, the Rainbow Registered designation is more than a symbol—it's a commitment to excellence in hospitality and more inclusive and accountable spaces for all. Here's how to get started:

Step 1: Start Online
Visit cglcc.ca/rainbow-registered to begin your application. You'll choose a registration tier based on your business size (small, medium, or large). Corporations follow a different onboarding path and will be guided accordingly.

Step 2: Connect with a Program Lead
Once you register, you'll be connected with a member of CGLCC's business development team. They'll walk you through the process and introduce you to the online platform used to track your progress.

Step 3: Upload Your Evidence
To demonstrate inclusivity, you'll need to submit evidence (documentation) to show how inclusion is built into your business operations across the four program pillars: Inclusive Leadership, Policies & Procedures, Culture of Inclusivity, and Training.

Step 4: Identify Gaps and Improve
As you upload documentation, the Rainbow Registered team reviews your materials and offers support. If there are gaps, or you need help during the collection process, the Rainbow Registered team is prepared to support you.

Step 5: Undergo Third-Party Assessment
Once your documentation is complete, you'll be paired with a third-party assessor. They'll review your submission, provide feedback, and determine whether your business meets the criteria for accreditation.

Step 6: Get Accredited and Stay Engaged
If you pass, you'll officially become Rainbow Registered and be onboarded into the program. That includes access to CGLCC's community events, monthly webinars, continued learning opportunities, and support from the Rainbow Registered team.

PRO TIP:

The learning doesn't stop once you're accredited. Keep your team engaged by attending webinars, tapping into diverse training suppliers, and staying open to feedback and growth.

Learn more about the Rainbow Registered Program and how to get the registration process started at:

@rainbowregistered
cglcc.ca/programs/rainbow-registered/

PROUD TO SERVE

SPOTLIGHT ON RAINBOW REGISTERED HOSPITALITY BUSINESSES

IRONWOOD CIDER HOUSE

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE. ONTARIO



For Ironwood Cider House, inclusion isn't just a statement—it's a practice rooted in purpose. Nestled in the heart of the Niagara, Ontario wine country, Ironwood has built a reputation not only for its crisp, contemporary ciders but also for creating a space that feels as welcoming as it is vibrant. That inclusive spirit is now backed by action through the business's Rainbow Registered accreditation.

"We've always valued community," says Shannon Daust, Sales Manager at Ironwood. "But over time, we realized that just believing in inclusion wasn't enough—it had to become something we actively practiced."

As a member of the 2SLGBTQI+ community herself, Daust is candid about the shift from passive allyship to intentional change. "We have queer team members, myself included, and our lived experiences really informed how we approached this. It's not enough to assume people feel safe—we need to build spaces where that safety is real, and where it's communicated clearly through our actions."

From rethinking staff training to refining their event strategy and customer service approach, Ironwood began weaving inclusion into every aspect of its operations. The journey toward becoming Rainbow Registered brought clarity—and a few necessary wake-up calls. "One of the biggest surprises was seeing where we were unintentionally falling short," Daust recalls. "Things we thought were standard practice—like checking ID—turned out to have more nuance than we realized."

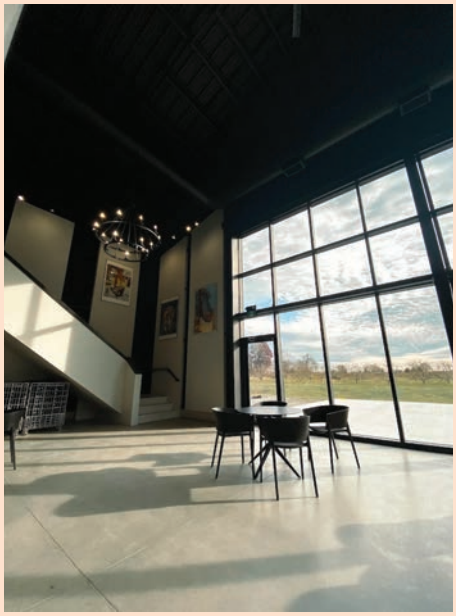
Participating in Rainbow Registered's educational sessions and webinars introduced new ways of thinking, particularly around the guest experience for trans and non-binary patrons. "Even small interactions can have a big impact," she says. "We started to realize how even something as routine as asking for ID could feel uncomfortable or invalidating. That was a big shift in perspective."

This process led the Ironwood team to enhance its front-of-house training, rethink language use, and develop internal practices that prioritize empathy and respect.

Ironwood's commitment to inclusion shines through in its annual Pride celebration—an event that has quickly become a community favourite. "Every year, we host a big Pride party at Ironwood to celebrate and uplift the 2SLGBTQI+ community," Daust says.

This year's event, Amour, takes that commitment further by highlighting queer artistry





and culture. Featuring a curated visual arts gallery in partnership with NOTL Contemporary, as well as live music and community activities, Amour is more than a party—it's a platform. And this year, it's completely free. "We want Amour to feel accessible and celebratory, but also intentional," Daust explains. "We're not just throwing a party—we're creating space for queer joy, for visibility, for connection. That's what makes it powerful."

Internally, Rainbow Registered has changed the way Ironwood approaches its team culture. "It's no longer something we aim for—it's something we live every day," Daust says. Inclusion is now baked into how staff are trained, how issues are addressed, and how values are modelled from leadership on down. For Daust, that change has been deeply personal. "I'm proud to be a member of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, and working for a place that genuinely supports us is truly amazing," she says. "Our owner doesn't just say the right things—he backs them up with real investment. That makes a huge difference."

This kind of cultural clarity also strengthens morale. Staff know where the business

stands, and what's expected of them. That consistency builds trust—among employees and with the guests they serve—that extends out into the community. The Ironwood team is currently forming a dedicated committee focused on building inclusion initiatives beyond the cidery walls."We see our events not just as celebrations but as catalysts," Daust explains. "They're opportunities to build connection, raise awareness, and generate real support for the queer community in our region."

Plans are already underway to expand future events and channel proceeds into 2SLGBTQI+ organizations and initiatives. "We want to use our platform to amplify queer voices and create something that lasts," says Daust. "Inclusion has to go beyond hospitality. It has to live in how we support our communities."

Follow Ironwood Cider House:
ironwoodcider.ca
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WHICH CRAFT

GUELPH. ONTARIO

Inclusion was never an afterthought at Which Craft—it was the starting point. Located in downtown Guelph, this community-minded barbecue and craft beer spot opened its doors with a mission to create a space where everyone feels at home. "I applied to become Rainbow Registered before we even opened," says owner Michael Woodley. "Inclusivity was built into the concept from day one."

That commitment shows up in every detail. From private, fully enclosed stalls in gender-neutral washrooms to the way staff are trained, Which Craft was designed with belonging in mind. "We had delays getting materials for the washrooms," Woodley says, "but it was essential. Everyone should feel safe and respected."

That intention extends to guest interactions. Staff are trained to use gender-neutral language and to ask for pronouns, setting a tone of respect from the moment guests arrive. "We have a zero-tolerance policy—respect is non-negotiable here," Woodley adds. "We're proud of how many reviews mention the atmosphere and how safe people feel just being themselves."

Which Craft goes beyond inclusion to elevate and celebrate community, joy, and expression. The venue regularly hosts drag bingo, full-cast drag shows, queer burlesque, and performances by local alt-drag troupe Riot Queer. Touring companies and Pride fundraisers keep the event calendar lively and inclusive. "These aren't side projects," says Woodley. "They're at the heart of what we do. Earlier this year, our local drag queen Chimaera offered to put me in drag for my 43rd birthday—and I said yes. I gave all of my tips from the night to Pride."





Which Craft owner Mike Woodley (at centre right) glams it up in drag as a birthday fundraiser for Pride.

At Which Craft, allyship isn't performative—it's built into the business structure and culture. Guests and staff alike know that their identities are not just accepted, but respected and celebrated. Woodley acknowledges that more than half of the Which Craft team identifies as 2SLGBTQI+, and leadership is evolving to reflect that representation. "Though I'm a cisgender white male—which I totally get, boooo—I'm surrounded by an incredible team," Woodley says. "My head chef Kirsten is part of the community, and she'll be joining me as a business partner soon."

The commitment doesn't end inside the restaurant. The team actively supports vulnerable communities through Pride fundraisers and uses social platforms to amplify queer voices and urgent causes. As a Rainbow Registered business, it shows that the standard for hospitality isn't just welcoming everyone—it's making sure everyone feels they belong.

"We make sure everyone knows they're safe, heard and loved for who they are," says Woodley.

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PROOF OF CONCEPT:

UNLOCKING LOYALTY & THE MECHANICS OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN CANADA'S BEST BARS

In a world increasingly optimized for lightning speed, solo endeavours, and curated feeds, the bar remains defiantly analog. It is one of the last true commons—a space where strangers cross thresholds without purpose, linger without guilt, and occasionally leave with more than they expected. The appeal isn't merely in the well-crafted drink, but in the possibility. A quick stop for a quiet cocktail might turn into a new connection or story worth retelling.

A great bar offers a pause from the transactional rhythm of daily life, extending permission to be unhurried, present, and open to the unplanned. It's a room where names are remembered, rituals are honoured, and the repetition of small gestures—ice clinking in a glass, the warmth of shared laughter—becomes a kind of soft architecture for connection.

These spaces are not incidental to our culture. They are its scaffolding.

It's a truth that Kim Kuzmak, VP of Lifestyle Benefits, Partnerships and Brand at American Express Canada, understands deeply—not just as a hospitality advocate, but as a strategic thinker in the mechanics of guest loyalty and experience. Loyalty, after all, isn't just a theme for Kuzmak—it's a cornerstone of the American Express business model. The brand has long supported and elevated bars and restaurants that offer the kinds of emotionally resonant experiences their customers crave. For Kuzmak, a bar can be a place that fosters community. And when done right, it becomes fertile ground for something marketers and operators are forever chasing: lasting loyalty.



KIM KUZMAK
VP of Lifestyle Benefits, Partnerships and Brand American Express Canada

"Bars and restaurants are more than places to eat and drink – they're spaces to connect, discover, and support local businesses," says Kuzmak. "It's a passion point for our cardmembers, especially for Gen Z and Millennials who represent our fastest growing demographic. That's why we back initiatives like Canada's Best Bars and continue our long-standing Shop Small program. Whether it's highlighting a neighbourhood staple or helping someone find their new go-to, we're here to champion the places that bring people together."

That word—*together*—carries weight. It also reveals something fundamental about where loyalty is headed. It's not a matter of collecting stamps or chasing offers. Today's guests are investing in how a place makes them feel. They're drawn to places where they are seen,

known, remembered. It's a shift from transactional value to emotional resonance—what Kuzmak describes as "elevated, emotionally resonant experiences."

This is especially true in the bar space, where guests arrive hoping for something a little unexpected and personal: a bartender who remembers their go-to base spirit or a chance connection that makes the night. Bars, at their best, are purveyors of these memorable moments, And memory is the foundation of loyalty.

American Express has leaned into this understanding, aligning its brand more closely with access, presence, and shared experience. Under Kuzmak's leadership, the company's partnerships with bars, restaurants and concert venues across Canada are about creating memorable moments of access and unique experience.

Dining and hospitality, she says, are "industries built on delivering memorable moments—all things our brand is known for too." Through its growing portfolio of dining partnerships and curated experiences across Canada's top culinary destinations including Canada's 100 Best Restaurants, Canada's Best Bars, and MTLàTable, and Platinum Dining Experiences, Amex helps top-tier venues create that magic—while introducing new guests to their spaces. The beauty of this approach is that it works both ways: "Guests gain access to curated experiences they care about, while venues benefit from new exposure and streamlined support."

But the real loyalty play isn't in the transaction—it's in the transformation. What turns a one-time visit into a ritual? What elevates a great drink into a great night, and a great night into a brand memory that lasts? According to Kuzmak, it's the human details. "Today's top restaurants and bars stand out by creating something personal, whether it's a thoughtful welcome or a tailored recommendation. These details may be small, but they're what transforms a good night into a lasting memory."

And that's not just a nice-to-have—it's a data-backed imperative. According to the Amex Trendex, a trend index that tracks consumer sentiment, younger consumers are not only willing to spend on experiences, they *prefer* to. "The data shows a clear trend: membership and exclusive experiences resonate deeply with these younger generations, who value connections over transactions, with 87 per cent expressing a willingness to invest more in once-in-a-lifetime experiences." Kuzmak confirms. That's why the bar world—once viewed as the casual, scrappier cousin of fine dining—is becoming one of the most fertile spaces for experience innovation. Storytelling, mood, music, mixology—when they're in harmony, they create something that transcends a product. For operators, it's no longer enough to be good at cocktails. You have to be good at context. Who's the guest? What do they want to feel? How can we make it personal? This is where loyalty is forged.

It's also where partnerships become powerful. Kuzmak points to Amex's collaborative work with industry tastemakers—not simply as brand amplification, but as ecosystem building. "When we collaborate with chefs, mixologists, and creators, it allows us to bring our community closer to exceptional experiences and help bars and restaurants stand out in a competitive market," she says. "It's good for our customers, and it's great for our merchants."

In other words, experience is the product—but connection is the outcome. And connection, as Kuzmak reminds us, is what the best bars have always offered, and where brands can support and find lasting value. "Our aim is to create access to moments that feel truly singular—experiences that linger," says Kuzmak. "We want guests to walk away from our experiences thinking, 'That wouldn't have been the same without the special access my American Express Card gave me'." That kind of feeling—the sense that you were part of something singular—is the new benchmark for guest satisfaction. Not because it's flashy. But because it's real.

Something that feels, for a moment, like it was just for you.



As part of its ongoing commitment to supporting Canadian hospitality and elevated guest experiences, Amex is a proud RC Show Partner and sponsor of the Speaker Stage and Bar and Beverage Stage panel discussions on the issues that matter most to Canadian operators.

HOW CANADA'S BEST BARS TURN VISION INTO GUEST EXPERIENCE

Great cocktail programs are no longer enough to put a bar on the national map. Today's stand-outs pair excellence with a defined vision—and, above all, with hospitality that feels personal rather than choreographed. To see how that alchemy works in practice, we spoke with the teams behind three of Canada's top bars.

BAR POMPETTE

Toronto, Ontario
Canada's 100 Best Bars
2025 | No. 1



Photo by Jessica Blaine Smith

Toronto's Little Italy is full of places that claim to feel like home, but only one began life as a pandemic pivot and wound up crowned the country's best bar without reservations or velvet ropes. Bar Pompette—a 30-seat room with a marble counter and French café bones—didn't set out to be a destination. It set out, says co-owner and celebrated mixologist Maxime Hoerth, "to be a nice, neighbourhood space that people enjoy. Seeing the room full of people having fun—whether they have cocktails, a beer, a glass of wine—that's what drives us."

Hoerth and original partner Jonathan Bauer (sommelier) share an uncanny, almost mirror-image résumé. Both grew up in Strasbourg, trained side-by-side at the city's hospitality lycée, and rotated through every station—from pastry bench to concierge desk—before graduation. Hoerth's next stops were Luxembourg and Switzerland, then Paris, where he rose from bar-back to running the Four Seasons George V cocktail programme by the age of twenty-five. Bauer also landed in Paris, curating wine service for chef Daniel Rose, while his wife, Martine Bauer, worked as chef to the French Prime Minister in the city.

Their personal lives stayed in sync, even welcoming a first child within days of each other. When the 2015 terror attacks crippled Parisian tourism, the longtime friends revisited a standing promise to raise their children in a safer city. A mutual friend suggested Toronto, and within 72 hours both families had agreed to move.

From first blush, the vision for a new restaurant was sketched out in close partnership between Hoerth and the Bauers, and the three partners landed in Toronto with a fully sketched concept. Following a challenging search for a space, they finally secured a College Street lease and opened Pompette in March 2020—barely a week before the pandemic shut the city down.

A rapid pivot to take-out kept cash flowing, though Ontario's liquor rules initially barred cocktails to-go. Directly across the street, a space that had housed a once-popular café called The Walton, a pandemic casualty, had sat idle for a year. Brokers dismissed it as "too big for coffee, too small for a restaurant, with no kitchen," but the partners saw the opportunity for a purpose-built "playground for drinks."

In July 2021, Bar Pompette opened in the former café's footprint, with bartender Hugo Togni (another hometown connection) eventually joining the partnership. Hoerth shares that the original vision was for an Italian-style café. "You focus on coffee during the day, and then you transition to low ABV, and then cocktails at night, closing around 10:00," he explains. It soon became clear that while the morning espresso service was faltering, the evenings were booming. By autumn they boldly dropped daytime hours to lean fully into cocktails and small plates.

"Bar Pompette doesn't really have a 'concept," Hoerth allows. "The place is mostly us… each of us had a vision of what we wanted to create, and that blend created Bar Pompette."

The Walton provided strong bones the team could use to build the guest experience. "The space was already really cute," Hoerth says. "It had a French-European-café vibe with a marble counter and lovely back patio. We kept what worked and refurbished everything else, adding more French details. The Walton was really a neighborhood favourite, and we wanted to preserve that. We weren't interested in opening an international cocktail bar, we wanted to open a local joint for the community that supported us through the pandemic years. We wanted to recreate what made The Walton great, but as a great local bar. That was our biggest vision."

Hoerth believes the signature Bar Pompette experience stems from the unique and collaborative partnership between a chef, a sommelier and two bartenders. "A sommelier is going to have a focus on taste, the evolutions, bitters and certain notes. A bartender is going to engage on the techniques and compare the results to the many hundreds of drinks we're familiar with. A chef also tastes



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things differently. So, the brainstorming reflects everybody's approach and helps create something unique. That being said, we also want to keep things simple and approachable. We all have a culinary background, so we use a lot of techniques. We did not want guests to feel that when they try a drink. The menu is a promise. When you read the name of a cocktail and you see its ingredients, that's what you should expect and ultimately taste."

Five house classics anchor the cocktail list—the *Nitro Colada*, a nitrogen-charged Piña Colada, the roasted-grapefruit *Paloma Quemada*, the dill-brined *Cornichon Martini*, the anise-kissed *11 a.m. in Marseille*, and the smoky and woodsy *Fire Escape* scotch highball. Seven rotating slots change with the seasons or when a new idea captures the team's imagination. Behind a closed prep door, centrifuges clarify juice, Clinebell blocks turn into crystal spears, and nitrogen rigs push kegged cocktails to the glass in ten seconds—yet guests rarely hear details about how Pompette classics like the *Nitro Colada* are crafted: fresh pineapple is juiced, clarified, blended with coconut-oil-washed rum, homemade falernum and curry-leaf tincture, then kegged and nitrogenated. It lands velvety and ice-cold, in about 10 seconds. "We don't really mention our techniques," Hoerth says. "They're not a secret, but we're not trying to showcase that aspect of our menu. It's not what we want guests to feel or think about when they drink it. When you visit a restaurant, you remember the sauce was delicious. You don't ask, 'How did you do this?'."

Pompette claimed the top spot on Canada's 100 Best Bars in both 2024 and 2025, and climbed to No. 7 on North America's 50 Best Bars 2025, adding yet another trophy to an already crowded shelf. "We haven't changed a thing," Hoerth says. "What we do now is working well, so we're focused on fixing small things and always trying to be even better." The no-reservation policy stays. Regulars who kept the bar alive during lockdown can still wander in on a Tuesday and claim their



Photo by Jessica Blaine Smith

stools. The team reinvests in new tools—extra ice freezers, ergonomic mats, bigger prep sinks—and into staff culture. "We let our staff be whoever they are within the Bar Pompette frame," Hoerth says. Happy bartenders, he believes, make faster, better drinks.

While destination drinkers line up on weekends, Pompette still behaves like a corner joint because, as Hoerth puts it, "without the community we wouldn't be here today. If the room is full of neighbours laughing over whatever they're drinking, we've done our job." By that measure the bar is thriving.

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PROPHECY

Vancouver, British Columbia
Canada's 100 Best Bars 2025 | No. 7

Prophecy does not announce itself with neon or sidewalk chalk. Guests pass through the Rosewood Hotel Georgia's historic lobby and slip behind an unmarked door that leads down a staircase into "a pretty cool, dynamic basement area," as bar director Jeff Savage describes it. "That's pretty unique for Vancouver. We also benefit from specialized licensing that lets us cater to people who are sitting down and soaking up the room, as well as to people who want to stand, talk, dance, and hear live music. Those silos of experience just don't exist elsewhere in the city." The room first opened in 1927, yet Savage and his partners—Teddy Wilkie, Mike Rose, and Justin Mensah-Coker—have reshaped it for a Vancouver audience that, in their view, craves hospitality over spectacle and conversation over posture.

Jeff Savage's career began in academia, where he researched civic participation and sustainability. The work made him, as he puts it, "obsessed with the idea of a third space—the zone between work and home where strangers connect and community takes root." When he switched to hospitality, that concept guided him: "I came in already valuing that sanctuary, a place where people can meet, connect, and find real value in each other."

Teddy Wilkie's résumé details a long hospitality journey through Cactus Club, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, and, since 2016, his own Banter Room in Yaletown. He frames Prophecy's goal in straightforward terms: "We knew we wanted to be a high-end cocktail



Prophecy Bar Director, Jeff Savage

bar, but the hospitality had to shine through in a way that's unpretentious and fun. Some five-star places forget the human part. What we thrive on is creating memorable moments: remembering someone's last drink, starting them with a riff before they even ask, turning the room from sultry jazz to DJ energy without losing the sense of welcome."

The partnership clicked, improbably, in an airport lounge. Savage had just left Botanist, where he had spent six years and collected a shelf of international cocktail-competition trophies. Wilkie and Rose were returning from meetings with a New York agency that was helping them distill a concept for the Hotel Georgia basement. "We were literally sitting across from Jeff at LaGuardia," Wilkie recalls. A few weeks later the three were trading ideas. One branding exercise asked which car best matched the concept. "We thought, an Aston Martin James Bond edition DB5," Wilkie laughs. "Really slick on the outside, but with bells and whistles under the hood—the intangibles, the people, the way we train and empower the team."

Savage's first task was to write a menu that matched that metaphor: elegant at a glance, intricate once you lifted the bonnet. He refused to lead with laboratory jargon. "We can make the nerdiest cocktail you want," he says, "but we present it in a way that's honest, fun, engaging. Cocktails, like food, can be cultural touchstones, so every menu is a love letter—to the space, to our staff, to the people walking through the door." The list carries deeply personal references: a drive across the Rockies that always smells of ponderosa pine; a childhood song that reminds him of his family dog; the novels that kept him company during long shifts in earlier bars. Each drink's headnote tells that story in plain language. Only if a guest insists will the bartender explain the rotary evaporator or agar clarification that underpins the flavour.

One drink, the *Northern Lights*, has become Prophecy's thesis statement. "It's a gin drink—refreshing, floral, a bit funky and herbaceous," Savage says. The backbone is Labrador tea, wild-foraged in the boreal forest and bought directly from Indigenous pickers. The drink arrives under a low-lying fog of rosemary-grapefruit air, while a soft light in the base cycles through aurora colours. "It's our most photographed serve," Savage admits, "But the point is the story." The menu note, "*Souls of the past serving as guides, a fox made of fire, a celestial love story, or a reminder that in the darkest of nights, we are still not alone. An homage to stories told by people that call the North home.*" perfectly conjures the setting. "Stories are what unite us," Savage adds. "If a cocktail reminds you we're all connected, that's worth more than the garnish."

Wilkie guards against pretence by insisting on low- and no-alcohol options that match the main list in complexity. "People are spending more money on health and wellness than on going out drinking," he says. "Our no- and low-ABV cocktails have the same story, thought, balance. That's table stakes now." Prices stay within reach because, as he puts it, "You shouldn't feel a place is only for special occasions. If Monday night means one low-ABV spritz and live jazz, that's a win." The licensing allows live musicians on Wednesdays and DJs on weekends, letting the room breathe with the week's rhythm. The space can seat couples at linen-draped two-tops or fill with standing guests when the tempo rises. "It morphs from date-night calm to 'let's-party' energy without asking anyone to leave," Wilkie says.

Staff training revolves around the phrase "memorable moments," lifted directly from Wilkie's management playbook. Employees learn each table's preferred level of engagement: some guests want to hear the folklore behind their drink, others simply want it cold and quick. Either way, the bartender begins by acknowledging the person, not the order. "I want them to feel like they're coming into our home," Wilkie says. "Most of us spend more time here than in our actual homes."

Savage's academic past also shapes hiring. During a recent interview a candidate asked what part of his job he loved most that he never expected. "No one had ever asked that before," he says, still delighted. "I told her: I used to love handing a drink across the bar and seeing that first sip. Now I watch someone walk in, take in the room, the music, the lighting, our staff, the menu, and finally that first sip. It's the same moment, just bigger."

Prophecy's programming folds in the broader cocktail world so Vancouver does not feel, in Savage's words, "like a sleepier, fly-over town." Mexico City's Handshake bar recently took over the room; other international guests



are pencilled in. "We want to be a cornerstone when people think about Vancouver and a place locals feel proud of," Savage says. These collaborations leave behind spirits and ideas that surface in the next menu cycle, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a global scene.

Running a bar in 2025 means grappling with numbers that show fewer Canadians drinking less alcohol more selectively. Savage and Wilkie meet that reality by focusing on experience first. "If the competition's on, we have to be the next place people want to come back to," Wilkie says. That competition is not other bars so much as the couch, the streaming service, the meditation app. Prophecy therefore stretches its appeal: older guests appreciate the hotel's pedigree; younger drinkers photograph the fog-lit cocktails; everyone hears genuine welcome in the greeting.

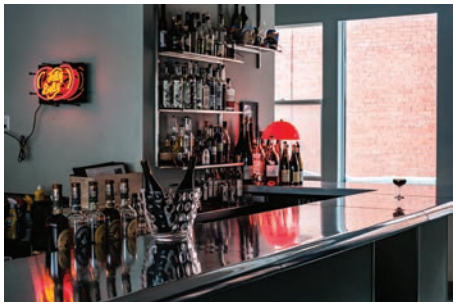
Asked what element of Prophecy might teach a struggling bar, Savage returns to his third-space theory. "Our job," he says, "is to give you something you didn't know you wanted, tell you why it matters, and make sure you feel completely at ease while you're drinking it." Wilkie echoes the point: "Authenticity is what people feel. If the staff believe in what they're serving, guests will feel that."

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MISSY'S THIS THAT

Calgary, Alberta
Canada's 100 Best Bars 2025 | No. 8





Missy's This That sits above a corner convenience store in Calgary, reached by an outdoor staircase that feels more like a service entrance than a grand reveal. Inside, the room is bright and spare—18-foot ceilings, gallery-white walls, and sunlight pouring through southwest windows. On any given night you might see twenty-something skateboarders nursing bottles of Moosehead beside couples uncorking four-figure Burgundy, proof of the broad, inclusive appeal that lies at the heart of Missy's success.

Owner-operator Thomas Dahlgren spent fifteen years in wine and spirits before he sold his share in a polished wine-bar project. "That was really, really good timing," he says. He wanted "something a little bit more accessible, somewhere all friends can come to," yet still serious about the products he's passionate about. Missy's opened in late 2021 with a staff of four and a cocktail list drafted on the fly, and it has thrived by holding contradictions in tension: minimalist dive energy with Champagne-salon inventory, neighbourhood bar prices with world-class bottles, casual service with meticulous curation.

The bar's name embodies its spirit of comfortable eccentricity. Early in the pandemic, Dahlgren adopted a stray that shelter staff had misgendered. In an error that would prove auspicious, its file read "Missy." The name stuck, and the bar was named in his honour.

Dahlgren stocks the back bar with the same rigour and wide-eyed curiosity he brings to his cellar, choosing bottles for provenance and character rather than for the name on the label. "All of the spirits we use are really, really artisanal—hand-made and reflective of place, history and culture." Alberta's open liquor market lets him go further: Missy's inventory includes many special-order products unavailable anywhere else in North America, including fruit-based eaux-de-vie from Etter, the legendary Swiss distillery. Those spirits appear in finishing sprays or as the aromatic spine of cocktails, and they underpin a menu built on story rather than technique. "We're starting with really great spirits and trying to coax the most out of those without really doing too much to them," he says, acknowledging that this approach—a respect for the spirits at the heart of the cocktail—is the foundation of his philosophy.



It's revealing to note that Missy's third-best-selling drink for three years running is the Orange Yuzu Glad, a shaken Scotch cocktail with two ounces of Glenmorangie brightened with Spanish almond orgeat, yuzu and a touch of orange. Dahlgren allows that while scotch whisky is beloved by many passionate enthusiasts, some still find the spirit challenging. This cocktail proves whisky can be playful without disguising itself, the same way the bar's 100-plus Champagne labels can coexist with proletariat lager. "Quality never goes out of style," Dahlgren says, and the list shows it with Burgundy's reds and whites and Champagne poured by the glass.

Dahlgren's refusal to fashion Missy's as a special-occasion bar is a strategic throughline. Cocktails sit between fifteen and twenty-one dollars; wine mark-ups stay lean so bottles move. "I'd rather sell the stuff, create volume and keep the room buzzing." Roughly a third of nightly guests are regulars. Many come for a single glass; others stage Champagne flights; but all, he hopes, leave thinking the cheque matched the experience. "A bar should be fun," he says. "You should have tried something new or unexpected and feel like it was a good deal."

Music shapes that fun. The oversize sound system hums just shy of conversation-crushing; Dahlgren calls it a "major aspect of the vibe." Food—house chips, tinned seafood, charcuterie—accounts for barely ten percent of sales yet unlocks higher wine spends: "If you want to sell a five-hundred-dollar bottle, you need something to complement it." Enthusiasm travels from staff to guest. "Selling stuff you actually like—and that your staff likes—is massive. If no one's excited, the guest will feel that."

Accolades arrived quickly. Missy's landed at No. 8 on Canada's 100 Best Bars 2025 and placed No. 52 in the North America's 50 Best Bars 2025 ranking, bumps that brought both new business and heightened expectations. Balancing a casual concept with top-ten status can be "tricky," Dahlgren concedes, but he answers by "upping our game a little bit" while keeping prices democratic.

Missy's proves Calgary's appetite for discovery is stronger than ever. By pairing fine wines, Champagne magnums and spirit-led cocktails with snackable favourites like *Brown Anchovy & Fancy Butter Toast* and *Spanish Seafood Conservas*, and *Covered Bridge Chips*, Dahlgren shows that a bar powered by curiosity and genuine welcome can fill seats night after night—and climb national and continental best-bar lists. In an industry too often split between high gloss and low expectations, Missy's stands as evidence that passion-driven eclecticism is not just viable; it's award-winning.

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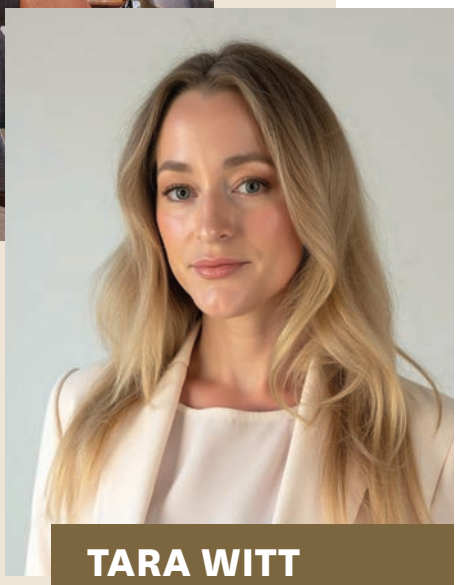
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TARA WITT
Founder of **Tru Contract Interiors**

Before Tara Witt became one of the hospitality industry's go-to voices on sensory design and furniture strategy, she was behind the bar—learning the business from the floor up. What began as a university job eventually evolved into a career at the intersection of aesthetics, comfort, and functionality.

Today, Witt is the Founder of **Tru Contract Interiors**, known for its high-quality, commercial design solutions for restaurants, hotels, and other commercial venues across Canada. "Hospitality is the best industry in the world," Witt says. "It's about creating spaces where people feel welcome, whether they're gathering or dining solo. That experience is everything."

In this conversation with MENU, Witt unpacks the often-overlooked power of sensory design—and why the most impactful restaurant spaces aren't just beautiful—they're intentional.

MM We're really excited to speak with you, specifically on design elements people might overlook—like ambience and sensory elements. How would you define sensory design, and why is it important in restaurants?

Tara Witt: *Sensory design is fascinating because hospitality is, at its core, a feeling. Sensory, by definition, is about feeling. You've got interior design, which is visual and technical. Then you've got restaurant operations, which are often chaotic—equal parts art and science. These two worlds don't always mesh perfectly.*

But the piece in the middle—the guest experience—is shaped by how you feel in the space. If you overlook sensory design, you're missing the opportunity to shape how your guests feel. That emotional connection is essential.

MM What common oversights do you see operators making when they're designing a new concept or refurbishing a space?

TW: *The first mistake is not hiring a designer, and I can't stress that enough. A lot of people think, "I've got a Pinterest board, I can do this." But the money you think you're saving by doing it yourself; you'll likely spend fixing mistakes. Working with a designer helps you avoid costly errors and ensures you're specifying the right materials and pieces. It's just more profitable in the long run.*

The second mistake is being too focused on the part of the business you know best. For example, if you're a chef and all you care about is the menu, you're probably going to overlook some really important design and operational details.

MM How do you help align different visions to create consensus on the design?

TW: *Very carefully! Often, the operator has one vision in their head, and the designer has another. You need a meeting of the minds. It's about slowing down and explaining things clearly.*

It works both ways. Sometimes a designer might say, "Let's specify all four-tops as 36x36 and all two-tops as 30x32." But that doesn't make sense operationally—those tables can't be pushed together if you need to maximize covers on a busy night. Practical considerations make a big difference, and come from experience—like having been a server myself and knowing the panic of trying to rejig the floor mid-service. So, part of my role is to mediate and ensure both design and operations are talking to each other.

MM Do most operators understand how design impacts profitability and not just aesthetics?

TW: *That's a good question—and a tough one. There's a huge range. Some operators deeply respect design and admit upfront, "I know that I don't know everything." And those are the ones who shine. They're the ones earning Michelin stars and setting new standards.*

On the flip side, you get operators who are afraid to commit. They don't want to spend the money or let anyone else into their vision. But you can't be the best at everything. You can't foresee every outcome. That approach is risky.

And right now, financially, a lot of people are trying to scale back and be frugal. But the ones who know what they're doing—they'll still make space in the budget for the elements that matter.



COMMODORE restaurant in the Hôtel HONEYROSE, Montreal. Photo by Adrien Williams.

Lighting, Acoustics, Materials and Flow: The Other Half of Great Design

MM Let's talk about lighting. Why is it so important, and how does it affect the guest experience?

TW: *Lighting is huge. It shapes perception, comfort, even your operational flow. If the room's too dim, guests can't read the menu. That's frustrating and makes them feel uncomfortable right from the start.*

If it's too bright, it feels clinical or institutional—like you're in a cafeteria or dentist's office. People feel rushed and exposed. Natural light can be tricky too. If you have large windows and the sun's glaring through at certain times, it's uncomfortable. No one wants to wear sunglasses at their table.

When someone feels uncomfortable, they are not looking to make purchases. They are not thinking of leaving a great review. They are just thinking about when they will feel comfortable again.

Lighting sets the tone for everything that follows in the dining experience.

Does lighting affect how food is perceived?

TW: *Absolutely. Imagine a steak comes out under cool-toned lighting—the centre might look grey even if it's perfectly cooked. That increases the chance the guest will send it back. Now you're losing on food costs. That guest may not have a great experience, which could impact your reviews. Your staff might get a lower tip. That one moment can throw off the energy of a whole shift.*

There are actual psychological studies on this. Warm lighting has been shown to increase comfort and appetite. Cool lighting tends to suppress hunger and can make people feel uncomfortable or even anxious. But lighting doesn't have to be expensive—it just has to be intentional.

What about sound? What role do acoustics play in the guest experience?

TW: *Sound is a huge factor. In my experience, it's actually the number one complaint people have about the sensory experience in a space.*

If we take Toronto as an example, the median age is around 40, and one in 10 people in the GTA has some form of hearing loss. And the people spending money right now—people like me—are what I call the "headphone generation." We've spent decades with earbuds in. So how we process sound, especially in social environments, can be very different.

High reverb and echo can be painful or overstimulating. And for guests who are neurodivergent, that kind of sound environment can completely derail their experience and sense of comfort. In the QSR (quick service restaurant) space—with tile flooring, hardwood, hard walls, maybe an open kitchen with lots of stainless steel—sound is bouncing off every surface. Then someone comes in at lunch, has their FaceTime call on speaker at full volume... and now that sound is bouncing around the entire space, ruining the experience for everyone.

So how can operators manage or mitigate noise?

TW: *There are solutions at every price point. You can go all out with custom upholstered ceiling baffles and high-end acoustic treatments. But you can also make a big impact with more modest additions. For example, upholstered booth or banquette seating along a wall helps absorb sound. It's functional and helps you define your floor plan. It also keeps chairs from scraping and clattering, which adds to the noise.*

Acoustic wall panels are another option. There are so many stylish choices now—wood slat panels, decorative hexagonal felt tiles, or architectural finishes backed with sound-absorbing fabric. It's about mixing your materials and incorporating softness wherever you can.

Operational Considerations, Inclusive Design & What's Next in Sensory Strategy

How does restaurant layout affect both experience and operations?

TW: *First and foremost, your staff need clear sightlines. They have to be able to see and monitor their tables, and they need clear paths to move through. If they can't do that, service suffers—and so does the guest experience. A smart layout reduces chaos. It prevents collisions, improves accessibility, and sends a message that thought has gone into the space. That matters to guests.*

From a marketing standpoint, sightlines matter too. Let's say you've got a patio with staggered seating. Even if it's only half full, it looks busy. And when people see a busy restaurant, they assume it's good. But if all your tables are the same height and some of the front ones are empty, it can create the illusion that the place is dead—even if the back is full.

You also need to make sure aisles accommodate mobility aids and strollers. If someone larger struggles to get between tables, that's a terrible feeling. It makes people feel unseen. And that's the opposite of hospitality. Creating logical zones for different party sizes, leaving room to move, and designing with varied sightlines are my top recommendations.

What are some affordable, often-overlooked changes operators can make to improve guest experience?

TW: *I mentioned the use of layered textures like upholstered banquettes, which are relatively inexpensive and can make a big difference in comfort and acoustics. Low-cost LED tabletop lamps create intimacy, let guests control their own space, and add function without disrupting the overall lighting scheme.*

A lot of the acoustic treatments I mentioned earlier can also serve as design features. Instead of investing in wall art or a mural, make your acoustic solution the centrepiece. We've done wood panel installations with laser-cut logos—it becomes brand art and sound mitigation in one. Green, biophilic touches are also calming and affordable, and fabric technology has come so far—there are commercial-grade materials with built-in ionic stain resistance that feel amazing and look

WHAT'S ON TREND FOR RESTAURANT INTERIORS

There's a big emphasis on natural materials, and I don't see that changing anytime soon. You're seeing a lot of wood, cane, rattan, raw ceramics, and linens. These materials ground a space and give it warmth and authenticity.

Tactility is also deeply connected to trust. Guests associate soft, natural textures with care, cleanliness, and quality. And from a sensory design perspective, these materials are great—they absorb sound, they don't create harsh reflections, and they're visually calming.

Biophilic design—bringing in natural or nature-inspired elements—is definitely having a moment. Greenery, natural shapes, and organic materials all promote a sense of calm and well-being.

And on the flip side, we're moving away from two extremes: the hyper-matched, institutional look, and what I call "garage sale chic," where nothing matches and it's just chaos. There's a happy middle ground that feels curated but natural.

elevated. You can have a rich faux velvet that's durable, acoustically effective, and totally on-brand.

Another idea is table flexibility. If you've got square or rectangular tables, adding a shallow half-moon extension at the end can give you the option to create oval-shaped tables. That makes it easier for guests—especially older guests—to see and converse with everyone at the table. You get that social ease without committing to a permanent oversized table that might sit empty half the time.

MM That ties into the idea of having everything work together—not just individually. Can you describe how those adjustments might come together to tell a brand story?

TW: *Exactly—and "brand story" is the key phrase here. When operators take the time to do proper strategic planning before opening, everything gets clearer. You identify your brand voice, your ethos, your values. And once you know who your guest is, you can design for them.*

It's really about translating your brand values into sensory cues—what people see, touch, hear, and even smell.

MM That leads into the bigger question—how do you help operators balance their creative vision with operational realities and profitability?

TW: *I work closely with a lot of incredible designers, and a lot of it comes down to logic, communication, and empathy. The best outcomes happen when both sides put themselves in the shoes of the guest. Designers are typically stronger at imagining the sensory and emotional side of the experience. Operators know what's happening behind the scenes—how the team moves, where the pressure points are.*

When those conversations happen early—ideally during the strategic planning phase—you avoid costly mistakes later. Everyone understands what the space needs to feel like and what it needs to do. That's where the magic happens.



COMMODORE restaurant in the Hôtel HONEYROSE, Montreal. Photo by Adrien Williams.

MM You've touched on inclusivity a few times. How can operators design more accessible and inclusive spaces—especially for neurodivergent guests and an aging population?

TW: *Accessibility is one of the most important and most misunderstood aspects of design. People are afraid to ask about it because they don't want to get it wrong.*

In Ontario, the AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) provides legal parameters around things like clearance widths, washroom design, and ramp requirements. But accessibility goes far beyond code compliance. Can someone read your menu? That matters. We have an aging population, and older guests often need high contrast, softer acoustics, and more comfortable seating. If you don't offer that, you're excluding a major demographic.

Neurodivergent guests may need different types of sensory environments—quieter zones, less visual chaos, softer lighting. And honestly, many of the same design choices that benefit neurodivergent guests benefit everyone.

You don't have to guess—ask your guests what works for them and what doesn't. Hospitality is about making people feel seen and comfortable. That starts with understanding that needs aren't one-size-fits-all.

MM Looking ahead, what innovations or shifts do you see shaping the next generation of restaurant interiors?

TW: *Acoustics, hands down. More people are aware of it now, so I expect to see more investment in acoustic panels and mixed-material ceilings.*

We're also seeing natural materials paired with subtle technology—creating "quiet luxury" spaces that feel elevated but comforting. Think deep velvets, curved furniture, warm light. It's aspirational but not flashy—more like the kind of luxury you dream of having at home, experienced communally.

Assistive technologies are shaping how spaces are built—like digital menus that are compatible with screen readers, or seating designed to accommodate different mobility needs.

We're moving from a model of directing the guest experience to one of co-creating it. It's about asking, "What kind of experience do you want to have here?" and designing for that. And it's not just feel-good—it's good business. When you ask people what makes them comfortable, and you actually apply it, they come back. They tell their friends. That's what hospitality is. That's what gets you a five-star review.

It's such a simple idea, but still underutilized. Operators are investing in experience, not just aesthetics. It's also about how we interact with the world now. Everything is reviewed, rated, and shared. You book a restaurant based on its Google score. You're prompted to leave a review after your Uber ride. That's just how we live now.

So operators need to think, "What can I do to earn five stars?" It's not just about the food—it's about the feeling. And sensory design plays a massive role in that.

About Tara Witt

Tara Witt is the founder of Tru Contract Interiors, a company that specializes in supply of furniture, wallcovering, flooring, lighting, art, mirrors, and fabrics for hospitality spaces. With a background in foodservice and a deep understanding of both operations and aesthetics, Tara collaborates with designers, restaurateurs, and procurement teams to bring spaces to life in ways that are functional, welcoming, and aligned with brand voices. She believes the guest experience starts with how a space makes you *feel*, and that every detail plays a role.

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Restaurants Canada

The voice of foodservice | La voix des services alimentaires

(02-2025)

COOKING WITH CONFIDENCE:

LA TABLÉE DES CHEFS' KITCHEN BRIGADES PROGRAM IS EMPOWERING CANADA'S YOUTH



La Tablée des Chefs

In school gyms and classroom kitchens across the country, something powerful is simmering. It's called **Kitchen Brigades**—a year-long culinary training and life skills program delivered by La Tablée des Chefs, and it's transforming the way young people think about food, health, and themselves.

Launched with a mission to combat food insecurity through education and engagement, Kitchen Brigades goes far beyond simple cooking instruction. Each year, teams of 16 to 25 students dive into a series of hands-on workshops, exploring everything from food safety and nutrition to multicultural cuisine and creative plating. The curriculum blends technical skills with teamwork, leadership, and a strong sense of social responsibility—nurturing not only capable cooks, but confident individuals.

It's part culinary boot camp, part mentorship incubator. Under the guidance of professional chefs and educators, students learn to collaborate, solve problems, and take pride in the meals they create. The program culminates in high-energy culinary challenges, including a national final hosted by Quebec food media icon Ricardo. Since 2023, winning brigades have also represented Canada on an international stage, facing off against top student teams from France in a spirited cross-Atlantic competition.

If you ask anyone from the La Tablée des Chefs team and program instructors to the young people enrolled in the program, they'll tell you: the real win isn't the trophy. It's the transformation. For many participants, Kitchen Brigades marks the first time they've taken ownership of what they eat—or seen a path toward a culinary career. It's about creating access, inspiring confidence, and ensuring every young person has a seat at the table.

In a world where food insecurity, poor nutrition, and lack of opportunity continue to challenge youth across Canada, Kitchen Brigades proves that a chef's knife can be a powerful tool for change. But it's the people behind the program—the dedicated chefs and culinary mentors—who truly bring that mission to life. In classrooms and kitchens from coast to coast, these instructors don't just teach recipes; they spark curiosity, model resilience, and help shape the next generation of changemakers.

Here are just a few of the inspiring individuals leading the charge.



Lighting the Spark

RAY PATRICK ROYANDOYAN
KITCHEN BRIGADES CHEF TRAINER SINCE 2023

"When I was in culinary school, my chef said that if any one of us, even just one, becomes a chef 'I know I did my job'. This stuck with me especially having been in the kitchen for several years," says Chef Ray Patrick Royandoyan. "The idea of giving back and sharing your knowledge and experiences to the next generation has stirred my passions more. When I learned of La Tablée des Chefs and knew that we have a shared vision for the youth, I immediately jumped on the opportunity and have been relishing the experience since."

In his short time as a Kitchen Brigades instructor, Royandoyan has already witnessed the impact the program can have—not just on students' culinary abilities, but on their confidence, direction, and sense of possibility. "I had a student who was talented and had passion for cooking. She was shy and was still finding her way when we started. I assisted her, taught the necessary skills and helped her find her confidence. This led to her being the leader and an essential part of the winning Kitchen Brigades competition group," he recalls. "She gained a lot of confidence within herself and her cooking and is now pursuing her culinary studies. And this reminded me of what my chef taught me, and I know I did my job."

Royandoyan hopes his students walk away from the program with more than just kitchen skills. "I want them to be organized and disciplined—for what they've learned in the kitchen to spill over to their daily lives. I want them to be challenged, to learn the value of hard work, that being in a competition and team environment will bring out the best of them and learn how to deal with adversity—knowing that, whatever the outcome, they will come out stronger and better."

And above all, he wants them to find passion. "Even if they don't pursue cooking, I hope it shows them what passion is and what it can do to help them go forward."

When asked what advice he'd give to a young person considering a culinary career, he shares a story that's stuck with him: "When I was a student, a chef was speaking to us about his career. He said 'When you're happy and want to celebrate, you don't go out and heal a patient or build a building, you go out and eat. I'm not a doctor or an engineer, but I am a chef. And when you want to celebrate happy memories that's where I come in and something a doctor or engineer can't do.' I learned that chefs bring joy to people. We don't just feed, we also give them happiness and good memories."

One moment that continues to resonate came early in his teaching experience, when he saw the power of purpose firsthand. "Before I told the class about the competition and the chance to travel at the end of the program, most of them weren't very focused—they were mostly just there to eat. But once I mentioned it, everything flipped. Suddenly, everyone was more serious about their lessons and motivated to improve. It gave them a goal to work toward by the end of the program. I learned that students need to be properly challenged, and that having a clear goal helps keep them motivated. They need to learn how to lose well and to win well—and to understand the value of hard work and teamwork."

For Chef Royandoyan, teaching is not just about techniques or recipes—it's about belief. About knowing that sometimes, showing a student what's possible is enough to change a life.

Sparking Passion Through Practice

CHEF MICHAEL TYBER
KITCHEN BRIGADES INSTRUCTOR SINCE 2024



For Chef Michael Tyber, joining La Tablée des Chefs' Kitchen Brigades felt like coming full circle.

"I started cooking in a program similar to this when I was young, and it sparked a passion for me to make a career in the restaurant industry," he says. "After almost a decade working in restaurants and foodservice it seemed like a natural progression to start passing my knowledge and passion on to others as was done for me."

Since stepping into the instructor role, he's been collecting moments—big and small—that reinforce just how powerful this kind of program can be. "Honestly, every class has given me memories to last a lifetime," he reflects. "One that sticks out is when other faculty members came by to see what the course was all about and taste some food. This particular class liked really spicy food, so I always tried to bring in new hot sauces and things for them to experiment with. I warned the faculty that the students like to make their food quite spicy and to be careful. Seeing the look on their faces when they tasted it and said, 'You weren't kidding!' and 'Wow, you've got these kids really cooking!' was very special. It was a great reminder of how this course can allow the students to explore and discover their own taste preferences."

Beyond the kitchen skills, Tyber wants his students to walk away with something deeper: the resilience to try, fail, and keep going. "I hope the

students gain self confidence and an understanding that it is ok to fail sometimes when starting something new," he says. "We can always learn from our mistakes, and that is universal to all parts of life."

His advice to students dreaming of a culinary career is similarly grounded, encouraging them to, "Practice, practice, practice. Do not be afraid to start out as a prep cook, you will learn and hone all the necessary skills for a successful culinary career. Treat the beginning of your career as education over everything else. Focus on learning as much as you can and gaining exposure in as many areas as you can find."

But the moment that lingers most comes after the burners have cooled and the aprons come off. "After every class the students talk about how excited they are to use the skills we learned to cook for their families at home," Tyber says. "It's extremely rewarding to see a direct impact beyond the classroom. I also think about how proud their parents must be when they taste the food. These kids can really cook."





Transmettre la passion, un atelier à la fois

CHEF ANNY MARLEAU
INSTRUCTEUR DES BRIGADES CULINAIRES DEPUIS 2013

Éprise de cuisine depuis l'âge de 7 ans, elle n'a pas immédiatement fait carrière dans ce domaine. Mais arrivée à la fin de la trentaine, la passion a pris toute la place. Elle s'est alors lancée dans plusieurs formations et a commencé à offrir des ateliers culinaires dans divers milieux : communautaires, épiceries, et plus encore.

« Avec La Tablée des Chefs, dès leurs débuts, il était naturel pour moi de me sentir interpellée. »

En 2013, elle commence à s'impliquer bénévolement auprès de l'organisme. Rapidement, elle devient cheffe formatrice. Depuis, elle a semé des graines culinaires dans le cœur de nombreux jeunes—graines qui, parfois, refleurissent des années plus tard.

« Il y a quelques années, une jeune de secondaire 1 est arrivée à la rencontre pré-brigade en me demandant si c'était moi qui avais donné les ateliers culinaires au IGA. Réponse positive. Elle me dit : 'J'ai tout fait les ateliers avec toi, et c'est la raison pour laquelle je suis ici aujourd'hui. Tu m'as fait découvrir la passion de la cuisine au travers ta façon de nous partager la tienne.' Elle est là chaque année, et maintenant rendue en secondaire 4. »

Son souhait pour les jeunes? Qu'ils repartent avec plus que des compétences. Avec du plaisir, une curiosité sensorielle, et une approche simple mais éclairée de l'alimentation.

« Je souhaite que les jeunes repartent surtout avec le plaisir de cuisiner au quotidien, de connaître les enjeux de la saine alimentation et de les appliquer simplement au quotidien, sans se casser la tête. Créer dans le plaisir de tous les sens. »

Elle aime aussi partager son propre parcours, preuve qu'il n'y a pas une seule bonne façon de faire les choses.

« Je leur dis toujours qu'il y a tellement de possibilités. Je leur partage mon parcours qui n'est pas standard du tout. Que la passion aide grandement à être heureux dans la vie. Alors, la vivre dans notre travail est un grand plus. »

Ce qui l'anime profondément, c'est le contact humain—particulièrement avec les jeunes en situation plus vulnérable.

« Entrer en contact avec les jeunes du secondaire, des centres jeunesse en fin de parcours, les jeunes avec des difficultés particulières, tout ça m'aide à rester le plus humain possible. Entrer en contact avec l'humain, dans l'écoute, simplement, se servir de la bouffe pour y accéder... n'est-ce pas la plus belle façon de vivre? »

Empathy, Education & the Power of Food



CHEF JUNG SUK AHN, PHD.
KITCHEN BRIGADES INSTRUCTOR SINCE 2024

With over two decades of experience spanning the food industry and academia in both the United States and South Korea, Dr. Jung Suk Ahn brings rare depth to the Kitchen Brigades program. He's led operations in restaurants and foodservice enterprises, trained staff, and taught hotel management and culinary arts at the post-secondary level. But it was a move to Canada—and a serendipitous discovery—that introduced him to La Tablée des Chefs.

"Five years ago, I made the move to Canada," he shares. "While continuing my work in the food industry, I serendipitously discovered the La Tablée des Chefs' Kitchen Brigades Program. Previously, my teaching focused on students with clear career ambitions, but this program is different—aimed at younger students with the goal of igniting a genuine interest and passion for food and cooking. I saw an exciting new opportunity to make a difference, and I eagerly embraced the challenge."

Teaching younger students presented both surprise and insight. Working with a group of Grade 5 students in 2024, Ahn recalls one memorable moment that exposed deeper truths about food education in Canada. "During our first class, I asked some basic questions to get to know the students better," he recalls. To my surprise, all 14 students, regardless of their race or gender, listed their favourite foods as spaghetti and pizza—and surprisingly, these were from franchise brands, not authentic Italian cuisine. This reveals a lot about the lack of food education and exposure they have had at home or school in Canada," he explains. "While students from more affluent families might have a broader range of food experiences, most of the children I taught had recently immigrated or came from less privileged backgrounds. This highlights a noticeable gap in the emphasis on food and cooking within the Canadian public education system—a realization that left a deep impression on me."

Ahn's own culinary training at the Culinary Institute of America—a school known for producing Michelin-starred chefs—shaped his educational approach. "Even after 20 years since my graduation, I vividly recall that the core of our education was centred on developing positive, proactive team players—an essential quality for any successful organization or team within the food industry," he says. "From the moment students enter the program to their graduation, every class revolves around teamwork."

It's this value—teamwork—that he hopes to pass on to the students in Kitchen Brigades. "I believe that nurturing these qualities—teamwork, empathy, and leadership—is truly the essence of culinary education. It's about cultivating not just skilled chefs, but well-rounded professionals capable of inspiring and leading others in the dynamic world of food."

He's also quick to note that the future of culinary arts depends on more than just knife skills and plating. "In today's world, artificial intelligence and computers are increasingly controlling and managing nearly every aspect of our lives. The fields of culinary arts and hospitality are no exception," he says. "What AI cannot replicate is the uniquely human ability to foster empathy—embracing others and maintaining a flexible, open-minded attitude."

He encourages aspiring culinary professionals to embrace this truth. "While technical skills are foundational, the ability to build meaningful relationships through empathy and understanding will always set exceptional professionals apart. I believe that the ability to empathize is the most important value in teaching. In that sense, the empathy between students and teachers creates an unseen 'bridge' that spans any distance—whether physical or emotional—and fosters a bond through which we exchange our values and understanding."



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From Student to Mentor

CHEF DAVID GIROUX
KITCHEN BRIGADES INSTRUCTOR & AMBASSADOR SINCE 2025

When Chef David Giroux first stepped into a Kitchen Brigades class as a high school student, he had no idea the experience would shape his life. But it didn't take long for something to click. "I started with the Brigades Culinaires program in Grade 10, and one of the first things I remember is how much our instructor sparked my passion for cooking," he recalls. "I also quickly realized how amazing cooking was, and above all, how enjoyable it was to learn how to cook and to eat."

Then came a moment of clarity that would change everything. "Later, the chef instructor told me something that really struck me: 'Yes, it's possible to study cooking.' I had never imagined that you could actually go to school to learn how to 'chop carrots.' It was like a revelation. Right away, I began the steps to enrol in culinary school right after high school. Without that program, I might never have gone into cooking."

Today, Giroux is not only a chef, but a returning instructor and ambassador for the very program that launched his career. For him, youth culinary education is about more than technical skills—it's about building foundations for life. "Learning how to eat well is essential, and having basic cooking skills can make a real difference," he says. "It's not just about the professional side of things—being able to cook helps in everyday life. I also think that for some youth who may not have the chance to learn these skills at home, it becomes an incredible tool to help them navigate their future as independent young adults."

Looking back, he credits his chef instructors with giving him the confidence and skills he needed to forge a path forward. "Chef instructors play a major role in our learning, because they're the ones who really teach us the foundations of cooking—almost like we were in culinary school," he says. "They show you how to hold a knife properly, teach you basic techniques, how to cut, food safety—things that may seem simple to some, but for young people like I was, it wasn't all that easy."

"These chefs are really there to guide us through the recipes, and they even take time out of their own schedules to share their personal experiences," he explains. "These are chefs who are truly dedicated to giving their time and most importantly, to teaching us the basics. So that, above all, we can grow into better-equipped young adults. The goal isn't necessarily to turn us into professionals, but first and foremost to help us become self-sufficient in the kitchen. And I can honestly say that after my time inside of 'les brigades culinaires' I was much more independent! And I even impressed my parents more than once."

Now standing in front of students himself, Chef Giroux is driven by the same desire to inspire. His message to young cooks is simple—but heartfelt. "If I had one message for young cooks, it would be this: just cook. Cook with love, take your time, try, fail, and try again. That's all part of the process. But above all… never stop cooking—it's one of the most beautiful things in the world. It's about sharing, about love, about bringing people together. It's a craft that's constantly evolving, and that's what makes it so exciting. I truly believe everyone should experience what it feels like to create something with their own hands."

That passion now fuels his advocacy work as an ambassador, where he champions the idea that culinary education is also a powerful tool for equity, access, and social change. "Going through the program helped me realize that being a chef goes far beyond preparing plates in a kitchen," he says. "Chefs have the power and the responsibility to make a real impact in their communities. We can be mentors, role models, and educators. Through food, we can teach essential life skills, build confidence, and create a sense of belonging, especially for young people who may not have access to those opportunities elsewhere."

For Giroux, the kitchen is more than a career path—it's a platform for connection and empowerment. "Cooking isn't just about technique; it's about connection. I now see the role of a chef as someone who leads with purpose, who gives back, and who uses their craft to empower others. Whether it's in schools, community centres, or simply by sharing our stories, we have the chance to make the culinary world—and our communities—more inclusive, more hopeful, and more inspiring."



To learn more about La Tablée des Chefs and the Kitchen Brigades program:

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[1]Environics Research Group Ltd. (August 2023). Egg Nutrition Survey. [Unpublished data]. Prepared for Egg Farmers of Canada.

PULL UP A SEAT

THE INSIDE TRACK ON FURNISHING A RESTAURANT THAT WORKS



With Eugene Honcharuk, Founder of Contract Supply Corp.



When it comes to furnishing a restaurant, it's easy to focus on the visual impact—the colours, the shapes, the Instagrammable moments. But for Eugene Honcharuk, founder of Contract Supply and one of Canada's most trusted voices in commercial furniture, that's just the surface.

"People underestimate how critical furniture really is," he says. "Before a guest tastes the food or talks to a server, they've already formed an opinion based on what they're sitting on and what they see." A great chair, he explains, doesn't just look good—it feels solid, holds up to abuse, and contributes to the overall experience in ways most diners never consciously notice.

That mindset is becoming more common as operators move away from quick fixes and lean into long-term thinking. "We're seeing it across the board—in upholstery and in hard materials," Honcharuk says. "Velvets, leathers, plush fabrics—they're everywhere now. Synthetics are nearly indestructible, and people are spending more because they know it pays off in the long run." He notes the same shift in attitude when it comes to structural materials. "Whether it's solid wood or steel, operators are starting to understand that durability matters. If it lasts twice as long, it's not expensive—it's smart."

So, what should operators be thinking about when choosing furniture that doesn't just look good—but works hard, holds up, and delivers real value over time? Here are four brutally honest, experience-backed pieces of advice from Honcharuk to help restaurateurs make smarter, more resilient choices.



"Whether it's solid wood or steel, operators are starting to understand that durability matters. If it lasts twice as long, it's not expensive—it's smart."

1. Match your furniture to your service model.

Not all restaurants operate the same way—and their furniture shouldn't either. That's one of the first things Honcharuk wants operators to understand. "A high-turnover quick-service spot might run 60 to 70 turns a day. Fine dining? That's a whole different seating experience," he says. "You need to design for what's really happening in your space. You don't spec a three-legged chair for commercial use—it just doesn't make sense."

The wrong chair in the wrong setting isn't just uncomfortable—it's costly. "You wouldn't believe how many people come to us after the fact, saying everything's falling apart," Honcharuk notes. "They had spec'd something pretty without thinking about the actual wear and tear."

Contract Supply has seen it all over four decades of designing for everything from indie cafés to high-traffic entertainment venues. "We've got close to 3,000 chairs in Tomorrowland at the Cosmic Café in Disney," Honcharuk says. "They've been there for over 20 years. We never expected them to last that long, but we built them to take the abuse." When Universal Studios opened Jurassic Park, Honcharuk's team was asked to recreate bamboo-looking chairs from a scene in the movie—but make them out of steel. "The ground actually shook as part of the experience," he says. "So, we built something that looked delicate but could handle the chaos."

The takeaway? Your furniture should match your actual operational demands. Whether it's high-turnover seating, long dwell times, or immersive theming, durability and design need to work hand in hand.

2. Don't chase price over value.

It's one of the most common—and costly—mistakes Honcharuk sees in the industry: choosing furniture based on price, not performance. "Here's a chair—it looks great, it's $150. But it's a retail chair, and it's not made for commercial use," he says. "That's where a lot of people go wrong. They fall in love with the look and forget the context. Every chair in a restaurant might be sat in 50 or 60 times a day, every single day. It's got to handle spills, constant wiping, and heavy usage. You can't get around that. A chair built for a dining room at home just isn't designed for that level of wear and tear."

And it's not just the budget buys that mislead. Even well-crafted materials can hide weak construction. "Just because it's made out of wood doesn't mean it's commercial grade. I've seen beautiful chairs made with premium European beechwood, but they're held together with dowels and friction—no glue, no reinforcements, no proper mortise and tenon joints. It wouldn't cost them a dollar more to do it right, but they don't."

He sees the fallout regularly. "We'll get the call a month later: the chairs are falling apart, the finish is flaking off, the welds are cracking. And now they're spending more to replace them than they would have if they'd just invested properly up front."

Honcharuk's advice is blunt but honest: don't confuse affordability with value. "A commercial chair isn't just about materials—it's about engineering. It's about knowing this thing is going to hold 400 pounds, many times a day, for 10 to 15 years. That's the kind of investment that actually saves you money."

3. Collaborate with your supplier.

"Custom furniture doesn't have to break the bank, but you do have to work closely with your supplier," Honcharuk advises. Many custom projects start simply, often with a quick sketch or even a doodle on a napkin. "It's true—we get napkin sketches from designers all the time," he laughs. "But the key isn't the sketch itself; it's the conversations that happen afterward. You talk materials, you talk budgets, and you talk reality. That's how great restaurant furniture actually gets made."

He is quick to emphasize the importance of these conversations. "Good manufacturers will guide you to make the right choices,





balancing the look you want with the durability and affordability you need. You shouldn't compromise—you just have to collaborate smartly."

Honcharuk has seen too many projects go sideways because the right conversations didn't happen early enough. "Operators aren't supposed to be furniture experts—that's our job," he says. "You should ask plenty of questions. Weld types, finishes, wood species, foam density—whatever it is, ask, because mistakes can get expensive when you don't."

These conversations often start with rough sketches, reference photos, or a big idea from a designer. "Sometimes it's a Pinterest vision, sometimes it's a napkin drawing," he says. "Our job is to turn that into something real, functional and commercial grade."

At the end of the day, he adds, it's not just about filling a space. "We're not just selling chairs—we're building restaurants with you," he explains. "If we're not talking about layout, volume, mood, brand—we're missing the point. You're shaping how people feel when they walk into your restaurant. That takes more than just a supplier. It takes a collaborative partner."

4. Recognize that timeless always beats trendy.

While he is well aware of design trends, Honcharuk is less interested in chasing them. "A lot of trends come and go," he says bluntly. "The secret is sticking with timeless designs and materials that never go out of style." For Honcharuk, that means clean lines, smart proportions, and materials with proven staying power. "Durability is timeless," he adds. "You build something well and it'll look good—and function—ten, even twenty years down the line."

That said, some trends are evolving in the right direction. Upholstery, for example, is having a moment—not just in look but in performance. "We're seeing more clients spec genuine leather and velvet," Honcharuk notes. "They're seen as luxury touches, but they're also incredibly durable. Modern synthetics and finishes have come so far—they don't fade, they don't wear out, they're easy to clean. People are finally understanding that investing in quality materials pays off."

One of the smartest moves an operator can make, Honcharuk says, is to lean into what already works, like refurbished commercial furniture. "Often, years after a purchase, our clients will call and ask if we want our chairs back—they love the product and don't want to see it go to waste. We probably have four to five thousand used chairs in the shop at any given time."

The appeal of refurbished furniture is growing, not just for budget reasons but because it supports sustainability goals, and Honcharuk sees real opportunity for forward-thinking operators. "Refurbishing gets overlooked, but it shouldn't," he says. "You can save a lot, and in many cases, the quality is better than new imports. Older pieces were built with better materials and stronger craftsmanship, and we've got warehouses full of furniture ready for a second life. Once operators see the results, they get it—it's like getting brand new furniture for half the price, without sacrificing performance or aesthetics."



CONTRACT SUPPLY CORP.

ABOUT CONTRACT SUPPLY CORP.

Founded in 1985 by Eugene Honcharuk, Contract Supply Corp. has grown into one of North America's most trusted manufacturers of commercial-grade furniture for the restaurant and hospitality industries. Built on a foundation of craftsmanship, durability, and responsive service, the company is known for delivering high-performance furniture that's as functional as it is timeless.

All of Contract Supply's custom and customizable products are proudly made in Canada at their state-of-the-art manufacturing facilities in Mississauga and London, Ontario.

A long-standing partner of Restaurants Canada, Contract Supply provides hard and soft seating and tables for the RC Pop-Up Experience and Chef's Table Stage at RC Show—bringing industry insight and reliable performance to every detail.

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CULINARY GOLD:

WHY SUPPORTING OUR NATIONAL TEAMS MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

BY BRIGITTE FOISY, VICE-PRESIDENT, BOCUSE D'OR AND CHEFS CANADA

In the world of food, the Bocuse d'Or and the World Pastry Cup stand as the Olympics of gastronomy, drawing chefs and pastry artists from across the globe to compete in what are considered the most demanding culinary competitions on Earth. Canada's recent ascent back into the world's culinary top 10—its first since 2013—signals not just a triumph but an invitation for emerging Canadian culinarians to pursue excellence on the international stage.





THE NATIONAL SELECTION: A LAUNCHPAD FOR CULINARY EXCELLENCE

Held biennially at RC Show, the National Selection is a crucible where eight hopefuls vie for the honour of representing Canada at the 2027 Bocuse d'Or and World Pastry Cup. Under the discerning eyes of a jury comprising of esteemed chefs and restaurateurs, these competitors embody the aspirations of our nation's foodservice professionals, producers and manufacturers. Their journey is not merely personal; it's a national endeavour to elevate Canada's culinary stature globally.



THE FUNDING GAP: A STARK CONTRAST

Unlike their European counterparts, Canadian culinary athletes receive minimal financial support, relying largely on sporadic brand sponsorships. This stands in stark contrast to the substantial government funding that supports sports athletes and culinary teams in countries like France, Denmark and Japan. Despite the lack of financial backing, Canadian chefs are celebrated abroad with the fervour reserved for box office celebrities. Yet, domestically, their achievements often go unnoticed, overshadowed by a general indifference to the intricacies of haute cuisine made with tweezers, molds and emulsions.

THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE: GASTRONOMY AS A CATALYST FOR TOURISM

The significance of investing in our national culinary team extends beyond prestige; it's an economic imperative. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2025, the travel and tourism sector is projected to contribute an unprecedented US$11.7 trillion to the global economy, accounting for 10.3 per cent of global GDP. International visitor spending is expected to reach a historic $2.1 trillion, surpassing the previous high of $1.9 trillion in 2019 by $164 billion.

Culinary tourism, or gastrotourism, has evolved into a significant driver of travel decisions. It's estimated that 80 per cent of travellers research culinary options before trips, with many selecting destinations primarily for their food and beverage experiences. Activities such as food events (79 per cent), gastronomic routes and cooking classes (62 per cent), and visits to markets and local producers (53 per cent) rank among the most sought-after experiences for tourists.

Countries that have excelled in competitions like the Bocuse d'Or—such as France, Denmark and Sweden—have witnessed heightened interest from culinary tourists. France's recent victory at the 2025 Bocuse d'Or reinforced its status as a top gastronomic destination. Similarly, Japan's consecutive wins in the 2023 and 2025 Pastry World Cup have spotlighted its rich pastry-making traditions, further attracting global attention. Following their Bocuse d'Or success, Nordic countries, including Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, have seen a growing focus on their tourism. Iceland, for example, which made the podium in 2017, saw a 19 per cent annualized growth rate in tourism following their performance, far outpacing any of their peers.

A CALL TO ACTION: INVESTING IN CANADA'S CULINARY FUTURE

The time has come for Canada to recognize the strategic value of its culinary talent. Active participation and success in competitions like the Bocuse d'Or and the World Pastry Cup not only showcase our nation's culinary prowess but also promote our unique terroir and local producers. This, in turn, can boost gastrotourism, support local agriculture, and enhance the sustainability of foodservice businesses.

Organizations like Chefs Canada play a pivotal role in this ecosystem by inspiring industry professionals, fostering creativity, and mentoring the next generation. However, to truly capitalize on the opportunities presented by the global culinary stage, a concerted effort involving government support, industry investment, and public engagement is essential.



CHEFS CANADA

We invite you to be part of this transformative journey. Support our national culinary team and advocate for the recognition and funding they deserve. Visit our website to sign the petition and join us in elevating Canada's culinary identity on the world stage.

Sign the petition here:

www.chefscanada.com/petition

THE MARKETPLACE

INSPIRE · INNOVATE · EMPOWER

NEXT FOOD EXPO
FOODSERVICE + HOSPITALITY SHOW

Join us on September 8-9th, 2025 in Calgary, Alberta at the BMO Centre. Visit www.nextfoodexpo.com for details.

NEXT Food Expo is more than a trade show

— it's a curated hospitality industry expo designed to spark innovation, foster meaningful connections, and showcase what's next in food, beverage, equipment, and tech. As an Expo, NEXT goes beyond product displays by offering immersive experiences, collaborative learning, and future-focused programming tailored to the evolving needs of foodservice and hospitality professionals. Every element— from exhibitor engagement to education stages — is built to connect people, ideas, and solutions in ways that drive progress across the industry.

Tableware Solutions: Elevating the Art of the Table

Since 2000, **Tableware Solutions** has been a trusted master importer and distributor of premium tabletop products built for the demands of the foodservice industry. With a sales force strategically positioned in key markets across North America, they deliver personalized service and expertise to meet the needs of chefs, restaurateurs, and hospitality operators.

The **Tableware Solutions** portfolio is one of the most robust in the industry, featuring **Bone China, Fine Porcelain, Vitrified Hotelware, Stainless Steel and Silver-Plated Cutlery, Hollowware, Glassware and Induction Warming Products**—all backed by **industry-leading warranties**. And while they set the standard for quality, they offer competitive pricing, ensuring that exceptional tableware is always within reach.

Visit the Tableware Solutions Virtual Showroom and book an appointment at: tablewaresolutions.com





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