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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-AT-LARGE

MENU is evolving.

Richer content. Bolder design. Deeper stories of the people, places, and ideas transforming foodservice and hospitality in Canada.

To better serve Canada's foodservice and hospitality community with actionable insights and high-impact storytelling, MENU is transitioning from a quarterly magazine to a **twice-annual industry digest**. Launching in **February 2026**, this expanded format will give our editorial team the space to deliver more comprehensive analysis, future-focused trend reporting, business-ready operator resources, and powerful personal narratives—all in two collectible, high-value editions each year.

This evolution comes at a pivotal time for our industry. The newly released ***Foodservice Facts 2025*** report paints a clear picture of both the challenges and opportunities ahead. I encourage every operator and industry partner to read the report and the **interview with Chief Economist and VP Research Chris Elliott** in this issue closely. Understanding where we stand—economically, socially, and operationally—is the first step toward **future-proofing your business**.

As we reflect on where we've been and where we're going, I want to extend heartfelt thanks to all who helped make the inaugural **One Table** event such a resounding success. Presented by **Uber Eats** and supported by the **Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence sponsors**—**PepsiCo Canada**, **Garland Canada**, and **Enbridge Gas**—this gathering brought together many of the sector's most inspiring leaders for an evening of conversation, connection, and celebration. It reminded us just how vital it is to come together—to share insights, ideas, and the extraordinary achievements that too often go unrecognized in the day-to-day rush of operations. Be sure to read the **excerpted panel discussion** with this year's **Awards of Excellence winners** in these pages—an honest and uplifting exchange that captures the heart of what makes this industry exceptional.

You'll also find a deeply personal interview with **Mme. Cora Tsouflidou**, recipient of the **2025 Legacy Award of Excellence**. Her reflections on entrepreneurship, perseverance, and purpose are a gift to the next generation of restaurateurs. Those who attended One Table will recall the heartfelt **standing ovation** she received—proof that her story continues to inspire all of us who believe in hospitality as a force for good.

The **Spotlight on Restaurant Technology** section explores how innovation can and should serve people first. Technology is set to play an increasingly critical role in the future of hospitality—not to replace human connection, but to **liberate operators and their teams** to do what they do best: create unforgettable experiences. And finally, don't miss **Donald Guse Salah's** insightful piece on attracting and retaining the next generation of hospitality workers, alongside two inspiring case studies from **Sarang Kitchen** and **Calypso Waterpark**. These operations—vastly different in scale and structure—demonstrate the power of inclusive hiring and the tangible benefits of tapping into underrepresented talent pools.

As MENU enters its next chapter, our mission remains the same: to inform, connect, and inspire the people who feed and serve our nation every day.

Thank you for reading—and for being part of the story we continue to tell, together.





Kelly Higginson
President & CEO

Fall 2025
Volume 10 Number 4

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

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Back row, from left to right: *Chef Nick Chindamo, Kelly Blankstein (for A&W Canada), Chef Chris Commandant*
Front row: *Chef Jean-François Archambault (for La Tablée des Chefs), Julie Denton*

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Cover photo by Savage Media Group Inc.

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THE PASS

MENU IS EVOLVING.

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To better serve Canada's foodservice and hospitality community with actionable insights and high-impact storytelling, MENU Magazine is transitioning from a quarterly magazine to a twice-annual industry digest. Launching in February 2026, this expanded format will give our editorial team the space to deliver more comprehensive analysis, future-focused trend reporting, business-ready operator resources, and powerful personal narratives—all in two collectible, high-value editions each year.

REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN for Canada's leading foodservice and hospitality event—now bigger, bolder, and more accessible than ever.

For the first time, **RC Show** moves to **The International Centre**, featuring an **expanded show floor**, **new conference-style programming**, **free parking**, and a location just minutes from **Toronto Pearson Airport (YYZ)**—making it easier than ever for national attendees and exhibitors to connect.

Three powerhouse keynotes will set the tone for what's next: **Janet Zuccarini, CEO of Gusto 54 Restaurant Group**, on fearlessness, scaling with creativity, and cultivating a resilient, people-driven culture; **Colonel Chris Hadfield, Astronaut and Author**, on leadership, thinking big, and building an agile, future-ready industry; and **Chockie Tom, Indigenous Drinks Advocate and founder of *The Cornsilk Road***, on reconnection and forging sustainable, responsible systems for the future.

Whether you're an operator, chef, or supplier, now's the time to plan your trip — with incredible travel and accommodation packages available for national attendees and exhibitors.

Learn more and register at: RCSHOW.COM

For information on sponsorship and activation opportunities, contact: sponsorship@restaurantscanada.org



CANADIAN RESTAURANT INVESTMENT & LEADERSHIP SUMMIT (CRILS)

November 13, 2025 | Roserock Place, Toronto

Presented by National Bank, in partnership with Restaurants Canada and MENU Magazine

The Canadian Restaurant Investment & Leadership Summit (CRILS) brings together the country's most influential restaurant and foodservice leaders for one powerful day of ideas, insight, and connection. Now in its 15th year, the summit blends high-level discussion and real-world intelligence—spanning economics, leadership, technology, and growth strategy. Join senior executives, investors, and innovators as they explore the forces reshaping Canada's restaurant economy and the opportunities ahead.

Learn more and request information at: restaurantsummit.ca
Read more about the CRILS event, beginning on page 54 of this issue.

Restaurants Canada and ***MENU Magazine*** thank the
2025 Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence winners
for joining us at the inaugural **One Table** event in September and for sharing your wisdom and insights.

Special thanks to One Table's presenting sponsor, **Uber Eats**, and to the Awards of Excellence sponsors — **PepsiCo Canada** (Leadership Award), **Garland Canada** (Culinary Award), and **Enbridge** (Social Impact Award) — for helping bring this important industry celebration to life.

Read full One Table and Awards of Excellence coverage beginning on page 15 of this issue.

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

RESTAURANTS CANADA MEMBER EVENT:

The Poutine Caucus

November 19, 2025 | Parliament Hill, Ottawa | Doors open at 6:00 PM

Join Restaurants Canada and fellow members on Parliament Hill for The Poutine Caucus—an evening that brings together policymakers, industry leaders, and operators to champion and celebrate Canadian foodservice and strengthen the connections that shape our future.

Don't miss poutine tastings from celebrity chefs, a light-hearted MP cook-off, and insights from Kelly Higginson, President & CEO of Restaurants Canada, on the state of our industry and the policies that impact it most.

RSVP by Wednesday, November 12, to: members@restaurantscanada.org

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Yes Shef
ELEVATING WOMEN IN FOOD & BEVERAGE

YES SHEF VANCOUVER 2025

Thursday, November 6, 2025
Fairmont Pacific Rim
Doors open at 5:30 PM
Presented by WORTH Association

Vancouver's most anticipated culinary event returns for its 5th anniversary. This one-night tasting experience brings together many of British Columbia's top women chefs and their culinary mentees, inviting guests to explore 15+ stations of unforgettable food and drink, all for a cause worth toasting to. Bite into brilliance, meet the women shaping the future of food, and be a part of cooking up something extraordinary.

SAVE THE DATE FOR YES SHEF'S FIRST TORONTO EVENT AT RC SHOW 2026

Yes Shef is taking place on March 9, 2026 at The International Centre in Mississauga, Ontario. Specially priced tickets go on sale soon at: **rcshow.com**

RESTAURANTS CANADA WEBINARS: WATCH ON DEMAND

Scan the code to register or watch on demand:

GETTING PAID: RELIEF FOR SMALL BUSINESS CHALLENGES

Presented by Interac

Running a small business in foodservice means balancing rising costs, shifting customer expectations, and the daily stress of operations. On top of it all, getting paid—whether on time (especially caterers), in the right way, or without added expense—can be one of the toughest challenges. Sophie Lambert, Group Product Manager, Segment Expansion & Product Operations, and Sopana Selvachandran, Director, Solutions Engineering, Money Movement from Interac bring together experts and operators to explore real payment pain points and help give small business owners the relief and solutions they need to succeed.

FOODSERVICE FACTS 2025: THE ULTIMATE GENERATIONAL GRUDGE MATCH

Presented with support from Uber Eats

The Restaurants Canada Intelligence Team breaks down the latest economic and consumer trends driving today's market, and what it means for operators. They also dig into how Millennials and Gen Z are rewriting the rules of dining. From the rise of convenience and delivery to the demand for seamless, digital-first experiences – these next-gen diners are the ones setting the pace, and the industry can't afford to look away.

INTRODUCING THE

Poutine Caucus:

Championing Canada's Foodservice Industry

On November 19, 2025, Restaurants Canada will host the inaugural Poutine Caucus Reception at Parliament Hill's Wellington Building. This event brings together foodservice operators, policymakers, and industry leaders to celebrate and connect over Canada's vibrant hospitality sector.

Guests will enjoy poutine tastings by celebrity chefs, a friendly MP cook-off, and remarks from Restaurants Canada President & CEO, Kelly Higginson. Additional speakers will be announced.

Beyond the celebration, this event marks the launch of the Poutine Caucus, a new group designed to strengthen ties between the foodservice industry and government. The caucus will provide policymakers with data, insights, and firsthand perspectives to better understand the sector's challenges and contributions.

Higginson emphasizes, "Data is important, but it's the conversations and connections at events like this that truly give it meaning." The caucus aims to promote supportive policies and ensure the industry's voice is heard in Parliament.

With over $124 billion in annual sales and more than one million Canadians employed, the foodservice industry plays a key role in local economies nationwide. The caucus will focus initially on the top 50 foodservice ridings, where the industry's impact is strongest.



Join us to celebrate the industry that feeds Canada and drives its economy.

Poutine Caucus
Wednesday, November 19, 2025
Room 310, Wellington Building,
Parliament of Canada, Ottawa, ON
Doors open at 6:00 PM | Program begins at 6:45 PM

Get on the list!
RSVP by Wednesday, November 12, to:
members@restaurantscanada.org

Please note that Parliamentary security screening will apply.

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CHRIS ELLIOTT
CHIEF ECONOMIST & VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH RESTAURANTS CANADA

CTRL + ALT + DEL:

CHRIS ELLIOTT ON FOODSERVICE FACTS 2025 AND THE FUTURE OF RESTAURANTS

Just a week after One Table—Restaurants Canada's new gathering of Canada's most influential foodservice leaders—Chris Elliott is still running on adrenaline. The Association's Chief Economist and Vice-President, Research has barely caught his breath after a whirlwind September: board meetings, media hits, webinars, and the soft launch of Foodservice Facts 2025, RC's flagship report.

When we connect, he laughs off the idea that he's recovered. "Barely," he says. "We had board meetings and the event last week, then a webinar yesterday, the podcast with MENU... it just continues."

This year's Foodservice Facts lands at a crucial moment—less crisis management than a broad-based recalibration. Elliott frames it as a "CTRL + ALT + DEL" for the industry. In our annual conversation, he breaks down the numbers behind that reset: how consumer confidence, labour participation and policy are shaping the next cycle of growth for Canada's **$124 billion** *foodservice sector—and what operators should expect next.*

MM *You've referred to this period as a "CTRL + ALT + DEL" moment for the industry. What do you mean by that, and what legacy habits or systems do you think restaurants most urgently need to replace?*

Chris Elliott: *I think, for me, the way I thought of this is we have to get away from the "but we always did it this way" mentality. To me, the two areas where that's played out are on the profitability and financial side, and on the employee side.*

On the financial side, a lot of restaurant owners are still using the old method of keeping track of everything on paper—writing it down: "That was my revenue, that was my expenses, hey, I made a profit, good, we're done." I think that's the wrong way to do it, given how competitive and complicated the industry is. Things are changing rapidly. You need to look at your cost of sales, you need to look at your labour costs. Are you talking to your customers and getting feedback? There has to be that extra level of work involved to try and find how to improve your finances.

With 40 per cent of operations not earning a profit, there isn't much margin for error in your margins. And that's why it's so critical to be tracking all that information.

MM *So really, the heart of this is about taking a more sophisticated view of your P&L? Are there a few specific, practical things operators can do to make that shift without it feeling overwhelming?*

CE: *Absolutely, yes. Going through this approach means identifying which products or menu items might be popular in your head but not actually with your guests—or maybe*

they're popular but not profitable. The goal is to streamline the menu to bolster profitable items and move away from those that aren't making money. Expanding your menu to try and appeal to everyone is very expensive, so this transition is about keeping track of everything to understand what's working and what isn't.

That's the profitability side of it. The other area where I think operators are still stuck in the "we've always done it this way" mindset is with employees.

Employees today are very different from my generation or yours. They're looking for roles that serve as a step ladder to future success. A big part of that involves rethinking training and development. A lot of operators are now bringing gamification into the process. Instead of handing someone a manual and saying, "Go read this," they're introducing interactive modules where employees earn points for completing sections or quizzes, unlocking new levels, responsibilities, or even promotions.

> **With 40 per cent of operations not earning a profit, there isn't much margin for error in your margins."**

MM That long-term vision for growth is so important, yet Foodservice Facts describes the industry as operating in "survival mode" or a state of perma-crisis. What signs would indicate that we've moved from resilience into true renewal?

CE: *There are about four key indicators I'd look at. The first is financial health — earning a profit and seeing same-store sales growth above inflation. That's the baseline signal of recovery.*

The second is labour market stability. We've been facing extremely high turnover and persistent job vacancies since the pandemic, losing employees to other sectors. Stabilization in the labour market is critical to long-term success.



Then there's consumer stability. Right now, consumer confidence is still extremely low—well below pre-pandemic levels—and that directly impacts discretionary spending. As people feel more secure in their jobs and finances, they'll start going out more, and businesses will resume things like staff events or client dinners that have been paused in this holding pattern.

And finally, technology. Costs are still out of reach for most operators, but as those costs come down, restaurants can adopt new systems that solve many ongoing challenges. Those are the Big Four areas — financial health, labour stability, consumer confidence, and affordable innovation are what we need to get the industry moving in the right direction again.

MM With 75 per cent of Canadians dining out less due to cost concerns and menu inflation still outpacing cheque growth, how can the industry redefine and communicate its value proposition over the next few years?

CE: *When I take a step back, the biggest issue comes down to the same thing: 75 per cent of people aren't going out to restaurants like they used to. While developing this year's Foodservice Facts, we asked consumers, "If you had more money, would you go out to restaurants more often?" Younger populations in particular said, "Absolutely."*

That told me two things. One, there's still a real appetite for dining out. And two, there's pent-up demand that just can't be met right now because of people's financial situations. Once that improves, they're going to go back out to restaurants.

For now, it's all about value. That's what consumers want and look for—where they feel like they're getting a lot for their money. But, once financial security improves, you'll see people venture out more frequently. Some full-service restaurants are offering larger portions so guests can take food home and stretch the value over two meals. It can also mean creating experiences—like buying tickets to a special dinner where you meet the chef. There's an element of exclusivity and experience that goes beyond just the meal itself.

As you know, I'm a massive fan of metal music—where fans pay extra for a VIP meet-and-greet. You spend more, but you also get a T-shirt, an autograph, a moment of connection. It makes you feel like you're getting more for your money. I think restaurants are heading in that same direction: asking, "What more can we provide that makes this a better experience—beyond the combo or value meal?"

MM We're seeing more elaborate concepts built around the meal—student specials, prix fixe offers—things that make dining accessible again, even if it means limiting the menu. It gives guests a chance to connect with the space and build loyalty for when their financial situation improves. And, from an operator standpoint, moving more portions of a single menu item or special helps bring down production costs.

CE: *Exactly. Part of it, too, is that when you have those "meet the chef" nights or wine-tasting events, you're bringing people out of their homes and back into restaurants. When they're at home, they're not ordering the sides, the apps, the drinks, or the wine. When guests are in your dining room, that's where restaurants can really optimize profit, especially compared with delivery.*

MM The report suggests that closing the recovery gap will depend on operators improving production efficiency and pursuing targeted, intentional innovation.



What are the biggest opportunities you see in technology—beyond automation—to drive productivity without compromising hospitality, and how should operators think about measuring ROI in this context?

CE: *This is one topic that's near and dear to my heart because, as economists, we care deeply about productivity—and the simple relationship is: productivity equals prosperity.*

I've given this presentation to the Restaurants Canada Board of Directors and, while they recognize the importance, they have concerns about the expense and how customers might respond. The reason this is such an opportunity is because, over the last two decades, our productivity has been flat—it's not going anywhere. Out of 186 industries, we rank 186th in terms of labour productivity.

That's not a good sign. This equation—productivity equals prosperity—is exactly why we're in the situation we're in. If we can increase our revenues without increasing staff hours, that improves the bottom line. To me, that's where the emphasis should be: how do we increase labour productivity? Whether that's covers per hour or sales per labour hour, these are the measures that help determine whether we're making the right investments.

> **"As economists, we care deeply about productivity—and the simple relationship is: productivity equals prosperity."**

Improving speed and efficiency isn't just good for the business—it helps employees, too. If they're not running back and forth, if their job is made easier and less repetitive, that's a positive thing. Take Chipotle, for example: they introduced an avocado peeler—the Autocado—last year. It's a repetitive task that no one really wants to do. If technology can remove that task and make life easier for employees, that's a win. To me, that's a clear win for the foodservice industry—technology that benefits both the operator and the employee.

What about process efficiencies that aren't necessarily tech-based—like the ergonomics of the kitchen, workflow, or scheduling? What are some practical changes operators can make to improve productivity or rethink operations without a major investment?

CE: *I think for any process efficiency there's still a bit of a technology component—just not in the heavy robotics sense. For example, there are apps that can help with staffing and scheduling. If someone can't make a shift, they don't have to call the owner; the app can automatically manage it so another staff member can step in. So, there's still some reliance on tech, but it's lightweight and accessible.*

So, the easy way for any operator to start addressing margins by growing productivity is with low-cost, easy-to-adopt tools that reduce or eliminate repetitive or time-consuming tasks first?

CE: *Exactly. There's a balance between introducing simple technology and going all-in on automation. And there's a spectrum there. Even if fine dining restaurants aren't going to bring in robotics, they can still use simple forms of technology or streamlined processes that save time. If they're spending less time juggling schedules or administrative tasks, they can focus more on the financial side—the things we talked about earlier that truly impact performance.*

All right, let's talk about The Ultimate Generational Grudge Match—the Foodservice Facts webinar you co-hosted with Sara Hamdy, Research Analyst on the Restaurants Canada Intelligence team, to explore the difference between generational cohorts and the unique opportunities they represent for operators. You're a Gen Xer, and Sara is a proud member of Gen Z. How was that conversation?

CE: *It was a lot of fun. I think the big takeaway was how different each generation really is. We did six rounds in this generational battle, and every generation was leading in something. Our final conclusion was that all generations are important—each contributes to the foodservice industry in different ways. It's not one generation driving all the trends.*

But when we looked at the biggest themes, the one I was most curious about was price versus experience. Given that more people are dining off-premise and we're in an affordability crisis, I wanted to know: to what extent does the experience even matter anymore? Is it all about price, or does experience still matter—and by generation, does it matter differently?

For the older generation, absolutely it does. They want that balance of food, price, and experience, especially at full-service restaurants, because they were brought up to see dining out as something special. There's an expectation of that white-glove service.

For younger generations, who dine out far more often, it's not a special occasion. The experience itself is less important than the overall price—and that's true for both full-service and quick-service restaurants. I think that's become a bit of a barrier for some operators when it comes to adopting technology. They'll say, "Well, we're a full-service restaurant—our guests expect a server." But maybe that's not the case anymore.

Younger guests don't expect that same level of service as older guests. Maybe there's more room for a self-serve component for younger generations, while older guests still prefer the white-glove approach.

MM Based on your findings, do you think there's a greater opportunity for restaurants to hyper-target their offering to a specific generation—or to generalize across groups?

***CE:** It depends on the restaurant. One of our summary slides said it best: you have to know your guest. I can think of a few places where everyone in the room is over 70. In those cases, QR codes, digital menus, and robots just aren't going to work. But for restaurants with a more youthful environment, it's the opposite—guests expect kiosks, tablets, even gaming tables.*

It's about knowing your guest and understanding what their needs are, then saying, "Okay, this is going to work for this group, and we're going to focus on that." You don't want to alienate anyone, but at the same time, you have to ask: How do I make this profitable? How do I attract my guests without alienating others?

MM Some of the comments you've made suggest a scenario where economics and demographics are squeezing out the restaurant generalist. In other words, the old full-service model with everything from pizza and wings to Chinese to whatever—those broad, all-things-to-all-people menus—may no longer represent the opportunity of the times we're in.

If your guidance is to "know your guest" and plan around that, and at the same time manage costs and focus on profitability, it feels like the smart move is to dovetail into a much narrower, more intentional and precise approach. Is that fair?

***CE:** Yes, I would say that. When we went through some of the other rounds in the Generational Grudge Match, there were a few trends that really stood out—elements you can bring into your restaurant that don't make things more complicated.*

One of the biggest is snackification. A growing share of Canadians are snacking instead of sitting down for full meals—or replacing a meal with a snack. So how can you "snackify" the menu? What can you add that appeals to that habit? Of course, that resonates most with younger generations. One of the most interesting parts was when I asked Sara, "What does your generation consider a snack?" Because for my generation, it's yogurt, protein bars—things that are portable and simple. Her answer was, "It depends on the price."

I asked, "What do you mean?" And she said, "If it's under $10, it's a snack. If it's over $10, it's a meal." That really stuck with me. For younger consumers, it's not about format—it's about affordability. They want to dine out, but price remains the deciding factor for everything. So that's what determines the difference between a snack and a meal. For me, it's about portability—can I grab it and go? For them, it's about price.

That was one of the more fascinating insights from that discussion.

MM Can you share other significant insights?

***CE:** Another big trend is solo dining—we're seeing steady growth there. And the other major trend is the decline in alcohol consumption. To me, that's a game-changer for a lot of restaurants. I talk to so many operators who say, "Traffic's back up, but our sales still aren't." And that's because people aren't buying as much alcohol as they used to.*



"Another big trend is solo dining—we're seeing steady growth there. And the other major trend is the decline in alcohol consumption. To me, that's a game-changer for a lot of restaurants."

MM How much of that do you think comes down to price or the total cheque size? Do you think more people are forgoing alcohol at restaurants because they're budgeting? Clearly, there's a behavioural shift happening too, but do you think the problem is compounded by, essentially, austerity?

***CE:** As always, it depends on the generation. For the older generation, it's health and wellness—it's lifestyle. For the younger generation, it's price. They just don't have enough money. So again, that dividing line between one and the other is price. For younger consumers, it's the number one factor influencing their behaviour.*

Part of it, too, is that a greater share of younger people don't consume alcohol at all—or drink very little. That shift is already happening. Many are leaning more toward cannabis, and that's really disrupted a lot of the traditional trends in foodservice.

Mocktails have become especially popular, particularly among Millennials. They don't necessarily want to drink alcohol, but they still want something special—something that feels like a treat. It's that gourmet, crafted beverage experience—an elaborate, great-tasting, non-alcoholic beverage that's healthier and often a bit less expensive than a traditional cocktail.

MM How should operators engage with trends, given that we're in a period of continuous disruption? Do they have the same value as during more stable periods?

CE: *You can evolve, but there are guardrails around how far you can go before you completely lose the people who made you popular in the first place. There are a few brands that have thrown everything and the kitchen sink onto their menus, and I think; "This goes against everything your brand stands for. Why are you suddenly adding veggie burgers to the menu?" It's as if they don't know who they are anymore. It's confusing for consumers and waters down the brand.*

But there are positive examples, too, like Mildred's Temple Kitchen in Toronto. They started as a traditional lunch and dinner restaurant. During one of their strategic planning sessions, they were talking with their staff, who asked: "Why aren't we doing brunch? No one else in this market is, and we could do it better than anyone else." So, they did—and now brunch is what they're known for. They're not even open for dinner anymore.

So, it's about authenticity. Brands that are authentic and stick to their vision of who they are, are the ones that win. This ties back to that CTRL + ALT + DEL mindset: you can reset and evolve, but you need to stay true to your core identity.

You can innovate, but it's about talking to your staff and your guests to understand whether a shift will be beneficial or if it will water down the brand. If you look at some of the trends we highlighted in Foodservice Facts—solo dining, snacking occasions, mocktails—those can all be integrated into a full-service restaurant without alienating your core. Because if you alienate your guests, they may never come back.

MM So, you're saying that trends tied to behaviours and demand are more reliable than fleeting flavour or cuisine trends?

CE: *That's exactly it. That being said, one of the biggest risks I see is not changing at all—the risk of stagnation. If a restaurant keeps the same menu for 20 years and never evolves, people lose interest. Guests want something different, but within those guardrails.*

MM Given everything you've said about knowing your brand and staying authentic, what parallels do you see on the people side? How can operators rethink workforce strategy—recruitment, training, retention—when the old models of attracting and keeping talent just don't seem to work anymore?

CE: *The biggest challenge goes back to mindset. Things aren't the way they used to be. It used to be that young people would go to school and hold part-time jobs—half in retail, half in foodservice. Those days are over. There are roughly 500,000 fewer young people in the workforce today than there were 20 years ago. Many are postponing entry into the workforce—some not taking their first jobs until their 30s.*

Those are scary numbers, especially for males. You end up with a situation like we're seeing in the U.S.—where disaffected youth aren't working, aren't gaining early job experience—and that ultimately hurts our industry.

I'm not an expert on this, but I was looking at a perspective within Foodservice Facts from Julie Denton, Chief People Officer and Chief Technology Officer at Recipe Unlimited, and she really summed it up well. Her team has had incredible success—she mentioned at One Table that they have a 92.5 per cent retention rate for managers, which is unheard of in this industry. It trickles down, too—their staff retention is higher and turnover lower than most. They focus on the fundamentals: strong benefits, competitive pay, wellness programs, and financial planning tools to make sure employees feel valued.

Historically, the approach was straightforward: assign the job, provide orientation, and let them begin. Now, there has to be a deeper connection between employers and employees—more investment in time, mentorship, and development. That's what makes people feel valued, and when they do, they stay.

Retention also depends on growth. If you can show team members a career path, with effective training modules and clear steps to senior-level opportunities—they'll stick around. If they don't see that path, they'll leave. That's one of the challenges, but also one of the biggest opportunities.

MM How can smaller restaurant groups or independents offer their teams a sense of forward motion to make employees feel valued and see a future for themselves within the business?

CE: *I don't know that there's any one formula, but one thing we consistently see in our employee surveys—especially among younger workers—is that they want flexibility. That doesn't mean "I'll never work weekends," because that won't always be realistic in this business, but if operators can show some flexibility in scheduling, that goes a long way. It's about understanding that employees are balancing school, children, volunteer work or even other jobs—so flexibility makes them feel valued. And it doesn't cost you anything. It's about showing that you care.*

I go back to when I first started working—at Towers, which later became Zellers—when I was 16. When it was exam time and I said I couldn't work that weekend, they were flexible, and I really appreciated that. They knew I wasn't going to stay there forever, but I stayed seven years—which is longer than a lot of

> **"There are roughly 500,000 fewer young people in the workforce today than there were 20 years ago. Many are postponing entry into the workforce—some not taking their first jobs until their 30s."**





Asia today is where restaurants here will be in five to ten years. It's tablets, it's walk-up ordering, it's pick-up service. There's so much labour-saving innovation because the labour just isn't there—and it's only going to get worse. We're going to have 127,000 job vacancies in the next few years. Restaurants can say, "We're never bringing in technology," but you won't have a choice."

people stay in their careers today. They were good to me, and that mattered.

The other important retention-builder for small operators is creating a healthy work environment. I know operators are under pressure and stressed, but it's on them to build a culture that feels safe and supportive for everyone. That may sound somewhat basic, but we still hear those horror stories, and with social media, one bad experience can spread fast. If a business gets tagged as mistreating an employee, it's a long road back from that.

MM Within all these challenges, is there also an opportunity—to reframe what employment in this industry looks like? Could a more intentional management approach help shift the perception of restaurant work as a place for real growth and career development?

***CE:** Yeah—and I was hoping you'd bring that up. I think this is exactly the opportunity for restaurants to reshape their story. Operators can turn their employees into their best ambassadors. Imagine a staff member saying, "I worked at this restaurant for three years. I learned valuable skills. That experience made me a better person." Those are the voices that change the narrative around restaurant work.*

We need more of those positive stories. Because what we tend to hear about is the one bad operator—not the ten good ones.

There's a place in St. Catharines my parents go to—a breakfast spot—and there's a student who works there every year when she's back at Brock University. She's loyal to them because they've been loyal to her. They treat her well, and she enjoys the work. That kind of environment makes all the difference.

But it also speaks to management. You don't have to be an HR expert to run a restaurant, but increasingly, you need HR skills to lead one. You can't communicate with Gen Z the same way you would with Gen X. It's a completely different world, and operators have to evolve to meet it—or they'll lose their people to employers who do.

MM Finally, what does the restaurant of the future look like to you?

***CE:** It's not a restaurant—it's a place. And to me, it's Asia. When I think about the problems we're having here in Canada—rising labour shortages and rising wages—they're facing the same things, but they're addressing them differently. They're really embracing technology. They have fewer employees per restaurant, the speed of service has improved, and they're more profitable, so they can invest in that technology.*

Asia today is where restaurants here will be in five to ten years. It's tablets, it's walk-up ordering, it's pick-up service. There's so much labour-saving innovation because the labour just isn't there—and it's only going to get worse. We're going to have 127,000 job vacancies in the next few years. Restaurants can say, "We're never bringing in technology," but you won't have a choice. If you plan to open more locations while the labour pool keeps shrinking, the economics are going to decide it for you. Over time, labour gets more expensive and technology gets cheaper.

As the great Donna Dooher said, it's about "finding the intersection between technology and the human touch." That intersection changes over time—it's not static. We'll see more and more technology as people get used to it. Full service and fine dining will always be sought out to deliver that full experience, but especially for quick-service restaurants, the idea of "experience" doesn't really factor in the same way for younger generations. The experience really is the food.

Restaurants Canada
INTELLIGENCE

READY TO VENTURE INTO THE BEYOND?

Read *Foodservice Facts 2025*, then watch the on-demand webinar, The Ultimate Generational Grudge Match, to turn insight into advantage. Scan the QR code to watch on demand:

Not a Restaurants Canada member or business associate? *Foodservice Facts* is available for purchase for $250 +HST at: restaurantscanada.org/research/food-service-facts-2025/

ONE TABLE

IDEAS, CONNECTIONS & CANADA'S TOP HOSPITALITY & FOODSERVICE HONOUREES

The first edition of Restaurants Canada's One Table, presented by **Uber Eats**, took place on September 16 in Toronto, marking a defining moment for Canada's foodservice and hospitality community.

Hosted by **Pay Chen**—TV and radio host, writer, and producer—the event welcomed 300 guests to The Warehouse Event Venue, where a refined industrial space was transformed with bold design, roaming cellists in red gowns, and exquisite bites and beverages. Guests arrived in cocktail attire, each look elevated by that "little something extra" that defines hospitality at its best.

The evening's agenda began with a first look at ***Foodservice Facts 2025***, presented by **Chris Elliott**, Chief Economist and VP Research, and Richard Alexander, EVP Government Relations & Public Affairs. It continued with the Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence, honouring the industry's most visionary leaders. Among them, **Mme. Cora Tsouflidou**, founder of Cora Breakfast and Lunch, received the Legacy Award of Excellence after travelling from Sainte-Thérèse, Quebec—earning a heartfelt standing ovation.

A panel moderated by **Kelly Higginson**, President & CEO of Restaurants Canada, brought together the award winners for an open conversation on leadership, innovation, and resilience—a dialogue featured on page 17 of this issue.

The night concluded with a networking dessert session featuring French Chocolate Flan Noisette and a parting gift of fine chocolate—a sweet finale to an evening of community and gratitude.

One Table proved that when Canada's hospitality leaders gather with intention new ideas flow, partnerships form, and purpose takes shape. As a not-for-profit, Restaurants Canada reinvests 100 per cent of event proceeds into advocacy, research, and resources that strengthen the sector. Thanks to the incredible event sponsors and all who attended for helping build a stronger, future-ready foodservice and hospitality community.

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SAVE THE DATE:

The 2026 edition of One Table is planned for September 29, 2026. Stay tuned for details!



One Table event photos: @rosienchris











Lola Kassim, General Manager, Uber Eats



Restaurants Canada **Awards of Excellence winners'** panel at One Table.



Nicolas Filiatrault, Chair of the Restaurants Canada Board; CEO, Benny&Co.





Julie Denton, Restaurants Canada Leadership Award of Excellence winner with **Emily Sweet Kretz**, PepsiCo Beverages Canada, Award Sponsor.





Kelly Blankstein of A&W accepted the Environmental Stewardship Award on behalf of A&W Canada, with **Henmary Acosta, Board President of LEAF (Leaders in Environmentally Accountable Foodservice).**



Chef Nick Chindamo, Emerging Leader Award winner with **Paul Methot**, CEO of Groupex Canada.



Chris Elliott, Chief Economist and VP Research, Restaurants Canada.



The Maple Leaf team showcase their new Musafir™ Gold Nugget.



The team from **Uber Eats**, presenting sponsor of One Table.





Nicole Brunner of Enbridge Gas Inc. with **JF Archambault** of La Tablée des Chefs, Social Impact Award winner.



Kelly Higginson, Restaurants Canada President & CEO.

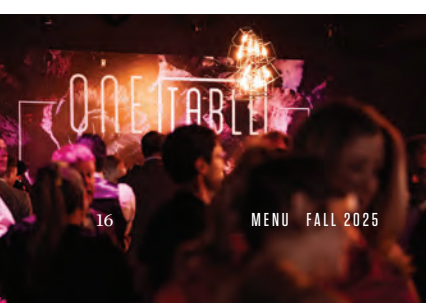




Mme. Cora, with daughter **Gesthimani Tsouflidis.**



Pay Chen, One Table Host.









From left to right: Chef Chris Commandant, Julie Denton, Chef Nick Chindamo, Kelly Blankstein and Chef Jean-François Archambault

Real Talk with the 2025 Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence Winners at One Table

At the inaugural edition of One Table—Restaurants Canada's industry dinner presented by Uber Eats—six changemakers took the stage not to give speeches, but to share ideas. Each had been named a 2025 Restaurants Canada Award of Excellence recipient, recognized for their vision, impact and the tangible ways they're re-shaping Canadian foodservice.

Since launching in 2017, the Awards of Excellence have celebrated leaders who combine business savvy with social purpose—those who elevate people as much as profit. This year's recipients embody that balance: advancing workforce development, driving environmental and cultural sustainability, tackling food insecurity, and redefining what leadership in hospitality can look like.

"Foodservice has always been about care—how we serve, how we connect, and how we contribute to our communities," said Kelly Higginson, President and CEO of Restaurants Canada, as she opened the evening. "These recipients represent the best of that spirit. Their innovation and purpose-driven leadership are shaping the future of our industry."

We hope you enjoy excerpts from their candid panel conversation on what it means to lead, innovate, and create change across an industry in transformation, moderated by Kelly Higginson.

One Table event photos: @rosienchris

LEADERSHIP AWARD OF EXCELLENCE



Julie Denton, Chief People & Technology Officer at Recipe Unlimited Corporation, for leading transformational change through people-first strategies and digital innovation at Canada's largest full-service restaurant group. Recipe Unlimited is a business of and about people—both customers and employees—and are the key ingredient to success.

presented by PEPSICO CANADA

Kelly Higginson: *You've done incredible work at Recipe Unlimited leading major cultural resets across the company's 20 brands and working with the team, shifting to a people-first approach. As the Chief People and Technology Officer, you're uniquely positioned at the intersection of culture and innovation. How do you see people and technology working together to define restaurants of the future?*

Julie Denton: *Big question! I think one of the things all of us here in this room can attest to is the fact that we were forced to embrace technology over the past number of years. Like it or not, technology has been at the heart of our operations. I think why I enjoy this role that brings together both people and technology is that all of this is about delivering people-centric experiences. We want our guests to have incredible experiences, but we also want the lives of our general managers and our store managers to be easier. So, when we look at embracing technology, and in particularly when you look at AI, robotics and table-side ordering and payment, it's all about enabling convenience and accuracy. But ultimately, in this labour market, we really want our teams to be highly engaged with what they do and to be able to deliver these personalized experiences to our guests.*



Technology allows us to do that. When we look at the data, the reservation systems, and the technology we've got around consumer loyalty, we've got this immense ability to be highly personalized and deliver even better and more creative and engaging experiences for our teammates. So, I think this ability to use technology for efficiency, speed and accuracy—all the things our customers are telling us they want—allows our general managers and managers to be hyper-focused on the things they want to do, and less focused on things like predictive ordering, scheduling, and all of the things that have to happen to run great restaurants.

Technology is also going to allow us to have much more sustainable restaurants. When it comes to food waste, we now have predictive ordering, and we have great places for food to go, like La Tablée des Chefs. We can all learn from the great things that Chef Jean-François is doing, and that should be a takeaway for all of us today as we become more sustainable. That's incredibly important.

Kelly Higginson: *You've been leading people-first strategies and digital transformation at Recipe Unlimited. Which technology or talent innovation has made the biggest impact in the last year?*

Julie Denton: *I have brand leaders from many of our brands sitting in the room and they don't all want the same thing. And in fairness, we are in the middle of rolling out a new point-of-sale system to 871 locations, and that is foundational to all of the other stuff we want to do, but we really leaned into our workforce planning. For every one of our restaurants, it's about ensuring we have a depth of talent, we know 'ready-now' and 'ready-soon', what people development plans need to be, and how we can move them across stores. Nine-block and talent mapping is something we've done for a while, but it's evolved to detailed workforce plans by store. This is foundational to creating detailed development plans for every one of our managers.*

We rolled out tax-free savings accounts and RRSPs for every salaried role. We want our teammates to stay and grow and retire with us. We want them to move across our brands and concepts. I think we are uniquely positioned to be able to do that, given our number of concepts. We are making the investment in people, and we have a 92.5 per cent manager retention rate.

CULINARY AWARD OF EXCELLENCE



Chef Chris Commandant, Executive Director of Indigenous Culinary of Associated Nations (ICAN)—for championing Indigenous culinary traditions and raising the profile of Indigenous cuisine on national stages.

presented by GARLAND CANADA

Kelly Higginson: *Chef Chris Commandant, I want to congratulate you on becoming the Executive Director of Indigenous Culinary of Associated Nations. We've talked about leadership at scale, but our industry is also*

about culture and stories on the plate. In a recent interview with MENU Magazine, you said that your father taught you to, "take what you need, and leave some for the next generation." How do you take that teaching forward in your work, and how might it change how restaurants think about sourcing?

Chef Chris Commandant: *Well, that lesson came as we walked through the forest and my father was teaching me about traditional medicines as he was harvesting things for himself. My dad was never one to take a Tylenol or an Aspirin, he always wanted to take it from the land. I remember saying to him as a kid, "Why don't you just pick all of it?" He said, "If I take it all today son, it doesn't regrow." That resonated with me, and it has served me along the way in my career.*

I've been a chef for almost 30 years now. I started in Toronto as a dishwasher, and that lesson taught me that, when the staff meal came out and we were all gathered around, to take what I needed for myself, and leave some for someone else. When I'm teaching my younger cooks this lesson, while they're working with me at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, one of the biggest things I want them to think about is sustainability. We've talked about crises within the country—both financially and surrounding food. We're looking at people not being able to afford food. So, the lesson resonates with all of us right now, to be conscious of what we take from Mother Nature, when you're in a restaurant eating with your mind, and not your eyes. Taking what you need to sustain yourself and leaving some for the next generation.

In teaching our young cooks that, they learn to value sustainability—the idea of environmental and social commitment. Those are great practices to have inside the kitchen. We can serve six to eight thousand people in a week, using only local farmers and no major suppliers, just because we take what we need, and leave some for the next generation.

EMERGING LEADER AWARD OF EXCELLENCE



Chef Nick Chindamo, Naturalist & Wild Food Educator, The Inn at Bay Fortune—for redefining farm-to-table through wild food education, sustainability, and a deep respect for nature from the grounds of PEI.

Kelly Higginson: *Chef Nick Chindamo, building on the foundation as an emerging leader, has also turned a lens for inspiration. Through foraging and wild food education, you exploring how future generations can reconnect with the environment while creating new possibilities for Canadian dining. As the winner of the Emerging Leader Award, you're carving a path that looks very different from traditional culinary careers. What does that say about the next generation of chefs, and their priorities?*

Chef Nick Chindamo: *That's a question I could answer in one sentence—or a thousand. I started cooking in restaurants when I was 14. All I wanted to do was cook—be a great cook. That's it. When I looked around me, everyone else also just wanted to cook, and be a great cook. There was no one around me who was doing anything different. Everyone seemed to want to do the same thing, and there was nothing wrong with that.*

I worked for another 10 or 12 years before I had my 'lightbulb moment", that ultimately got me to where I am today. So, when I think about young cooks now, people entering the restaurant industry, I think about how lucky they are because there are people like those on this stage and in this audience who work to mentor young cooks and show them different paths through the industry. You don't just have to cook, you can do so many things.

I think about this a lot because it took me 10 years to get to that moment, and now cooks who are coming fresh out of culinary school or in their first couple of years are entering into the industry already having had that lightbulb moment. They have focus, and they have intention in what they do. Ultimately, that's what's going to get you through the industry, and through life. Focus, drive, purpose and intention—if you don't have that, what are you doing? If you don't know, you're going to burn out.

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD OF RECOGNITION



A&W Canada for championing sustainability through its national food rescue partnership with Second Harvest (donating 1.24 million meals and preventing 4.8 million pounds of GHG emissions), innovations like the A&W One Cup reusable cup program and regenerative agriculture initiatives with ALUS. Since 2013, A&W has served beef raised without artificial hormones or steroids. Now, all their beef is also 100% grass-fed and grass-finished, meaning cattle graze only on grass and forage throughout their adult lives.

Kelly Higginson: *A&W Canada has been leading the way in bold environmental initiatives, from being one of the first to eliminate plastic straws to investing in regenerative agriculture. I remember walking out of Union Station in downtown Toronto years ago and wondering why it was decorated with all these plastic straws. It was actually A&W rolling out their paper straws, using all the plastic straws they had collected. That was a long time ago. We are happy to have Kelly Blankstein from A&W here as a representative to receive the Environmental Stewarship Award of Recognition.*

Environmental change takes a buy-in at every level. From head office to restaurants from coast to coast to coast, how have you built a culture that engages franchisees, managers and staff in these commitments?

Kelly Blankstein: *I'm so inspired to see future leaders like this here. I think the stewardship award is a kind of euphemism for saying that you're old or you've been around for a long time, but it all started with a spark. One of the things that A&W does exceptionally well, I think, being new to the industry and almost having that outsider perspective, is always putting the guest at the centre of everything we do. So, what*



happened fifteen or so years ago, was that the people who started and ran this company really recognized that hunger within the guest and within the consumer. They wanted to meet the guest where they were, and that led to the environmental strategy—because it was so important to the consumer.

That's not surprising for anybody in this room. Our job is to keep and serve a guest, and if we do that really well, we're going to be successful. Keeping what the guest wants was always at the heart of it, and today, that means that everything we do environmentally is still put through that guest lens. There are organizations that put it through a "How might I save money?" or "How might I make this better marketing or PR?" We really don't do that. We put it through the guest lens and that leads us to make very clear choices about what we select and do. Another piece of it is really finding within the organization the leaders and people who are really inspired within the employee or franchisee base. We've done a really good job of unlocking them as ambassadors. I'll never forget this one young woman who was so passionate about Second Harvest. We just unleashed her, giving her free time and space, to go and talk to franchisees and get out on the road to be a communicator—there is no replacement for somebody whose face and eyes light up when they're talking about something they care about to create that momentum when you want to inspire your franchisee or employee base. You need them to feel it from inside to give it to your guests outside.

Finally, with my CFO hat on, we build everything we do into all of our systems and processes and strategy very intentionally. We start with the strategy at the top and we make sure it has a component for sustainability. We make sure we have the resources lined up against it. We put our money where our mouth is. One really great example of freeing up the resources to do that was with the beef industry. We made a decision to go into grass-fed beef and sustainable beef, and tried to frankly build an industry in Canada. That required heavy working capital investment in cattle farmers and families who were just really trying to make a life and do some really good things in Canada. We embedded and weaved it in everywhere—in our objectives for people, in our performance evaluations, our training materials—it just shows up everywhere. So, you have to be very intentional. But, when you're doing what's right, it kind of makes it easy because you know that you're in service to a guest and you're going to inspire your employees along the way, so you're going to be successful.

SOCIAL IMPACT AWARD

La Tablée des Chefs



La Tablée des Chefs—for recovering over 2.8 million surplus portions in 2024 through its Food Recovery program and fostering food autonomy and social inclusion for thousands of youths via Kitchen Brigades and Solidarity Kitchens. Accepted by La Tablée des Chefs' founder, Chef Jean-François Archambault.

presented by ENBRIDGE

Kelly Higginson: *We've seen how corporate leadership can make measurable impact on the environment. Chef Jean-François Archambault, founder of La Tablée des Chefs shows us how that same spirit of responsibility can really transform communities by fighting food insecurity and teaching the next generation through their Kitchen Brigades. You've spoken about wanting food recovery to outlive you, to be ingrained in the culture of foodservice itself. What will it take for food recovery to move from a "good deed" to simply the way we do business?*

Chef Jean François Archambault: *It's at the core of what we're doing now. When I started, I just wanted people and culinary teams to recover food and feed people in need. I worked for 10 years as a hotelier at Fairmont and opened hotels for Marriott in Montreal. I learned how to make a bed and how to clean a bathroom with a checklist—you can't make it if you're not built into the process. You'll have good intentions,*

and you'll probably hit Christmas, giving once in a while, but you can give every day. We see that.

There's a shift I see right now. We were at the Casino de Montréal a few days ago. I've been trying to get into that building for 18 years. I worked with their new executive chef, Jonathan Legris, who previously worked as an executive chef at the Fairmont Tremblant, preparing meals for the community during the pandemic. He said, "JF, let's just do it." So, the meeting was a walk in the park. Sometimes the conversation between a GM and a chef never happens because you just don't engage on those types of subjects. You talk about everything but food waste and food recovery.

We started with one sports venue, the Bell Centre, back in 2005. We recovered 100,000 meals in 40 home games. Now, the only missing arena—and I'm visiting them next week—is the Jets' in Winnipeg, and they better be ready because we're just going to do it. We're doing this in 350 places in the country now, which is still the tip of the iceberg. We're recovering three million meals a year. We could be at 10 or 12 million. There's no reason why people shouldn't do this. Baked goods are safe for all jurisdictions across the country per food inspection agencies. It's okay to give them. I was a keynote at the Convenience Store Association in Montreal, speaking about the work we do in the hospitality sector. One of the heads of Couche-Tard came to see me afterwards and said, "I have to admit we've been throwing away all of the food that is close to the best-before date. Can you help us?" It's about proximity. You can't go around to seven locations and pick up four sandwiches, and two snacks with a 26-foot truck. You have to build proximity. So, now we're building a pilot program with nine Couche-Tard stores in LaSalle. We are creating the staff training manual, collateral and videos for these nine stores. The staff has been wanting this forever, but they never told the management. They thought management didn't want them to do that.

This is how we change culture: we build it into the process. We get the leadership, management and ownership—from the top to the bottom—to know they are moving in a new direction.

LEGACY AWARD OF EXCELLENCE



Cora Tsouflidou, Founder, Cora Breakfast & Lunch—for building one of Canada's most beloved breakfast chains and paving the way for women entrepreneurs in hospitality.

presented by Restaurants Canada

Kelly Higginson: *We're so excited to have Mme. Cora with us tonight. If we look back to one small diner to 125 restaurants across Canada, it's such a powerful story and example of how a singular vision can grow into a national institution. I was on the way here and a Cora commercial came on the radio as I pulled into the parking lot. It was so timely. It's wonderful to welcome Cora's daughter, Gesthimani Tsouflidis, to speak on her behalf on this panel.*

Every empire starts with a single story. When you reflect on your mother's journey, what moment best captures the spirit of a woman who built something so large, starting with very little?

Gesthimani Tsouflidis: *We started with a 29-seat—five tables of four and nine seats at the counter—in a diner that cost $20,000, which was all the money she had. With family and friends, we were able to do seven stores, and then we didn't have any more family members or money. Someone had approached my mother—her name was Natalie, a beautiful young woman. She was a regular, and she said to my mother, "I want a franchise." My mother said, "I don't do franchise, but we can open a store together and be partners." Then Natalie said, "Too bad, I want a franchise. Figure it out."*

Challenge accepted.

What I'm going to share with you, really demonstrates my mother. My mother wrote to every single franchisor in Canada and the United States. Forgive her, but she pretended to be interested in buying a franchise. She asked for any documentation that could be sent. Some sent pamphlets, some sent manuals, some sent binders. The U.S. chains sent UFOCs, which are full disclosure documents. My mother sat at a huge table with all of that in front of her and—I kid you not—she wrote her first franchising contract. We didn't have the money to afford a lawyer, and franchising wasn't widespread in Quebec. My mother wrote the entire franchise contract and hired a lawyer to just sit with the young lady and her uncle, who was a drycleaning franchisor. He brought three lawyers, and they had 127 points they wanted to change. My mother argued every single one and didn't change a single one. I always say that when my mother takes something on, at the end of it, you could give her a Ph.D. Whether it's rhubarb pie or franchising.

Kelly Higginson: *What part of her legacy do you hope the industry carries forward as we step into the beyond?*

Gesthimani Tsouflidis: *I don't know about "what part of her legacy," but what part of her as an entrepreneur, as a restaurateur, and as a Tavernier, as we say in French Canadian, is her deep love of and respect for her clients.*

Peer nominations for the 2026 Restaurants Canada Awards of Excellence open in January, and will be celebrated at One Table on September 29 in Toronto.

The 2025 honourees remind us that leadership, innovation, and community impact come in many forms—and they start with a nomination. Taking part in the peer nomination process is how our industry recognizes its own, amplifying the voices and efforts that inspire progress across Canadian foodservice.

Help shine a light on the changemakers shaping the future of hospitality.

RC AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE AT ONE TABLE

A Legacy Written in Sunshine:

Reflections and hard-won wisdom from Mme. Cora—beloved restaurateur, trailblazer and winner of the Restaurants Canada Legacy Award of Excellence.



From left to right: Nicolas Filiatrault, Mme. Cora, and her daughter, Gesthimani Tsouflidis



Mme. Cora

At the inaugural One Table dinner in Toronto this September, an audience of Canada's most influential food-service leaders rose to celebrate a woman whose name has become synonymous with breakfast itself. Cora Tsouflidou (Mme. Cora, if you don't mind), founder of Cora Breakfast and Lunch, received the Restaurants Canada Legacy Award of Excellence—a distinction recognizing her pioneering vision, entrepreneurial courage, and enduring impact on the national dining landscape.

When Mme. Cora opened her first restaurant in Montreal in 1987, eating out for breakfast was barely an idea, let alone an industry category. With her signature combination of warmth, creativity and relentless optimism, she transformed that simple morning ritual into a nationwide movement, now headquartered in Sainte-Thérèse, Québec. Today, more than 125 sun-bathed Cora restaurants across Canada serve as beacons of comfort and community where fresh fruit, family values, and entrepreneurial spirit shine.

Mme. Cora built a successful and enduring restaurant brand, but she also built a culture. Her story reflects the tenacity of women entrepreneurs who redefined business and hospitality through authenticity, heart and grit. On receiving the Legacy Award, she reflected with characteristic humility: "Since day one, my goal has always been simple—to offer delicious and comforting breakfasts, prepared with fresh, high-quality ingredients. If I can inspire other entrepreneurs to pursue their dreams, then my mission is accomplished."

In recognizing her contributions, Restaurants Canada honours not only a remarkable business founder, but a true industry trailblazer—one whose legacy continues to brighten mornings, inspire entrepreneurs, and shape the future of Canadian dining. Following the award presentation at One Table, MENU sat down with Mme. Cora to reflect on her journey, her philosophy, and the lessons she hopes to pass on to the next generation of restaurateurs.



When you look back to the day you bought that tiny 29-seat diner in 1987, what vision were you holding—and how close has the reality come to what you dreamed?

Mme. Cora: *When I opened my first restaurant, I was a recently divorced mother of three who'd spent a year on her couch recuperating from a burnout. I'd sold our small house and invested every single penny in the new restaurant.*

There was no vision, at first. My only concern was to come out of poverty, survive, and feed my children. I figured that since we'd always have food for our clients, we'd be able to eat too. I was very creative and talented in the kitchen. When our breakfast dishes, decorated with fresh fruit and served with fruit cocktails, started to attract curious gourmets and form long lineups on the weekend, that's when a vision started to form, and soon the reality became the dream! The vision of evolving our 29-seater into a larger concept came when the restaurant was constantly full and I dared to imagine that I could open a second one, then a third, fourth, and the request to sell a franchise came when we had seven restaurants.

Today, there are more than 125 Cora restaurants across Canada.

What personal values or philosophies have anchored you through decades of change in the restaurant industry?

MC: *Our core values were and still are about family, friends we consider like family, and a memorable nutritious experience in a warm family atmosphere. The atmosphere in Cora restaurants is also a core philosophy: kids and their parents are welcome with open arms. Everyone is welcome, of course, but I opened and operated the first restaurants with my three kids. We built our business as a family and family values are still what we have in mind whenever we make changes to our concept or update our menu.*

I was blessed because I had a creative streak in the kitchen. I could prepare the comforting classics, but I could also come up with inventive dishes to amaze our clients. I passed that onto my kids and eventually to our staff: quality ingredients can be used to recreate the comfort food from your childhood, but they can also delight you in ways you didn't think possible when you dare to try something new!

As you scaled Cora from a single diner to a beloved national brand, what were the most pivotal leadership decisions you made—and what did they teach you about risk and resilience?

MC: *The first pivotal moment was when I was asked to sell a franchise. We had seven restaurants in operation, and the idea hadn't crossed my mind. I did a lot of research, inquired with advisors and then decided to evolve from restaurateur to franchisor. It was a big risk and certainly a pivotal moment in the brand's history.*

We had over 45 restaurants across Quebec, and we decided to venture into Ontario in 2000. That was another meaningful leap! My risks were always calculated: when I opened the first restaurant it was with the money of the house I'd just sold. When I bought the second restaurant, I made sure I had the money in my pocket before moving forward. I surrounded myself with people who could help advise me, trusted my gut and wasn't afraid of calculated risks.

My personal life had taught me that bouncing back was the only possible outcome. We developed a strong franchising system that continues to evolve as we continue to expand and as the industry changes. When your support system is strong, whether it is your friends and family, your franchisor, your coach, your mentor, your community or your life partner, you will find the resilience you need to adapt.

Many entrepreneurs struggle to maintain quality and culture as they grow. How did you preserve the warmth and soul of Cora while building a franchise system?

MC: *Our corporate culture and values are intrinsically part of our concept and franchising system. From site selection and staff training to marketing and coaching, our team is there to support continuously. We are regularly in contact with our franchisees through our web portal, and we meet them in person annually. In addition, our coaching staff regularly visit our restaurants. They are our boots on the ground. When we want to try out different ideas, they can get the feedback from our franchisees immediately and we can adjust.*

Our teams are the soul of the Cora brand, and their dedication keeps the warmth and family atmosphere at the heart of our business.

In an industry long dominated by men, what was your experience building a national brand as a woman entrepreneur—and how did that shape your leadership?

MC: *I knew, and I could see, that I was surrounded by men, but I never let it bother me. I never looked at it like, "me against men."*

I was raised in a home where love and emotions were not on the forefront. My marriage taught me a lot about leading with my mind and to stay focused on a long-term goal. My life was not led by emotion. Becoming the family provider and leader and struggling to make ends meet and feed my children perhaps made me a bit bullheaded in my ways.

> "Being a woman was never a factor because being a leader and a great example was never about gender for me."

My position was always to grow my business, to help others achieve their dream of becoming entrepreneurs. I had a business to run; I didn't have time to worry about what others would think. Being a woman was never a factor because being a leader and a great example was never about gender for me.

In an industry known for burnout and turnover, how have you inspired loyalty, passion, and longevity among your teams?

MC: *I never asked more from my team than I expected from myself, but I did raise the bar high.*

A couple of years before opening my first restaurant, I had a burnout due to working six-to seven-day weeks on end. For me, it was a lesson learned: entrepreneurs and staff must have respectable hours and time off to rest and re-energize. It's one of the reasons why our restaurants are open for breakfast and lunch only. Our franchisees can run a thriving business while still having time for their friends and relatives, to be home on time when the kids come back from school, take care of homework, and have dinner as a family.

It's important to us that our staff, from the people in our restaurants to those at the office, feel that they have a good work balance and that they matter. It's within our core values. As much as possible, we connect with our franchisees, and we get together with our staff. The brand was built around the family and we continue to grow our business like a family, supporting each other in the hard times and celebrating the good times.

What has changed the most in Canada's foodservice and hospitality landscape since you began—and what hasn't changed at all?

MC: *Breakfast restaurants evolved since we launched our brand. When we started, you could get breakfast at a snack-bar or 24-hour diner, and some hotels offered brunches on Sundays. But none of them specialized in breakfast per se. We shaped the landscape in Canada by initiating the concept of breakfast-only restaurants. That was a big change. Moreover, we upgraded breakfast by incorporating fruits and vegetables into our dishes. To this day, Cora restaurants are famous for their fruit cocktails and plates with mounds of fruit. Nowadays, everybody drinks smoothies so it may seem odd to mention it, but Cora restaurants' fruit cocktail was an early trendsetter! New concepts such as delivery are relatively new to the breakfast industry. Food trends also evolve. Specialty coffees, vegan dishes or meat substitutes, and vegetal milks made their way into our kitchens. Technology has greatly changed! Although we still have our coaches in-restaurants, we can now offer online training videos and refreshers. Clients can now reserve their table online, order on their phone and get loyalty points in-restaurant. I think that what hasn't changed is people's appetites for a good, satisfying meal; enjoying a good time out with friends or family never gets old. Perhaps the number of competitors in the industry has increased since we started, but clients are still looking for friendly service, sometimes a kind ear who'll listen to them, and good food.*

If you were opening your first restaurant today, what would you do differently, and what would you insist on doing the same?

MC: *If I had to start all over, I would perhaps think of opening smaller locations – we were originally only opening restaurants with a minimum of 125 to 150 seats. With the popularity of pick-up and deliveries now, smaller locations may prove to be more effective.*

What would I insist on doing the same? Always insist on the quality of the ingredients. I would also keep the focus on a specialty offering with a wide variety on the menu, the hours of operation so that personnel have their evenings to themselves, a solid franchising concept and an amazing team of coaches and employees who can take the brand to its next level. I would continue to listen to our staff: they are our eyes and ears, our most precious resources to know what our beloved customers want and need.



> "When I started, I whipped up everything my clients asked me because it was my way of receiving their love. As the brand expanded, we had to adjust, but pleasing the guest has always been on the forefront."

When I started, I whipped up everything my clients asked me because it was my way of receiving their love. As the brand expanded, we had to adjust, but pleasing the guest has always been on the forefront. We want them to be happy and satisfied, and we offer them complimentary fudge as they head out the door the same way we did when we only had our 29-seat dinner. It comes from a place of love and it's a meaningful part of our warm family-atmosphere trademark.

What do you believe today's restaurant leaders must do to build companies that last—not just financially, but culturally and emotionally?

> "Restaurant leaders have to love people and customer service. If you are not into pleasing your clientele, then hospitality isn't the right industry for you."

MC: *Restaurant leaders have to love people and customer service. If you are not into pleasing your clientele, then hospitality isn't the right industry for you.*

A leader must be eager to learn, always be on the lookout for new trends and have the willingness and flexibility to adapt. Integrating the corporate culture into everything you do, from onboarding to training, and everyday tasks is a must. The people you hire to be part of your team must have the concept at heart the same way you do. It has to be a natural fit. A leader must also be able or learn to adapt, reinvent, evolve and remain true to their mission and values.

> "Do you remember when our restaurants were decorated with plastic chickens? We've removed them from our décor, but we've remained loyal to our values: good food, good service, and kind staff."

Do you remember when our restaurants were decorated with plastic chickens? We've removed them from our décor, but we've remained loyal to our values: good food, good service, and kind staff. Keep what has made your brand a success. Hold on to your best sellers and your classics but always be ready to welcome new ideas and try new things.



From left to right: Gesthimani Tsouflidis and her mother, Mme. Cora, upon receiving the Restaurants Canada Legacy Award of Excellence at One Table in Toronto

MM As someone who helped shape Canada's breakfast culture, what opportunities do you see for the next generation of foodservice innovators? What challenges?

MC: *Competition is a challenge that was always present but seems to be ever-growing. Food costs is a huge challenge, especially when our brand was built around quality ingredients. As someone who helped shape Canada's breakfast culture, I see huge opportunities ahead for the next generation of food service innovators. Today's consumers crave novelty: fresh, creative twists that surprise and delight. They want their expectations not just met but exceeded, and they want it fast.*

Technology and new delivery models open exciting ways to meet these evolving demands. But the challenges are real: rising costs, labour shortages, and ever-higher consumer expectations. The key will be finding the right balance between tradition and creativity, and between efficiency and experience. Staying ahead means listening closely, adapting constantly, and putting in the work to keep pace with trends, tastes, and a market that never stands still.

MM What legacy do you most hope to leave behind—for your family, your teams, your guests, and for the industry you've helped shape?

MC: *I believe I've created a team of passionate people who are disciplined, meticulous, methodical and conscientious like I always was when building the brand. They have a sense of belonging, like in a large family. You must have the pleasure of going to work every morning or you're in the wrong job. Like a mother often does, I think I've taught them to negotiate with fairness, to be kind and generous with those who are loyal to you.*

As far as the industry goes, I hope I've demonstrated how important it is to know your brand DNA and to make it evolve while always remaining true to what made it a success in the first place. I leave behind the legacy of going out to have breakfast at a restaurant, not just for brunch on Sunday, but on any day! It's a lifestyle ritual that I invented for past generations and generations to come.

Follow what's next for Cora Breakfast and Lunch:
Chezcora.com | Corafranchise.com
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MTLàTABLE 2025: American Express® is Accelerating Growth for Montréal's Culinary Sector.

MTLàTABLE, Montréal's citywide dining showcase, has always been about more than prix fixe menus—it's about turning the city itself into a living, breathing tasting room. Now in its 13th edition, the event returns from October 30 to November 16, 2025, backed by presenting sponsor American Express Canada, a partnership that signals just how strategic this event has become for both the restaurant sector and the city's economy.



JULIE GHERSI

Director, Member Relations, Industry and Corporate Affairs, Tourisme Montréal

Widely recognized for championing independent restaurants and culinary experiences across Canada, Amex is a natural partner. "American Express is an important player in Canada's culinary scene, known for supporting small businesses and local dining experiences," says Julie Ghersi, Director, Member Relations, Industry and Corporate Affairs at Tourisme Montréal. "This makes it a natural fit for MTLàTABLE, whose mission is to showcase Montréal's culinary creativity and stimulate the local economy."

> American Express is an important player in Canada's culinary scene, known for supporting small businesses and local dining experiences."
>
> – **Julie Ghersi Director, Member Relations, Industry and Corporate Affairs, Tourisme Montréal**

The impact of the Amex and MTLàTABLE partnership is both broad and measurable. In 2024, the event generated $15.5 million in revenue for participating restaurants and drew 240,000 diners across Montréal. Of those attendees, an impressive 98 per cent said they plan to return in 2025, while 53 per cent were first-time participants, underscoring the MTLàTABLE's ability to grow the customer base. On the operator side, 85 per cent of restaurateurs reported welcoming new customers through the event, and 96 per cent rated the organization as effective, reflecting the tangible value delivered to the industry.

Ghersi credits Amex with amplifying those results. "This partnership gives Tourisme Montreal increased visibility and expands MTLàTABLE's reach to Amex Cardmembers, a highly engaged audience." she says.

One of the clearest ways the partnership comes to life is through curated benefits for eligible Amex Cardmembers. In 2024, for example, diners received a $10 statement credit on a $70 restaurant spend—a simple, frictionless way to encourage people to choose local restaurants. "Exclusive offers create a direct incentive to support local restaurants," says Ghersi. "For restaurateurs, this translates into greater visibility, new clientele, and an enhanced customer experience."

Ghersi is also clear that Amex isn't simply lending its logo; it's co-creating the experience. "Amex has shown a deep commitment to making this collaboration meaningful—not just for its brand visibility, but also to help MTLàTABLE grow and succeed," she explains.

That includes dedicated marketing to highlight the incredible restaurants, and special perks like early access to reservations. "This level of engagement demonstrates that Amex is not just a sponsor, it's a strategic partner that shares MTLàTABLE's mission to support the restaurant industry," says Ghersi. "Amex's support has helped us turn MTLàTABLE into more than an event—it's become a citywide movement that celebrates Montréal's culinary identity and strengthens its future."

> American Express Canada is thrilled to once again be the presenting sponsor of MTLàTABLE. Our partnership reflects our ongoing commitment to celebrating and supporting Montreal's vibrant culinary scene and the talented restaurateurs who bring it to life. Over 14,000 businesses in the Montreal area started accepting Amex in 2024, making it's easier than ever for our Cardmembers to discover, experience, and enjoy the best of the city's food culture. We look forward to another year of connecting food lovers with unforgettable dining experiences through MTLàTABLE."
>
> – **Gerardo Welter, Vice President of Marketing, American Express Canada**

MTLàTABLE:
5 STOPS ON MONTRÉAL'S CULINARY MAP



Photo by Mikael Lebleu

3 PIERRES 1 FEU

Little Italy and Villeray | Chef Paul Toussaint $25 (Brunch), $50 (On Site)

This Haitian-inspired spot has built its reputation on fire and smoke, marrying Afro-Caribbean flavours with Texas BBQ techniques. The on-site menu is bold from the start, featuring oxtail fritters, grilled gambas, or ceviche—before moving into mains like jerk Cornish hen, smoked brisket, or whole grilled fish. Sides are equally indulgent, from rice and beans to sweet potato fries, while desserts lean into tropical flavours with pineapple pie or rhum cake.

ANEMONE

Little Italy and Villeray | Chefs Minh Phat Tu & Mike Madokoro | $80 (On Site)

Anemone, tucked in Mile-Ex, pushes "market cuisine" toward the avant-garde with Japanese, French and Chinese influences. Expect delicate temaki—char with leek or scallop with XO bacon—before transitioning to plates like albacore tuna with smoked eel or Québec carrots with béarnaise. Larger courses feature duck magret with beets, crab-bisque poached char, or hand-pulled biáng biáng noodles with kimchi. Dessert keeps the surprises coming with pumpkin pie with pumpkin seed oil or a reimagined apple tatin with buckwheat ice cream.



Photo by Bruno Florin



CAFÉ RUTBA

Plateau-Mont-Royal and Mile End | Chef Dilpreet Singh | $25 (Brunch), $35 (On Site)

Rutba takes Montréal brunch global, infusing it with the colour and spice of Indian street food. The on-site menu starts with fried bhajiya, tangy samosa chaat, or banarasi vegetable cutlets before diving into Lahsooni chicken tikka, Malabar tandoori shrimp with maple, or smoky paneer tikka. Curries span butter chicken, lamb Rogan Josh, palak paneer, and tawa vegetables, while desserts layer tradition with invention with a choice of gulab jamun ice cream or slow-cooked carrot halwa.

RESTAURANT PAPITO

Downtown | Chef Joëlle Trottier | $50 (On Site)

Papito thrives on flexibility, offering diners mix-and-match freedom without sacrificing flavour. Begin with oysters, spätzle with smoked Fontina, or coppa with pickled crabapple. From there, the menu opens wide—salads, sausages, veal, chicken, fish, even focaccia and sauce for minimalists. To close, diners can lean sweet with churros and chocolate or opt for chai-spiced pumpkin cake.



Photo by Justine Latour



Photo by Peter Currie

BONHEUR D'OCCASION

Les Quartiers du Canal | Chef Philippe Gauthier | $65 (On Site)

In Saint-Henri, Bonheur d'Occasion lives up to its name by serving food that feels celebratory but unpretentious. The five-course menu opens with briny Cascumpec oysters, then layers seasonal vegetables like smoked almond sunchokes and black kale salad. Mains balance the delicate (Arctic char with king mushrooms) with the hearty (Québec beef chuck with hazelnut). Mille-feuille and a rich royal chocolate gâteau close the occasion in delectable style.

Ready to taste Montréal at its best?

MTLàTABLE, presented by American Express, runs from October 30 to November 16, 2025. With more than 150 restaurants across the city offering specially priced menus, seats will fill fast.

Explore the full lineup and book your table now at: mtlatable.mtl.org

RC Show

Restaurants Canada

CANADA'S LEADING HOSPITALITY & FOODSERVICE TRADE EVENT

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

MISSISSAUGA, ONTARIO

MARCH 8—10 2026

INTO THE BEYOND

CHARTING BOLD NEW HORIZONS FOR FOODSERVICE & HOSPITALITY

RC SHOW 2026: INTO THE BEYOND invites us to shed outdated practices, embrace permachange, and reimagine our businesses for greater creativity, connection and profitability. **This isn't adaptation—it's transformation**. By harnessing breakthrough ideas, inclusive innovation, and purpose-driven technology, we can refocus on what matters most: timeless craft, genuine care, and unforgettable guest experiences.

Join us at **RC Show 2026** to turn today's challenges into tomorrow's triumphs and reaffirm hospitality as the heartbeat of culture, community and our national economy.

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INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

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6 STAGES with **130+** SPEAKERS

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6 LIVE COMPETITIONS

3 INCREDIBLE KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



JANET ZUCCARINI
CEO, Gusto 54 Restaurant Group

On fearlessness, scaling with creativity, and driving a future-ready culture.

COLONEL CHRIS HADFIELD
Canadian Astronaut & Author

On leadership, thinking big, and building an agile, future-ready industry.





CHOCKIE TOM
Indigenous Drinks Advocate & Founder, The Cornsilk Road

On reconnection and forging sustainable, responsible systems for the future.

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Restaurants Canada is a not-for-profit organization. All proceeds are directly reinvested into advocacy, research and resources that support the foodservice industry.

New Venue. Bigger Footprint. Future-Ready Experience.

Let's step *Into the Beyond*, together.

In 2026, RC Show will take over **The International Centre in Mississauga, Ontario—minutes from Toronto Pearson International Airport**. With incredible travel and accommodation offers, it's never been easier or more affordable for national foodservice and hospitality professionals to gather for three days of discovery, learning, connection and inspiration.

Exhibitor and Attendee Registration open now: RCSHOW.COM

For sponsorship and activation opportunities, contact: sponsorship@restaurantscanada.org

FROM EXPENSE TO EDGE:

How operators can cut through restaurant tech noise and turn complexity into ROI.



Spencer Michiel
Back of House Consultant

Restaurants rarely fail because of the food. They fail when time, cost and complexity outpace an owner's capacity to keep up. That's the gap Spencer Michiel works inside every day.

A Vancouver-based consultant with Back of House, the technology advisory group owned by Gordon Food Service (GFS), Michiel acts as translator, analyst and coach for operators overwhelmed by sales calls and "shiny-object" tools. His approach is refreshingly simple, offering solution-agnostic guidance that saves time and money. "Skip the random demos," he says. "Tell us what isn't working, and we'll right-size the stack for your operation."

Back of House delivers that in two ways: one-to-one consulting (free to GFS customers) and a constantly vetted online marketplace of vendors. New products cross his desk weekly—POS systems, AI forecasters, IoT sensors, inventory tools, marketing platforms, each assessed for real-world fit.

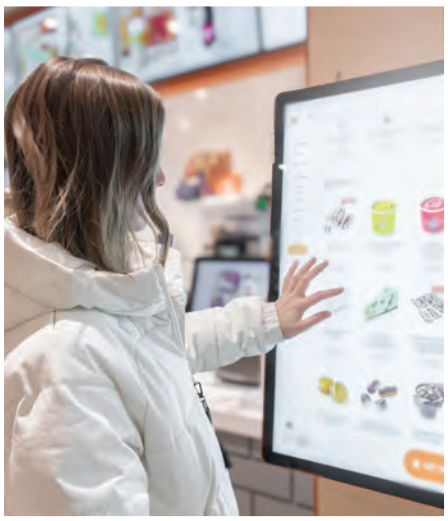


Michiel grew up in restaurants. He started bussing tables at his father's place before cooking across independent kitchens, mastering every station. At Earls, he learned the discipline of a brigade kitchen; at The Keg, he re-learned every role front-of-house, from dishwasher to manager. "You see every pressure point that way," he says. "You know where the friction lives."

Those years gave him a deep, practical understanding of operations he would carry into the restaurant tech world, first helping launch one of the industry's earliest cloud-based POS systems, and later introducing operators to mobile ordering and payment tools. Now, at Back of House, Michiel combines two decades of industry experience with an insider's instinct for what operators actually need, noting that operator DNA is central to Back of House talent selection. "Independent owners don't want a pitch from a technologist; they want someone who speaks restaurant," he says.

The Back of House model is deliberately agnostic. Rather than reselling or pushing specific platforms, consultants start by diagnosing an operator's real needs, then curate a shortlist of options and connect them with vetted vendors. If a match is made, Back of House earns a standard referral commission from the vendor—not the operator.

For GFS, that independence was the point. The company built Back of House after realizing that traditional "preferred partner" programs too often served distributor, rather than customer, interests. "We flipped the model," Michiel says. "Instead of forcing a fit, we listen first. When we do that well, the right vendors come to us anyway."



THE BACK OF HOUSE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

DISCOVERY: Start with a conversation. Define your goals, challenges, and capacity — who will actually run the tool day to day.

RESEARCH: Back of House compares top options across POS, prime-cost, marketing, loyalty, online ordering, and automation — filtering for what fits your operation.

SHORTLIST: Get three tailored solutions with clear trade-offs, ROI insights, and implementation notes — no jargon, just what works.

HANDOFF: Meet the vendors you choose. Back of House stays in your corner for support, but you set the pace and make the call.

TECH TERM CHEAT SHEET

POS (POINT-OF-SALE):
Your restaurant's command centre for orders, payments, and data — and, in modern systems, the hub for loyalty, online ordering, and gift cards.

OPEN / RESTFUL API:
The universal "door and key" that lets software connect without friction. It's what keeps your POS adaptable instead of obsolete.

PRIME COST:
Food + labour — the two numbers that decide your profit. Never manage them by instinct alone.

IOT (INTERNET OF THINGS) SENSORS:
Connected sensors that monitor equipment health and food safety in real time — alerting you before the walk-in fails on a Friday night.

AI (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE):
Software that learns from your data — predicting sales, adjusting menus, and recommending next actions so you can act faster and smarter.

AUTOMATION:
Technology that executes repeatable back-of-house tasks — from temperature logging to re-ordering — freeing your team for service and creativity.

TECH STACK:
Your ecosystem of connected tools (POS, scheduling, inventory, marketing, etc.) that share data to streamline operations.

The Real Barriers

For most operators, the hardest part of adopting technology isn't the software—it's the clock. Between the chaos of service, the constant labour shuffle, and the rigours of daily margin management, time and cost are the real barriers to innovation. Michiel is candid about it: the biggest mistake he sees is restaurants investing in tech they'll never use. "You can absolutely spend $300 a month and get no return," he says. "The key is buying only what you'll actually use."

He laughs at the idea that operators need to become technologists overnight. "For independents, we're essentially a free CTO," he says. "You keep service moving; we do the sorting." His advice is pragmatic: "If you're a single-unit operator who's in the building every day, you probably don't need an enterprise-grade system tracking every prime cost in real time. A simple recipe-costing tool that saves you a few hours each week will deliver a faster—and far cheaper—return. The goal isn't to chase the latest platform; it's to choose the one that fits your workflow and actually pays off."

AI & Predictive Systems

Some fundamentals, though, never change. No matter the economy, food and labour costs remain the two pillars of restaurant health. The labour panic that defined the pandemic is now endemic, but volatile supply costs and unpredictable tariffs continue to keep margins on edge. This is where technology—and increasingly, artificial intelligence—earns its keep.

The best systems, Michiel explains, "make what's invisible visible. They surface patterns, tighten controls, and show you the next best move before the problem hits the plate. Produce prices swing, tariffs shift, and everyone's watching the border, wondering what's next."

That's where he sees technology, and particularly AI, beginning to make a tangible difference. With the right data, he explains, systems can now forecast ingredient pricing by drawing on everything from historical trends to weather patterns and global supply conditions. "An AI platform can tell you romaine is about to spike because of a drought in California, then calculate whether you should remove the salad or raise the price by two-fifty a plate," he says. The same predictive logic applies to labour. By pulling sales data from the POS and factoring in weather, local events, and past patterns, AI can forecast how busy a restaurant will be, how much food to prep, and how many people to schedule—often with striking accuracy. "It's all about giving operators the information they wish they had time to gather," Michiel says, "so they can make the right call before it becomes a problem."

For all that predictive power, Michiel insists, "AI is a co-pilot, not an autopilot. The bot optimizes numbers; humans protect brand, values, and community." The goal isn't to replace hospitality—it's to reclaim it. By taking the grind out of admin, the right tech gives operators more time for what matters most. "AI should take the work you hate off your plate," he adds, "and give you a better plate cost while it's at it."



> If software can forecast, schedule, and cost more accurately than you can between lunch and dinner, that's a gift. Use it to buy back time—for your guests, your team, and your craft."

Automation & Tech Stacks

If AI interprets your data, automation acts on it. Automation has its place, Michiel says—but not everywhere. Back of House evaluates robotics partners regularly, but he's pragmatic about their role. "In fast casual—think sushi belts or high-volume clearing—robots can make sense," he says. "But in independent full-service, the personal touch is the experience. Guests will happily accept automation in a drive-thru. They won't thank you for a robot taking their anniversary order."

For Michiel, the real opportunity isn't replacing people—it's redirecting their energy. Automation can handle the repetitive or behind-the-scenes tasks that drag operators away from crucial leadership functions, like inventory tracking, prep monitoring, temperature logs, and reorder reminders. When implemented well, it creates space for teams to focus on hospitality—the part of the job no software can replicate.

The same philosophy applies to building a technology stack. Some operators want one platform that does everything—an all-in "suite" that handles POS, scheduling, inventory, and marketing in one ecosystem. Others prefer a mix of specialized tools, a "best-in-class" approach that pairs the strongest solution in each category. Both paths can work, Michiel says, but the difference comes down to connectivity. "There's no universal right answer," he explains. "The key is making sure everything talks to each other."

That connection starts with your POS. Cloud-based systems with open, RESTful APIs are the linchpin of modern restaurant tech because they allow seamless integrations without custom coding. Michiel likes to explain it in simple terms: "An API is the key to your front door," he says. "RESTful just means the key turns the same way every time. It lets you plug in new tools—or unplug old ones—without rebuilding the house."

He's seen the impact firsthand. On Vancouver Island, a chef-owner running a seasonal Italian restaurant faced what Michiel calls "marketing whiplash." His customer base changed completely with the seasons—affluent fishing tourists in the fall, local families in summer, and a sleepy off-season in winter. He wanted to automate his marketing so it could shift along with the calendar. Back of House matched him with a local AI-driven platform that tracks market trends, competitor activity, and community events, then aligns promotions and content with real-time sales data. "He's been using it for over a year now," Michiel says. "It just runs. He doesn't have to think about it, and that's the point."

Michiel has seen the same pattern across dozens of operations: the tools that deliver the most value aren't necessarily the newest, but they're the ones that fit. "We routinely find operators paying for features they never use," he says. "The win is cutting complexity and cost at the same time." In other words, growth doesn't always come from scaling your stack. Sometimes it's about refining it. "You always need a growth plan," Michiel says, "but the answer isn't always more tech. Sometimes it's the right tech, used consistently."

The Future of Restaurants is (Still) Human

At its core, hospitality has never been about technology—it's about care. Restaurants are where people go to feel seen, fed and connected. The right tools should protect that, not replace it. Michiel puts it simply: "If software can forecast, schedule, and cost more accurately than you can between lunch and dinner, that's a gift. Use it to buy back time—for your guests, your team, and your craft."

"Because the goal isn't "more technology." It's fewer late nights solving problems tech could have prevented".

THE RESTAURANT TECH PLAYBOOK FOR OPERATORS

Spencer Michiel, Consultant at Back of House, shares five top pieces of advice on how to make tech work for your business—not the other way around.

1. DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU DEMO

Start with clarity, not curiosity. Define the job you need done—better scheduling, tighter recipe costing, a smoother delivery mix—and be honest about who will actually use the tool week to week. If the answer is "no one," choose something simpler. And always demand ROI math: if you'll use 10% of a platform, don't pay 100% of the price.

2. FIX YOUR FOUNDATION FIRST

Your POS is your digital backbone. Move to a modern, cloud-based system with an open, RESTful API—it's your on-ramp to choice. Once it's in place, connect the essentials: online ordering, loyalty, gift cards, and payments should all flow through it. Centralized data means cleaner insights and fewer surprises.

3. LET AI DO THE HEAVY LIFTING

Use automation where it saves time, not where it erases the human touch. Let AI handle forecasting, ordering, scheduling, and prime-cost controls—but keep people in charge of hospitality, taste, and community. Data should inform your instincts, not replace them.

4. AUTOMATE WHERE GUESTS WON'T FEEL IT

Focus on back-of-house wins first. IoT temperature sensors, prep robotics, and real-time equipment monitoring reduce waste and stress without changing the guest experience. Front-of-house tech should enhance—not replace—connection.

5. CHOOSE YOUR STACK PHILOSOPHY

There's no one-size-fits-all system. Suites keep things simple: one invoice, one support line, and "good enough" performance across the board. Best-in-class mixes deliver top performance in each area but require a bit more vendor management. Either way, revisit your setup annually—the market moves fast, and so should your strategy.



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TECH EQUITY:

Making technology accessible for all operators strengthens the entire restaurant ecosystem.

For years, the conversation around restaurant technology has revolved around innovation — faster systems, smarter data, frictionless service. But as digital transformation accelerates, a deeper question has emerged: *Who gets left behind, and what does that mean for the future of hospitality?*

In an industry defined by tight margins and tighter schedules, the technological playing field has long been uneven. Large chains can afford in-house IT teams and custom integrations. Independent operators, meanwhile, often face a harder equation—balancing day-to-day survival with the long-term value of modernization.

This divide isn't just about tools—it's about time, training and trust. For many operators, digital adoption competes with the daily urgency of keeping the lights on. This means innovation is likely to cluster at the top of the market, while independents risk being excluded from the efficiencies shaping the industry's future.

"For restaurants, and especially for independent operators, adopting new technology is a careful balance between a short-term challenge and long-term value," says Amer Matar, Chief Technology Officer at TouchBistro, a Restaurants Canada Preferred Partner. "The most significant barriers are typically cost, complexity, and time. Many operators face tight margins, making the upfront investment in technology daunting. The learning curve can also be steep, with staff training and integration into existing workflows requiring time that operators simply do not have. On top of that, the sheer volume of options can be overwhelming. Without a clear understanding of their specific needs, operators risk wasting money on tools that don't align with their business model."

Tech equity isn't actually about fairness, it's about economics, and for Canada's $124-billion restaurant sector, this imbalance matters. When technology is accessible only to those with scale, it creates structural disadvantages that ripple across supply chains, labour markets, and local communities.

"To overcome these barriers, operators need solutions that are cost-effective, user-friendly, and tailored to their unique needs, with robust support to ensure smooth implementation," Matar shares. "Working with the right technology partner can actually streamline many of these challenges. While these barriers might seem daunting at first, an integrated POS solution can work within an operator's business model to overcome any concerns they have, streamline day-to-day operations, and help them build lasting success."



When technology is built around real workflows, it returns the focus to people — both staff and guests. Smart scheduling tools prevent burnout and help stabilize retention. Centralized dashboards replace mental math with clarity. Digital training tools don't just save time; they lift confidence and consistency across the team. In this way, tech equity becomes cultural equity—ensuring that every worker, from line cook to owner, benefits from the same clarity and control.

But in a market saturated with eye-catching apps and broken promises, discernment is essential. "With countless platforms promising efficiency, operators need a clear framework to identify tools that truly add value," says Matar. "Start by defining business goals, whether it is improving table turnover, growing the business to multi-location or expanding into catering. Then, evaluate how each tech stack aligns with these objectives. Ask critical questions like whether this tool solves a specific pain point, whether it is scalable, and how easily it can integrate with existing systems. Consider the total cost of ownership, including hidden expenses like training and





maintenance."

This disciplined approach—purpose first, platform second—is what makes technology equitable. It puts agency back in the operator's hands. "Additionally, seek out user-friendly solutions that won't overwhelm a team new to the technology. A demo can help gauge ease of use and fit. Also, prioritize platforms with strong customer support and training resources to ensure a smooth transition. Finally, look for measurable ROI and whether the technology can provide data-driven insights to track its impact," he adds.

At its heart, tech equity is about empowerment, not automation. It's about designing systems that make running a restaurant not just easier, but fairer. When every operator, regardless of size, has access to tools that simplify complexity, they can focus on what makes hospitality irreplaceable: warmth, creativity, and human connection.

In that sense, technology becomes an equalizer or force that strengthens both community and adds sophistication to competition. Because when technology works for everyone, hospitality wins.

FIVE SIGNS YOUR TECH IS WORKING FOR YOU

You're saving time, not losing it.

Technology should simplify operations, not stack on extra steps. The right tools cut down admin hours and eliminate repetitive tasks.

Your team adopts it quickly.

If staff can use it confidently after minimal training, you've found the right fit. Good tech feels intuitive from day one.

It integrates smoothly.

Your systems talk to each other. Data moves seamlessly between POS, payroll, and inventory – no more manual uploads or duplicate entry.

You can measure the return.

Every tool should earn its keep. Look for tangible gains in labour efficiency, waste reduction, or sales growth.

It makes hospitality easier.

When technology fades into the background, your people can shine in the foreground – where true hospitality happens.



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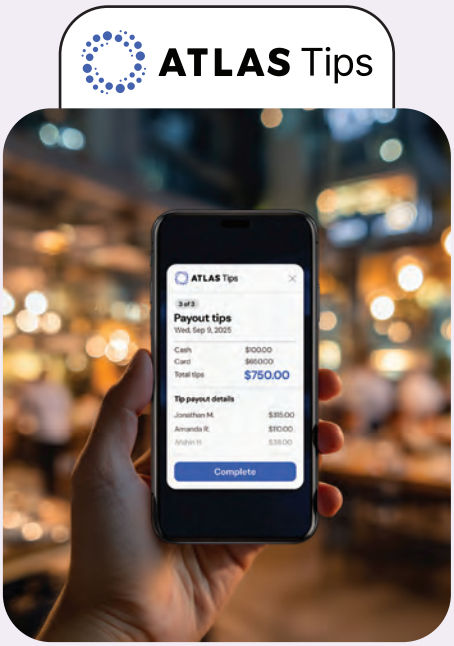
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THE LEDGER:
FINANCE MATTERS FOR RESTAURANTS

Fraud-Proof Your Business:

The Biggest Myths Holding You Back

BY NIYATI BUDHIRAJA
SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT SPECIALIST, MONERIS



If you're running a small business with countless daily responsibilities, fraud prevention can easily slip to the bottom of your priority list. Thankfully, there are a lot of things you can do to protect your business—both in terms of simple everyday measures to fraud prevention resources that do the work for you.

However, it's important to remember that there's no single "silver bullet" for fraud prevention. In fact, some widely shared tips may not be as safe as they seem. These are just some of the common myths about fraud prevention along with solutions to protect your business:

Myth #1:
Small businesses are not a target for fraud

Fact: Fraud affects businesses of all sizes. Fraud is not just a problem for big corporations—it affects small and medium-sized businesses too. Many small businesses assume they're not a target—but this mindset can be costly. Scammers know that smaller businesses may lack sophisticated security systems and dedicated fraud prevention teams, making them easier potential targets. Fraud can lead to significant financial loss and operational disruptions that small businesses may struggle to recover from. Beyond direct financial harm, fraud can disrupt operations, impact customer trust, and weaken long-term stability.

How to protect your business:

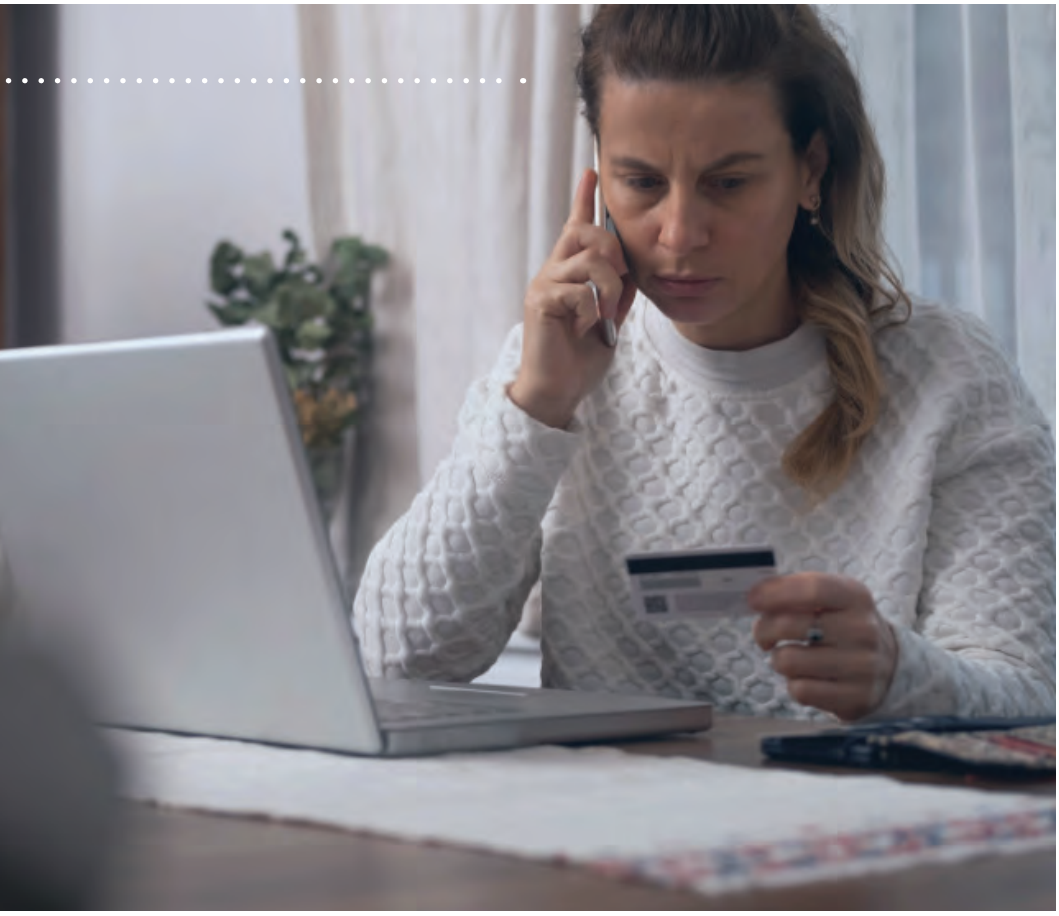
- Invest in fraud prevention tools suited for small businesses.
- Conduct routine security assessments to identify vulnerabilities.
- Educate employees on fraud detection and prevention best practices.

Myth #2:
Fraudsters are easy to spot

Fact: Scammers are skilled at deception. Fraudsters use tricks like impersonation, urgency, and intimidation to deceive businesses. They may pose as trusted contacts, pressure employees to act fast, or hide scams in routine transactions. Their tactics are always evolving, making fraud harder to spot without careful attention.

How to protect your business:

- Train employees to recognize and verify suspicious requests.
- Avoid rushing into financial transactions without proper verification.
- Establish clear fraud prevention protocols for handling unexpected payment requests.
- Observe the transaction to avoid refund fraud.



Myth #3:

Internal fraud isn't a risk

Fact: Employees can commit fraud too.
Businesses often worry about external threats, but internal fraud—like embezzlement, payroll fraud, and unauthorized transactions—can be just as harmful. Employees with access to finances or assets may take advantage of weak oversight. Without proper monitoring, these losses can add up over time.

How to protect your business:

- Conduct background checks when hiring.
- Implement dual-authorization processes for large transactions.
- Monitor financial records for irregularities.
- Require manager or owner approval for refunds by implementing a system where employees must obtain authorization (e.g., a manager entering their password) before processing a refund.

Myth #4:

Reporting fraud is a waste of time

Fact: Reporting fraud helps prevent future scams.
Many businesses hesitate to report fraud, fearing reputational damage or thinking it's too minor. But every report helps law enforcement track scams and prevent future crimes. Even small cases can provide key leads to stop larger fraud networks. If you've been a victim of fraud, notify the authorities and your commerce provider. They may help mitigate damage or disable stolen terminals.

How to protect your business:

- Report all fraud attempts to law enforcement and fraud prevention organizations.
- Keep a detailed record of suspicious activities and scams.
- Encourage employees to report any fraud-related concerns internally.

Myth #5:

If I've been scammed once, it won't happen again

Fact: Businesses that fall for fraud once are more likely to be targeted again.[1]
Fraudsters keep records of businesses they've successfully scammed. Once a business falls victim, it often becomes a target for future attacks. Instead of treating it as a one-time mistake, businesses should act quickly to strengthen their fraud prevention measures.

How to protect your business:

- Review past fraud incidents and identify security gaps.
- Strengthen employee training to recognize new scam tactics.
- Regularly update fraud prevention protocols based on emerging threats.

Myth #6:

CVV and AVS checks are enough to prevent chargebacks

Fact: Chargebacks require more than just verification codes.
While collecting CVV (Card Verification Value) and AVS (Address Verification Service) data helps prevent fraud; it doesn't stop chargebacks. Scammers can still use stolen card details, and cardholders may dispute charges. Businesses should use multiple fraud protection measures, not just verification codes.

How to protect your business:

- Use 3-D Secure authentication to verify cardholder identity.
- Keep detailed transaction records, including delivery confirmations.
- Establish clear refund and chargeback dispute policies.

Myth #7:

You can't fight chargebacks

Fact: Many chargebacks can be successfully disputed.
A common misconception is that once a chargeback is filed, there's no way to fight it. While not all disputes will be won, businesses that maintain proper records and have clear policies in place stand a good chance of reversing fraudulent claims.

[1] *https://www.securitymagazine.com/articles/100582-51-of-check-fraud-victims-had-been-targeted-two-or-more-times*

How to protect your business:

- Keep detailed records of all transactions, including receipts and delivery confirmations.
- Implement clear refund and return policies.
- Utilize fraud detection tools to reduce fraudulent transactions.
- Follow proper card acceptance procedures:
  1. **In-person transactions:** Only accept payments via chip & PIN or tap.
  2. **Online transactions:** Use a secure checkout with 3D Secure (3DS).
  3. **Avoid manual card entry:** There's no protection against chargebacks, even if CVV and AVS are captured.

Myth #8:

We don't need fraud protection—we've never had an issue

Just because your business hasn't been targeted by fraud yet doesn't mean it's immune. Fraudsters are always adapting their tactics, looking for new ways to exploit vulnerabilities. Businesses that assume they're safe often let their guard down, making them an easier target. Without proactive fraud prevention measures—such as monitoring transactions, training employees, and using security tools—your business could be at risk.

How to Protect Your Business:

- Stay up to date with the latest fraud trends and prevention strategies.
- Regularly review and update your security measures.
- Don't wait for a fraud incident to take action—prevention is key.

Myth #9:

Fraud is only a digital problem

Fact: Fraud happens both online and in-person.

While cyber fraud is on the rise, in-person scams, cheque fraud, and counterfeit transactions still pose serious risks. Fraudsters are constantly evolving their methods, targeting businesses through multiple channels.

How to protect your business:

- Train employees to recognize both digital and physical fraud risks.
- Use secure payment processing methods for all transactions.
- Verify large transactions and unusual requests before approving them.

Myth #10:

Fraud prevention tools are too expensive

Fact: The cost of fraud is far higher than prevention.

Many businesses hesitate to invest in fraud prevention tools, assuming the cost outweighs the benefits. However, the financial and reputational damage caused by fraud can be far greater than the expense of security measures.

How to protect your business:

- Explore fraud prevention tools tailored to your business size.
- Dealing with chargebacks and data breaches is time consuming and takes a lot of effort.
- Stay proactive rather than reactive to minimize fraud risks.





FRAUD-PROOF YOUR BUSINESS

Believing in these common fraud prevention myths can put your business at serious risk. Taking proactive steps to educate yourself and implement fraud prevention strategies can save you from costly and damaging situations. By staying informed, training employees, and using fraud prevention tools, you can protect your business and ensure its long-term success.

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TAPPED IN:

Attracting & Cultivating the Next Generation of Restaurant Workers



MENU in conversation with **Donald Guse Salah**, Restaurants Canada's Director of Workforce Development

Labour shortages may be the restaurant industry's biggest headache—but for Donald Guse Salah, they're also its biggest opportunity. As Director of Workforce Development at Restaurants Canada, Donald is leading national efforts to rewire how the industry finds, trains, and keeps talent. His mission: unlock overlooked labour pools, build real pipelines for skilled kitchen roles, and equip operators with the tools they need to hire and hold onto the next generation of workers.

Donald's path to this role has been anything but traditional. He started out supporting job seekers with disabilities, experience that gave him a deep respect for the human side of workforce development. From there, he moved into business association work, helping employers design inclusive hiring practices. Now, at Restaurants Canada, he brings both lenses—advocating for people while delivering bottom-line solutions for operators—to an industry he knows and cares about.

What makes Donald stand out is his emphasis on action over theory. He's building service partner networks across the country, creating youth employment toolkits, connecting members with grants and subsidies, and driving the flagship Cultivating Skilled Domestic Talent initiative—a program tackling the industry's over-reliance on internationally trained workers by building community-based pipelines of homegrown talent.

For Donald, the work isn't abstract—it's personal. His first paycheque came from a family-run burger joint, and he still sees restaurants as the glue of Canadian communities: sponsoring local hockey teams, hosting neighbourhood events, and giving countless Canadians their very first jobs. It's that mix of economic power and social impact that fuels his drive to find solutions.

In this interview, Donald talks about why workforce development has become mission-critical, how Restaurants Canada is backing operators with practical supports, and what it will take to ensure restaurants can thrive with the talent they need in the years ahead.

MM Operators everywhere are struggling with labour shortages, but the talent gap is most acute in the back-of-house. What does the lack of culinary talent mean for the industry and what can be done to address it?

Donald Guse Salah: *It's funny you ask that—I think Kelly Higginson addressed some of it really incisively in recent interviews. But to start with the second part of your question, what's at stake if these roles aren't filled is pretty clear: if you don't have people in the kitchen, your business can't operate. You need staff to prepare and provide the food customers are coming in to eat. Without that, you can't employ servers, hosts, dishwashers—even people in marketing, graphic design, or web development. If there's no food, there's nothing to serve and nothing to promote. For an industry that provides the most first jobs to youth and is Canada's fourth-largest private sector employer, you need people in the kitchen. Without them, we can't be those things.*

Why the gap exists is more complicated. I don't think it's any single thing; it's a confluence of factors. In some cases, it's hard to motivate people to go into skilled kitchen roles when they can work front of house, maybe earn more with tips, and have more flexibility. Every restaurant handles tip pooling differently, so it's not consistent. And kitchen work, because it's skilled, requires more training and commitment.

Culinary programs have seen declining enrollment for years. They've relied heavily on international students to bolster numbers, but immigration policy changes are hurting those programs—and the industry as a whole. Also, cooking hasn't been promoted as a "desirable" career path for Canadians in the same way other skilled trades have. For the last decade or more, trades have been emphasized, but usually in the context of electricians, plumbers, or construction—rarely chefs or bakers, even though those are trades too. People need homes and running water, sure, but they also need food.

Part of the problem is a general lack of understanding about career pathways in the industry. We could do a better job showing the upward mobility that's possible.



Think about McDonald's retiring CEO, who started out as crew and worked her way up to the top job—there aren't many industries where you see that kind of progression. Coming through the kitchen is essential to understanding operations and stepping into higher-level roles, especially in full-service restaurants. The challenge is getting more people to see the attraction of that path.

MM Are the challenges facing full-service and quick-service restaurants very different?

DGS: *With quick service, there are two challenges I hear most consistently—though this is anecdotal, not based on formal studies. The first is filling roles with less desirable hours: overnight, early morning, or late-night shifts. Those can be harder to staff. The second, more common challenge is getting people into management positions—store managers and similar roles. Part of that comes down to a lack of understanding about the career pathways in these organizations. McDonald's is a good example, and Tim Hortons too. Both have operators who say the same thing: you can start in an entry-level management role and work your way up to franchisee, regional director, or even CEO. These are not dead-end jobs. But parents aren't often telling their kids, "You should consider a career in quick service—you could move from crew into management and beyond." That's just not the conversation being had.*

For full service, the biggest challenge is filling skilled kitchen positions—for all the reasons I've mentioned earlier. There's a lack of awareness of career pathways, but there are also issues around wage discrepancies. Servers often earn more in tips, so people ask, "Why would I work in the kitchen and do all that work?" On top of that, it requires more training, sometimes formal education, and certainly more ambition and interest in working with food. It has to be an environment that fits your work style.

MM So where are the potential solutions?

DGS: *Many sector-specific training programs follow a familiar pattern: they're funded by government grants. Some are well put together, with equipment, capital investment, and even industry partners involved. But almost all of them face the same problem—when the grant money runs out, the program disappears. That might be after one year, three years, or even ten, but very few have a plan to sustain the training long term.*

Other programs are created by service providers in isolation. They might see that people want to work in foodservice, so they design training on their own. I ran one of those myself years ago in a teaching kitchen for job seekers with disabilities. It was a great experience, but it wasn't informed by operators. We weren't training based on the real competencies needed in restaurant kitchens. That's common. Programs may be well-meaning but miss the mark, or they focus on things like soft skills, which are important, but don't translate into industry-recognized certifications or readiness for the line.

Restaurants Canada's Cultivating Skilled Domestic Talent initiative is different in two key ways: sustainability and credibility. Instead of chasing short-term grants, we work with service providers who already have the kitchens, staff and budgets to make this part of their core operations. That means the training doesn't vanish when funding shifts—it becomes part of what they do every day.

Second, we build the programs directly with restaurant partners. Each one is informed by at least one or two operators who define the core competencies they need in their kitchens. That means the training is practical and transferable: knife skills, plating, multitasking, monitoring sauces, managing prep. These are



the baseline skills that allow candidates to walk into a prep cook, line cook, or short-order cook role with confidence and contribute productively right away.

The difference is that this model produces job seekers who are truly industry-ready—and it ensures the programs last. It's not about training people how to "make a pizza and that's it." It's about creating a pipeline of workers with the general skills every kitchen needs, informed by operators, and sustainable for the long term.

MM Are there any high-value funding opportunities out there for operators, independent of this program?

***DGS:** I can't pretend to know every funding bucket in every province, but there are a couple of programs that are consistently available across Canada.*

One is the Canada Summer Jobs program. It's a federal wage subsidy that supports hiring youth aged 15 to 30 for summer positions. Employers apply in the fall—usually between October and December—for funding that covers part of the wages. Not-for-profits can get up to 100% of minimum wage covered, while private and public sector employers can get about 50%. You can even request an advance on the funding, though you need to be sure you'll hire the people you apply for.

The other is the Student Work Placement Program, which in hospitality is run by Tourism HR Canada under the Propel banner. This one provides subsidies when you hire students in culinary or hospitality programs for work placements. It's meant to reduce costs for operators while giving students meaningful industry experience.

Beyond those two national programs, there are also provincial and local wage subsidies. Some provinces—Ontario, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Québec—have well-developed programs. Others, like Alberta, don't have as much infrastructure right now. Typically, these subsidies are tied to hiring people who face barriers to employment, whether that's youth, newcomers, or people with disabilities.

MM In your view, what demographics are underrepresented in hospitality hiring, but hold real potential to strengthen the workforce?

***DGS:** You're asking me a question I definitely have a biased opinion about. Overlooked and promising can sound contradictory, but I think both apply here.*

The obvious answer is youth. They have to be the future of the industry. Restaurants are the number one source of first jobs in Canada, and yet youth unemployment remains high. There's enormous potential when you're bringing people into the workforce for the first time—you can spark an interest and help build skills that stay with them. But they're often overlooked because of the challenges that come with new generations. Many have grown up with most of their interactions through screens, so developing the interpersonal skills that restaurants require takes time. We're also finding that many young people don't have their first job until 18 or 20. At that age, they're at the same place developmentally as those of us who started working at 14 or 15. Employers may need to adjust their expectations and invest more in training, even though that costs time and money. On top of that, there are stereotypes about youth being unreliable or more drawn to gig work. All of this makes operators hesitant. But youth remain the most promising stream because they are the future workforce of our industry.

My biased answer is job seekers with disabilities. They are the largest minority group in the country, yet they have the lowest employment rate. While some individuals won't be able to work, there are a huge number who can—and often it's a lack of understanding that gets in the way. People tend to think only of visible disabilities, like mobility issues, and assume their kitchens aren't designed for that. But most disabilities are invisible. The number one disability in Canada is chronic pain. Others include learning disabilities or conditions that may simply require more flexibility in training, task assignment, or workplace support. Operators may feel trepidation if they're not familiar with disability inclusion, but the reality is most restaurants already have employees with disabilities—they just haven't self-disclosed (i.e., employees with mental health experiences). This group represents a significant, overlooked workforce, and bringing them in can be incredibly rewarding for both the business and the individual.

MM What do we know about the size and composition of the potential labour pool among Canadians with disabilities?

***DGS:** Depending on which Statistics Canada data you look at, people with disabilities represent somewhere between 22 and 27 per cent of the Canadian population. Both numbers are significant. Personally, I don't put much weight on the higher figure—it came from census data collected during COVID, when many people self-identified as experiencing mental health challenges. While*

some of those cases are ongoing, I think a lot were temporary and tied to the pandemic.

Even if you go with the 22 per cent figure, that's still a very large share of the population. And when you look at employment, the gap becomes clear. In 2015, the employment rate for people with disabilities was about 59 per cent, meaning 41 per cent were not employed. In the 2022 census, the rate of disability in the population jumped to 27 per cent and the employment rate rose slightly to 62 per cent. Either way, it's still the lowest of any demographic group in Canada—the national average employment rate sits closer to 80–81 per cent.

So, we're talking about roughly a quarter of Canadians with consistently lower employment rates. That signals a huge untapped labour pool. But it also means operators need to think about how to integrate accessibility and provide accommodations in the workplace. There are changes required—but there are also a host of good reasons to do it, and the potential returns are significant.

What would it take for restaurants to be as agile with talent as they are with guests, and what opportunities would that yield?

DGS: *The big opportunity is retention. The retention rate among people with disabilities is higher than most other groups. We don't want to frame them as "super employees," but you certainly generate loyalty. And when businesses—and restaurants in particular—start to think about accessibility, the impact goes beyond just people with disabilities. It benefits youth, newcomers, older Canadians—everyone.*

For example, take job interviews. If you offer accommodations so candidates can present themselves in the way they're most comfortable—whether that's a traditional verbal interview, something written, or even a demonstrative approach—you get a truer sense of their abilities. That's good for everyone, not just one group.

The same applies in the workplace. The outcome has to stay the same—standards can't be compromised—but the way tasks get done doesn't have to be identical for every employee. Maybe someone is really strong at 70 per cent of a role and weaker at 30 per cent, while a colleague excels at that 30 per cent. You can divide tasks to maximize strengths. Yes, there are challenges with that, especially in terms of workplace perceptions or union rules, but those adjustments can lead to broader productivity gains.

> "Accessibility practices don't just remove barriers; they lift overall performance."

Accessibility practices don't just remove barriers; they lift overall performance. And while immigration will continue to be important, it's not enough on its own. Operators need to engage with other underrepresented demographics too. Youth need more support as they enter the workforce, and people with disabilities and Indigenous communities—who face some of the lowest employment rates—represent significant untapped potential. It all comes down to building more flexibility and accessibility into the way restaurants operate.

Can you share an example of how you've matched a restaurant with the right partner, and how that kind of tailored approach delivers results?

DGS: *This initiative is still fairly new, so none of the programs are far enough along to have success numbers yet. But I can share some examples of how we've matched restaurants and partners in ways that reflect their needs.*

One example is a secondary school in Brampton that wanted to launch a foodservice stream for its students. We connected them with a post-secondary culinary program to provide curriculum and possibly instructors, creating a feeder system that builds a stronger pipeline of domestic culinary students. At the same time, we linked the school with the limited-service arm of a large restaurant group, that gives students paid placements during the school year and in the summer—an entry point into the industry. From there, they can move into full-service roles within the brand's broader operations.

Another case involves a full-service independent restaurant group. They partnered with a training provider that had been running a two-week culinary program but wanted to revise it. Now, the restaurant's head chef is working directly with the provider to update the curriculum, extend the training period, and bring in additional restaurants to form a committee that can keep shaping the program year after year.

A third example is a restaurant partnering with two organizations that support job seekers with autism. One partner has kitchen facilities, both contribute trainers and candidates, and the restaurant helps define the core competencies the program should cover. The idea isn't that one restaurant hires every graduate, but that the training is directly shaped by industry input, and the restaurant will hire from that pool.

In each case, the goal is the same: align the training partner's resources with the restaurant's needs. I share with restaurants what service partners are available and what they can offer, and the restaurant decides if that's the right fit—or if we should go out and look for a different kind of partner. It's not a one-size-fits-all model; it's about building matches that make sense and can grow into sustainable pipelines.

Restaurants Canada

The voice of foodservice | La voix des services alimentaires

To learn more about Restaurants Canada's workforce sustainability programs and initiatives, please visit:
restaurantscanada.org/resources/workforce/

You can reach Donald Guse Salah directly at DSalah@restaurantscanada.org

Sarang Kitchen:

A Toronto restaurant for people who are too often designed out of both the dining room and the schedule.



Located in the heart of Toronto's west end, Sarang Kitchen serves modern Korean comfort food—crispy fried chicken, house-made sauces, and shareable dishes that draw both families and food lovers from across the GTA. Founded in 2022 by former educator Jennifer Low and her husband, Chef Deon Kim, the restaurant was built with dual intentions: to offer exceptional food and to create meaningful, sustainable employment for neurodivergent individuals. It's a place where the playlist volume adjusts to the table with the lowest sensory threshold, where staff are trained through visual checklists and tailored supports, and where families who've long avoided dining out can finally exhale. That's what makes Jennifer and Deon's project feel less like a feel-good story and more like an operator's case study—a rigorous, system-first approach to hospitality that widens the hiring pool, stabilizes execution, and keeps guests coming back for the food as much as the philosophy behind it.



Jennifer is not a restaurateur by training; she is an educator whose career took her from mainstream classrooms in Singapore to a specialist school in New Zealand. There, she watched neurodivergent students who excelled in school hit a cliff at graduation: supports were cut off, opportunities ran scarce, and social isolation was all too common. "They could be really happy in school. They could be thriving in school, but once they leave school, the supports drop off," she says. "Parents don't really know what to do, and many young people end up at home for the rest of their lives on an iPad. There's no connection with community." When she and Deon moved to Canada in 2022 (he with the ambition to open a restaurant with his own menu, she with the imperative to close a gap she'd seen up close), they began designing a business with the mission wired into the operating system. "Instead of just opening a restaurant with only, you know, good food… I thought we could also do something for the community," Jennifer says. The concept was simple, but radical: employ neurodivergent team members alongside neurotypical peers and create a sensory-friendly experience so families could actually dine out together in comfort, without bracing for judgment or overload.

Just two years in, Sarang Kitchen employs nearly 30 people and has opened a second location, a scale shift Jennifer acknowledges they've had to work hard to stay on top of. Team lunches that used to seat ten now sprawl to twenty. Growth has forced her to hustle to protect culture, to coach faster when fit wasn't there, and to codify what works. Her educator's eye shows up everywhere in the operation, and checklists are the backbone: opening, mid-shift, close, and cleaning. Recipes are "down to the grams." Stations are labelled. Visual job aids translate ambiguity into repeatable steps—photos for plating, pictorial guides for sauce tosses and garnishes, and short training videos that staff can replay on their phones. A neurodivergent prep cook might prefer to watch a video of Jennifer demonstrating how to break down a chicken on repeat at home or a front-of-house trainee might shadow a manager and then get a visual script for greeting, seating, and handling requests. The standard is the standard, but the pathway flexes to the learner. "If the employees say, 'Okay, I need a visual recipe for this. I need to see pictures of how this is done.' That's when I come in," Jennifer explains. "Every training aid is easily accessible on the kitchen walls."

If the back of house is engineered for learning and precision, the dining room is engineered for control—by the guest. Music is



instrumental or low-stimulus by default, and the volume is responsive to the preference of guests. “If we get a whole dining room of 10 tables, and one table says that the music is too loud, we usually follow the lead of that table with the lowest sound threshold.” If ambient noise or chatter still overwhelms, staff bring out sensory boxes stocked with noise-cancelling headphones and fidgets. A dedicated sensory room adds optional decompression with an aquarium, aurora lights, and calming audio. “We added a sequin panel wall guests can touch, change the colour and write on,” Jennifer says. “Our guests told us they wanted more tactile elements. We also added stepping stones and counting blocks for toddlers. They get restless waiting for food, and families need a safe place to ride out those minutes.”

Jennifer explains that accommodating neurodivergent guests is not about an expensive buildout; it’s about empowering staff to respond without friction. If a guest asks for silence, the music goes off. If the room is busy and voices stack up, headphones come out. Guests are also learning at the same time. When a chatty employee’s enthusiasm collides with a guest’s need for quiet, a direct, polite cue solves it. “He really wants you to have a good time,” she told the surprised diners. “But he also needs to be told directly that you want to have your food in peace.”

The response from the neurodivergent community has been immediate and faithful. “Families come every two weeks or so, or every month,” Jennifer says, sometimes driving in from as far away as Milton and Barrie. “They feel seen when they walk into Sarang Kitchen,” she says. “They feel like they can share their stories with us about the sensory difficulties, the challenges that they have. It’s normalized here…they feel safe.” For neurotypical diners who discover Sarang first for the food, the mission becomes an extra reason to return. Some notice the restaurant discourages tipping and ask why, opening a conversation about values and equity.

But Sarang Kitchen is not to be confused with a novelty or ’feel-good’ restaurant. The food is amazing. They’ve earned nearly 22K Instagram followers and over 2,200 Google reviews with a 4.7-star rating. “People love the food,” Jennifer beams. “They say it’s the best Korean fried chicken in the GTA. My husband has done an awesome job with the chicken and the sauces.”

Hiring and training are where the model proves itself to operators. Sarang partners with groups like George Brown College’s Augmented Education program to host work experiences and internships that work as gateways to permanent jobs. The training cadence is realistic and consistent. “For neurotypical staff, our training is three months, and within three months, 80 per cent of trainee staff will be able to get there.” For neurodivergent team members, outcomes vary by role and supports needed. “About 60 per cent of neurodivergent employees become able to work independently,” Jennifer says. “Some reach autonomy within three months; some need a year and a role change from kitchen to front of house to find the right fit.” The retention story is where the business case comes into focus. “I can definitely say that the retention rate is really high for neurodivergent employees,” Jennifer says. “Once you train them, they’re not going to leave because they love the place so much.”

Rather than a silver bullet, the Sarang Kitchen model is a living dialogue that shapes the structure and consistency behind sustainable success. Jennifer refuses to locate problems in people. She looks at the system first. “If issues come up, we don’t immediately blame the person, instead we look at the system to see where there may be barriers,” she explains, noting that this mindset forces daily refinement, and some messy, emotional, often unglamorous work. Checklists get rewritten when they come up short in practice. Communication paths get clarified when someone is unsure who to ask. Visuals are added when words aren’t landing. The approach may be more demanding, but it also builds psychological safety: the permission structure to ask questions and to request a different mode of instruction.

Jennifer also acknowledges that the culture at Sarang Kitchen must be nurtured and guarded. “There have been people who didn’t fit with the culture, and it was hard the first few times I had to have difficult conversations,” she admits. Protecting the team meant moving quickly when behaviours undercut the mission. It also meant absorbing the emotional burden of being the clarifier-in-chief. “I always tell the team that I’m open. They can text me any questions they have,” she says. The boundary that keeps the work from swallowing the couple is a promise they made before opening day. “We promised to stay true to the mission we started out with, and so every decision we make is aligned with that.”

The restaurants’ model specifically scales through contact. The couple built an inclusion approach, so neurodivergent and neurotypical staff work side by side. “When neurotypical staff work with neurodivergent employees, their impression changes for the better and they reach a better understanding,” Jennifer







> “You open a door to a whole new market of families who are dying to go out, but just need a place that gets it”.
>
> ***Jennifer Low***
> ***Co-owner, Sarang Kitchen***

says. Diners ask questions like, “What’s the sensory room for?” or “What does neurodivergent mean?” and staff learn to answer from a place of real understanding and experience. The idea is that normalization happens in the flow of service, not in a training manual.

For operators considering this path, Jennifer’s advice is to seek experienced partners. “There are a lot of nonprofit organizations that can help, and there are job coaches who help neurodivergent youth find jobs and work experience. They want their clients to be supported in the workplace, so they also help produce visuals and checklists and run training for you and your team.”

She also encourages operators interested in welcoming neurodivergent guests to start small, using the tools they already have. Many restaurants already have dimmable lights and a volume knob, so it’s easy to let the “lowest threshold” guest guide decisions on light and sound. Stocking a couple of sensory boxes and formalizing a quieter daypart as a “sensory-friendly hour” are easy ways to get started. The upside is not theoretical. “You open a door to a whole new market of families who are dying to go out, but just need a place that gets it,” she says, noting that when the food also lands, these guests become regulars.

The Sarang Kitchen team is young and diverse, ranging in age from the low 20s to 30 years old, with many neurotypical teammates also being new Canadians working toward permanent residency. That mix, plus Sarang’s dual-track training, creates a talent bench that can grow into sous-chefs and managers. It also makes the operation feel like part of a bigger web of support. Regulars recognize one another; families connect and trade resources. Staff take pride in a place that insists they can succeed and then builds the scaffolding to make that happen. Jennifer sees the pattern and is hungry to push it outward. “We get so many emails, and a lot of people who walk in asking about jobs but, realistically speaking, Sarang Kitchen cannot hire all of them,” she says. The solution she and Deon are pursuing is a training program in partnership with nonprofits—templated checklists and photo-aided SOPs that restaurants can print and deploy, plus on-site coaching when needed. “There needs to be a successful training program that caters to employers as well as neurodivergent youth,” she says. The goal is to bridge the gap and make adoption turnkey.

As they continue to build, the couple keeps investing in their original vision, planning staff lunches to reconnect a team that’s doubled, making small tweaks that remove friction, and fine-tuning a playlist or making it okay to turn the music off entirely if one table asks. The results show up in the small metrics that operators feel in their bones: guest loyalty, staff retention, and a product that validates the concept.

It is tempting to sentimentalize Sarang Kitchen, but Jennifer and Deon refuse to. This is real work and their livelihood. The lesson for foodservice is that inclusion is an operational discipline housed within a set of design choices that reduce risk. Inclusion expands who can thrive on your team and creates spaces where a wider variety of guests can have a good time. “Our mission is always the part customers remember,” Jennifer says. “It brings heart into your food.”



사랑 Sarang Kitchen
Est. 2023
Korean Fried Chicken & Bar

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THE ROI OF INCLUSION:

How inclusive hiring became Calypso Waterpark's competitive edge in a tight labour market.

Sandra Lalonde
Director, Human Resources,
Calypso Waterpark



"Apply and tell us what you need" might sound simple, but at Calypso Waterpark in Limoges, Ontario, it's the foundation of an HR strategy that's quietly redefining what inclusive seasonal hiring can look like. As Canada's largest outdoor waterpark—with 10 foodservice concessions serving half a million guests each summer—Calypso depends on the efficiency and energy of 600 young seasonal workers. For Human Resources Director Sandra Lalonde, accessibility isn't an initiative or a policy—it's part of how the business runs.

"When I got here in 2015," Sandra recalls, "some of the jobs we had out there had not really been identified as opportunities we could share with equity-deserving groups or people who face barriers to employment. So as part of that first-year HR plan, we made it a priority to take the step and find a way to do it. Employers can't just put it out there and say, 'Oh, you know what? I'm going to hire people with disabilities.' You really need to have a plan—a go-to-market strategy—as to which jobs your organization can offer to different groups, how you're going to provide accommodations, and how you're going to protect employees on the job."

Lalonde's approach was pragmatic and grounded in partnerships. She joined groups like the Discover Ability Network and built relationships with advocates such as Donald Guse Salah, now Director, Workforce Development at Restaurants Canada, whose work on inclusive hiring provided a roadmap for what was possible. "That's when I met Groupe Convex," she says. "They provide access to people with intellectual disabilities. They provide me with candidates, and these employees remain on their payroll, including WSIB. That model has worked very well for us over the years. Some of those employees have now been returning for six and seven seasons."

Through partnerships with LiveWorkPlay, Lalonde also found long-term team members who've become integral to Calypso's culture. "Three of my long-term employees came through LiveWorkPlay," she explains. "They've now been with us four years. Success depends on making a concerted effort and focused recruiting plan. You can't just say, 'Everybody's welcome.' You have to have a plan for handling what people need."

The results have been transformative. In Calypso's foodservice operations, teams that include employees with disabilities now handle key operational roles. "In our kitchens," says Lalonde, "they literally run the dish pit. There are three staff plus a team leader—who also has a disability—and they take care of everything themselves. They collect trays, make sure the kitchens, pots, and pans are clean, working together as a team. They're among some of the best-functioning teams we have in the park because they rely on and support each other."

Still, inclusion on a large, rural property doesn't come without logistical challenges. "The biggest concern is transportation," she admits. "We're rural, and many people with disabilities don't drive. So, we've had to find funding for transportation. A big piece of what LiveWorkPlay and Groupe Convex do for us is provide a shuttle. Now I hire as many people as possible to put on that shuttle."

Scheduling has also evolved into an act of intentional design. "They're travelling together, so we need to schedule them together. And when it's 30 degrees out for five days straight, everyone's tired and dehydrated.

We schedule staff with disabilities on alternate days, so they always have a day in between to rest and rehydrate." It's a small change that makes a big difference in both health and retention.

The more nuanced challenge in hiring people with disabilities, Lalonde says, is hesitation around self-disclosure. "The most difficult thing is having people tell you what they need," she explains. "They often think it's going to hurt them—that it'll prevent them from getting the job. That's a big barrier." "When I'm talking to someone, I can often tell if they need something," she says. "And I can encourage them. But if they don't disclose to

me, there's not much I can do to help until they need help."

Creating a culture of respect and belonging began with clear communication at Calypso. "In the beginning, we prepared our staff and let them know the expectation was respect and integration. We had no issues." What began as polite acceptance has since evolved into genuine connection. "Now we have real friendships that have formed," Lalonde says. "They're texting across social media with no regard to that barrier, with no indication that there's a difference between you and me."

Crucially for Calypso, the operational impact has been consistent and measurable. "The number one thing for us is that we've been able to fill more open positions," Lalonde says. "That adds to the continuity of our business, the customer satisfaction level—it ticks all the boxes. And the retention rate is hugely different. These are employees who return to us every year."

She shares one standout employee story among many about Jennifer, a 15-year-old teen-ager who was barely verbal when she started at Calypso. Since joining, she has charted an extraordinary path. "Jennifer began in park services but soon asked to become a cashier. We told her, 'You're not ready yet, but we'll make you a runner.' The next year she was moved into the cashier role—and her cash was never out of balance. She could tell you how many customers she served, and which ice cream sold best. Eventually, she wanted to work at the front gates, which is a very dynamic position with thousands of people coming through. We were a little worried for her, but she did it. She worked with us for seven years, won one of our staff awards, then went to college and graduated."

For Lalonde, these stories reflect more than operational success—they speak to the kind of social change employers can influence when they commit to accessibility and inclusion. "We employ 600 young people every summer—the average age is 17," she says. "It's so important that they learn about integration and inclusion for everything they're about to do in life. By working here, on these diverse teams, they get that experience. Year after year, we see friendships develop, alliances form—they protect their colleagues. Our clients see that, and they see our people supporting each other."

Guest reactions, she notes, have been mostly positive—and when they're not, they become teaching moments. "Most guests are pleased that we're doing what we're doing," she says. "Of course, some are not too patient with it, but I look at it as an opportunity to educate our guests. This is not going away for us. This is who we are, and we're going to continue to grow. We do not tolerate any employee being disrespected."

Her advice for other operators is both practical and philosophical. "Start small, but start smart," she says. "You can't just say 'everyone's welcome' without a plan. You need to figure out transportation, flexible scheduling, and training that meets people where they are. You have to prepare your management team. And you need the right partners—communities that understand these candidates and can help bridge the gap. Once you have that, it's just about opening the door."

Calypso's model shows what happens when inclusion is treated not as charity, but as infrastructure—something that strengthens the entire organization. As Lalonde puts it, "If you come to me and you say, 'Sandra, I want to be a lifeguard, but I'm on the spectrum—how can we do that?' I can figure that out. And if I can't, I'll be honest about what we can do instead."

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS FOR OPERATORS

Build meaningful partnerships.
Specialized agencies can connect employers to job-ready candidates and help navigate funding, insurance, and transportation. They also serve as advocates for employees and support employers through the onboarding process. Find a local service provider to help source and hire people with disabilities in your area at: **hirefortalent.ca/service-providers**

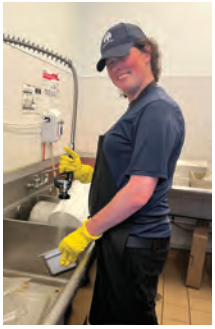
Design jobs with intention.
Structure tasks for predictability, safety, and teamwork, then match candidates to those roles.

Solve logistics first.
Transportation and scheduling are often the biggest accessibility barriers. Rem ember that accessibility starts before the first shift.

Train inclusively.
Offer smaller or quieter orientations, allow support workers or advocates to attend, and provide materials in advance. Adjust training formats to the learner, not the other way around.

Set clear culture standards.
Respect and integration should be explicit expectations, reinforced by management and modelled daily. Celebrate inclusion and take a zero-tolerance approach to harassment or disrespect.

Listen and adapt.
Accessibility is continuous improvement. Maintain open lines of communication and encourage employee feedback.



Shelby Penny



Carl Sanderson

CALYPSO WATERPARK

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Cultural Cravings: Global Cuisines in Canada Foodservice

Canada's foodservice industry is shaped by migration and multiculturalism. In 2023, nearly 472,000 new permanent residents arrived — one of the highest levels on record, according to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's "2024 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration." These newcomers bring skills and rich culinary traditions that continue to influence menus, neighbourhoods, and industry growth. Below are a few examples of how this is reshaping foodservice.

+37M Servings of specialty iced teas like bubble tea

+15M Servings of Mexican cuisine

+24M Servings of other global cuisines

Amount of foodservice business owners who are immigrants **50%**

Unit expansion of global cuisine QSRs in 2024 **+4.2%**

Dollar volume gained by independent restaurants, the industry's most **+$1.2B**

As diners explore new cuisines or seek familiar flavours from home, demand for international offerings continues to grow. For operators, this presents a clear opportunity to serve diverse communities and meet evolving tastes in an increasingly multicultural market. After all, dishes like pizza and Chinese food were once considered global novelties. Today, they're everyday staples, showing how cultural exchanges shape what Canadians eat.

Sources: Circana, ReCount®, Units, Canada, 2024; CREST®, Dollars and Servings, Canada, YE June 2025 vs. 2024; Statistics Canada, 2021 Census, Table 98-10-0600-01; Business owners are self-employed persons with paid staff; Other global cuisines include Chinese/Szechwan, Japanese, Indian, and Thai/Korean/Vietnamese

Circana.

About the Author

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



THE SECRET INGREDIENTS:

Authentic Recipes and Trusted Partners Fuel El Mariachi's Success



Michael Aitken, Owner,
El Mariachi Tacos and Churros

In a city where independent restaurants often struggle to stand out, El Mariachi Tacos & Churros has managed to build not one but two thriving destinations in Mississauga, Ontario. From its lively Streetsville flagship, known for its festive dining, seasonal igloo dining experience, and menu stacked with tacos, fajitas, and house-made churros, to its Port Credit location featuring a glass-enclosed four-season patio, the restaurant group has become synonymous with authentic Mexican food.

The commitment to authenticity shows in every detail. All of El Mariachi's cooks are Mexican, a decision that has shaped the flavour and integrity of the menu. "It was difficult to train local cooks on the authentic Mexican recipes because they didn't have the palate," says owner Michael Aitken. "We make everything fresh, and it's a lot of work. Through the Temporary Foreign Worker program, we were



able to bring in Mexican cooks, and that's when everything came together for us. Recipes started changing under their influence and we've evolved into a destination spot with people coming from all over."

That authentic approach has earned El Mariachi six consecutive Best Mexican food wins in the Best of Mississauga Readers' Choice Awards. It's also created a following that stretches well beyond the city.

Behind the scenes, El Mariachi runs on a network of close supplier relationships. Aitken relies on Gordon Food Service (GFS) for grocery products and proteins, alongside specialty produce and Mexican suppliers to source essentials that keep the menu fresh and true to its roots. Even with precision planning and schedules, managing costs is an ongoing challenge. "Prices have gone through the roof, and our suppliers have done everything they can to keep costs down," he acknowledges. "In the past five years, I've had to raise menu prices five or six times, but you can only charge so much for tacos. With Groupex, I know I benefit from pricing not all restaurants have. And I've tried several distributors in the past, but I always come back to GFS."

Through Groupex, Canada's foodservice buying group, Aitken has found leverage and support that go far beyond food costs. "Groupex has helped us in many ways and with many different things, including technologies like our POS and restaurant management system," he says. "If I need something addressed quickly, I'm able to phone my Groupex Rep, Ryan McKinnon, and he'll contact our vendor and get the ball rolling. He also helped me switch over our wines to stay local with Peller Estates wines. Groupex has played a huge role in helping shorten the path to get results, particularly with large companies. They're amazing."

El Mariachi also participates in Groupex's popular rebate program, which negotiates preferred partnerships with top-tier suppliers, allowing participating Groupex members to automatically earn back a percentage of what they are already spending on essential restaurant products and services. For El Mariachi, that means thousands of dollars in rebates each year—funds that can be reinvested into staff benefits, new equipment, or guest experiences—without adding any administrative burden beyond buying what the restaurant already needs. "The Groupex rebate is huge. Last year, I received about $20,000 back," says Aitken. "I don't understand how any operator wouldn't sit down and listen to what they have to say and give them a try. I get my rebate once a month in the mail, right on schedule. I don't have to do anything other than buy the products I need."

El Mariachi offers extended health and dental coverage to its full-time employees—benefits introduced in part to support the restaurant's Mexican cooks. "They don't have that in Mexico," Aitken explains. "They're here, in another country, making my business successful, so this is something extra I can do for them." When rising costs forced him to reconsider his provider, Groupex became part of the solution, connecting El Mariachi with Western Financial Group to secure fair rates and added confidence. For Aitken, it reinforced the sense that he isn't navigating these decisions alone: "If there are problems, I have people who will fight for me."

El Mariachi's story is one of persistence, partnership, and pride in doing things right. By pairing authentic food with operational discipline and Groupex support, both locations have built a reputation that outpaces their size. "My rep is in contact with me at least once a month," says Aitken. "The support is just spectacular."

For Mississauga diners, it means they don't need to leave town for true Mexican flavours. For other independents, El Mariachi offers a lesson: the right partnerships can make the difference between surviving and thriving.

groupex CANADA

Groupex Canada is a Canadian foodservice buying group that helps operators maximize savings with exclusive volume pricing and rebates from 300+ supplier partners. Visit Groupex and learn more at: groupex.com

FORGING THE FUTURE:

Canadian Restaurant Investment & Leadership Summit (CRILS) Preview

As Canada's top foodservice minds prepare to convene, the 15th annual Canadian Restaurant Investment & Leadership Summit (CRILS) lands at RoseRock Place in Toronto on November 13, 2025, marking a milestone year under the new stewardship of National Bank of Canada. Four high-impact sessions—from the duelling-podium Foodservice State of the Nation with National Bank and Circana, to Stéfane Marion's Canadian economic outlook, a candid CEO panel, and a deep dive into hospitality technology—will deliver data-driven insights and networking opportunities that bridge capital, strategy, and innovation. For operators, investors, and visionaries, CRILS is where the future of Canadian foodservice takes shape.



Jacob Mancini
AVP, Restaurants
National Bank of Canada
and CRILS Summit Leader



Now in its 15th year—and its first since joining the NBC family—the CRILS will once again bring together the leaders shaping Canada's restaurant economy at RoseRock Place, one of NBC's Toronto homes.

What began as a modest idea—a space where restaurant executives could talk candidly about growth, capital and strategy—has become a fixture for decision-makers across the country. "We designed CRILS to focus on the business and investment side of restaurants rather than the day-to-day operations," says Jacob Mancini, AVP, Restaurants & Breweries, National Bank of Canada. "It's for executives at the franchisor or brand level, and for the people who make up every part of a restaurant's P&L—real estate, accounting, supply, finance. It's the ecosystem."

That focus makes CRILS distinct in a crowded event landscape. "There's really no other event like it in Canada," Mancini says. "We created it because we saw this kind of high-level dialogue happening in the U.S.—but nothing comparable here." Over the years, CRILS has evolved into both a de facto think tank and a networking powerhouse, where CEOs, investors, and emerging brands trade insights with unusual candour. "It's a small, big world," he adds. "These are peers who know each other, who've probably worked together. So the conversations are honest—about what's working, what isn't, and where the opportunities are."

The 2025 program continues the event's signature mix of State of the Nation and CEO Panel sessions, now joined by a timely new focus: the Economic Outlook. "This year will be heavily about the economy," says Mancini. "We're bringing in an economist to unpack the challenges and opportunities shaping growth right now. It's what's top of mind for everyone."

While its been hosted by financial services companies and banking groups over the years, CRILS has never been a corporate showcase. "It's not about generating business," Mancini emphasizes. "It's about giving back—creating a standalone forum that benefits the entire industry."

For those in restaurant leadership, finance, or growth strategy, the message is simple: this is the room to be in.



ONE DAY, FOUR POWERFUL SESSIONS

Session 1:
The Foodservice State of the Nation

A CRILS mainstay, this lively session sees **Jacob Mancini** of National Bank of Canada and **Vince Sgabellone** of Circana take the stage at duelling podiums to unpack the current state of Canada's foodservice industry.

Session 2:
The Canadian Economic Landscape

Stéfane Marion, Chief Economist and Strategist, and members of the National Bank of Canada team bring their widely followed Economic Impact videos to the CRILS stage for the first time, offering a data-rich economic outlook.

Session 3:
The CEO Panel

This popular and candid discussion among restaurant and franchise CEOs explores the evolution of Canada's restaurant industry.

Session 4:
Tech in Hospitality

Can innovation enhance rather than replace the human connection at the heart of hospitality? Join us as a **panel of top tech leaders** discuss how technology can enable humanity.



Don't miss out on hearing some of the most important conversations on the future of Canadian hospitality.

Canadian Restaurant Investment & Leadership Summit (CRILS)
November 13, 2025
RoseRock Place
121 King Street West
Toronto, Canada

Learn more and request information at:
restaurantsummit.ca

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Tableware Solutions: Elevating the Art of the Table

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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.

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