

# The Sickness unto Hospitality

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I started working in hospitality while writing my dissertation in 2007. By the time I defended and went on the market, the financial crisis had taken its toll, and full-time jobs in my field were scarce and elusive. I loved teaching, but I probably did too much of it while struggling to finish, and the drawn-out process wore me down and ruined me financially. I was already working in bars to supplement my income, so I decided to stop commuting to my two teaching jobs and start bartending full-time. The hospitality industry in Chicago thrived after the Great Recession, and I was able to rise with the high tide of bar and restaurant groups and climb out of debt, back into a place where I could imagine a future. I felt at home immediately, I think because it was a place where my anxiety about the future was more tangibly rooted in the long, grueling hours working for the tips that may or may not justify the effort. Food and Beverage hospitality routinely forces us to face human existence in all of its dreadful implications, and to keep working with and in service of others despite those feelings.

Small-business owners and entrepreneurs, no matter what their market, share a humility that keeps those who experience success rooted in their daily problem-solving. The competition in hospitality is high, profit margins are thin, and revenue depends on a number of factors that are difficult or impossible to control. A mountain of debt is usually required to lay the bricks and mortar, to design and implement menus and systems, to acquire the licensing and insurance, to buy product, and to train the mostly new staff in whose hands the day-to-day execution of the entire endeavor will ultimately rest. Absent enormous wealth or ignorance, the process of opening and operating a restaurant—the ultimate creative expression of those of us inspired by food, drinks, and hospitality—produces intense dread, anxiety, and despair.

These existential feelings are not limited to ownership and management. Without an economy of scale, the typical restaurant with a liquor license generates the vast majority of its profit by selling beverages. Yet, after salaried managers,

cooks represent the next highest labor expenditure, despite being significantly underpaid. Back-of-house staff is almost always overworked by high-volume shifts producing a commodity that tends to reinforce the lower wages. Striving to reach food costs that allow the business to break even on food, hourly kitchen employees are alienated by the product of their labor, and this alienation produces the same dread, anxiety, and despair endemic to restaurant operations. Front-of-house employees generally make a higher average hourly income, and in many cases it is far higher. But this income is far from guaranteed. Employee tip credits make it easier for restaurants and bars to stay buoyant, but they make a tipped employee's every shift a potentially life-altering event. A few service missteps or bad tips and the bartender or server finds themselves hovering over the abyss of unpaid rent and bills.

In Food and Beverage hospitality, we all reckon with the abyss, and we get used to it. It drives our collective sense of responsibility for ourselves, our restaurant or bar, the folks we struggle alongside, and especially our guests. This ethos is best expressed in the concept of “family meal,” the food that chefs and back-of-house staff prepare for employees working a particular shift. To restaurant workers on long shifts, these meals are a little taste of hospitality, providing physical and social sustenance, bringing the restaurant together like family. By and large, the common feeling I've heard expressed in the wake of this pandemic—from owners, managers, cooks, dish staff, hosts, servers, bartenders, and support staff—is concern for our coworkers, our industry family, and the community we serve. Each has expressed a desire to be hospitable in the face of oblivion.

Local restaurant owners immediately circled the wagons and started getting organized as it became clear that their restaurants and bars would be forced to close. Most of the initial concern about the impact of the restrictions was for the effect it would have on employees. Employee relief programs were set up immediately, and a supportive community of guests and partners are giving generously. Industry leaders have taken it upon themselves to transform their operations into social

safety networks. Chef Rick Bayless transformed Frontera Grill into a food distribution center where furloughed workers package donations from U.S. Foods for Chicagoans in need. One Off Hospitality and the Fifty/50 Group joined forces with Chef Edward Lee and the Restaurant Workers Relief Fund to transform their restaurants into facilities for providing meals for industry workers. Pilot Light, which partners with chefs to promote healthier food preparation and consumption throughout the city, is paying furloughed chefs to make educational family cooking videos in a program called “Family Meal.” And the Feed Our Frontlines campaign is paying restaurant workers to prepare meals for healthcare professionals throughout Chicago. These are just a few examples from a hospitality industry that is problem-solving a humanitarian crisis to which itself has fallen victim.

These leaders immediately shut down and transformed their businesses to serve their suffering community. And they may very well never open for regular business again. The strength and focus demonstrated in this crisis seems almost irrational unless you have ever owned or operated a restaurant. Crisis-management, problem-solving, and maintaining a firm footing at the edge of an abyss are essential for navigating a restaurant opening or busy service. In contrast to the way we talk and think about them, successful restaurants, bars, and hospitality groups have not succeeded because they have risen above or escaped their finitude. Rather, they have faced the dreadful abyss of uncertainty and ventured to step forward, and to make a decision to strive through it. And for this reason, these are people who can deliver in a time of crisis. 