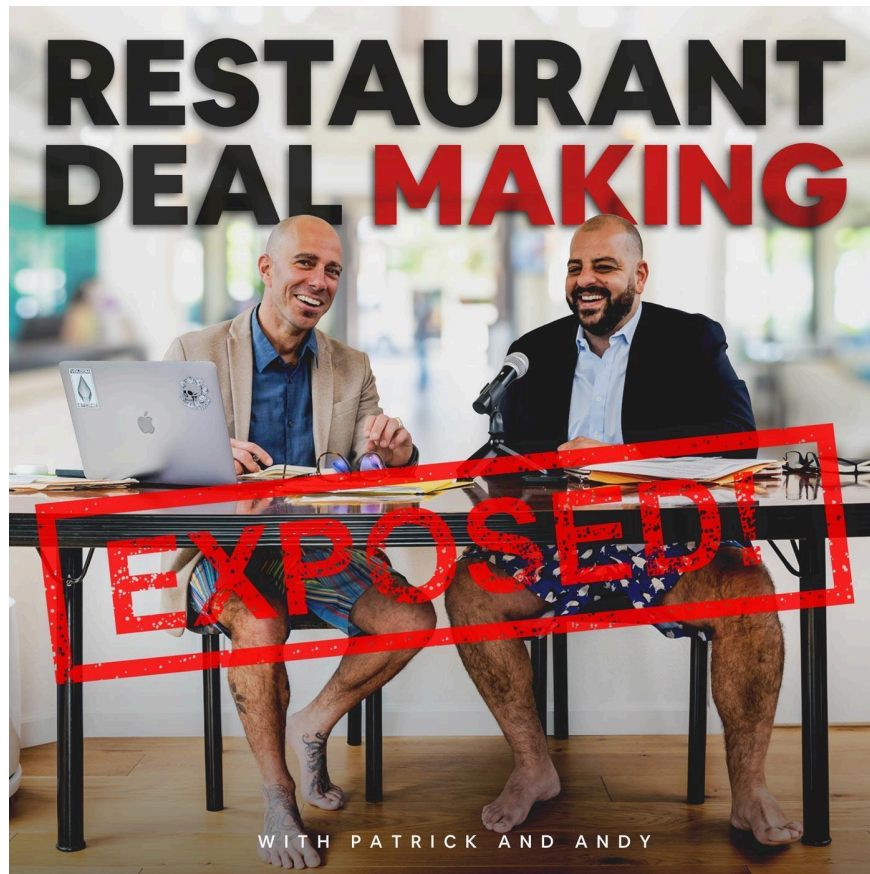


Ep #62: Yelp: Sucking the Soul out of Soul Food with Chef Brenda



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Patrick Totah and Andy Mirabell

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Welcome to *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!*, the only show that equips you with everything you need to know about restaurant transactions. In this show, we tell you all about how to make the sale or purchase of your restaurant not just possible, but successful. Now, here are your hosts, ex-restaurateurs, and seasoned brokers, Patrick Totah and Andy Mirabell.

Patrick: Alright, we are here with Restaurant Deal Making Exposed. Today's episode: "Yelp: Sucking the Soul out of Soul Food." Today we're joined by Brenda, Chef Brenda, the chef and owner behind Brenda's French Soul Food in San Francisco and Oakland and Brenda's Meat & Three in San Francisco. Brenda grew up just outside New Orleans, where food was pretty much a way of life, catching crawfish, crabbing, fishing, and growing up around an incredible mix of Creole, French, Sicilian, and Filipino food traditions.

Interestingly, she actually studied painting and drawing at LSU before realizing the kitchen was where she wanted to put all of her creativity. She eventually made her way to San Francisco, and in 2007, took a tiny Tenderloin greasy spoon she found on Craigslist and turned it into Brenda's French Soul Food.

What started as a little neighborhood restaurant became a San Francisco and Bay Area institution known for its fried chicken, biscuits, shrimp and grits, and of course, those beignets. My favorite beignet, of course, is the Ube beignet. Today we're not really here to talk about beignets, we're here to talk about something every restaurant owner has a love-and-hate relationship with, and sometimes very personal relationship with reviews, especially reviews on Yelp. Brenda recently had a little fun with one that caught our attention, so we figured there was no better way to have this conversation with than Brenda. Brenda, thank you for joining us.

Brenda: Of course.

Andy: There's very few times that, you know, we read these things online in SFGATE and so on about reviews, bad reviews, outrageous, outlandish reviews. Oh my Lord, I was smiling and I was laughing out loud reading the article. I've listened to it on an audible reading of it. I mean, again and again, and it's

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something to behold. So, I'm glad we get to talk about reviews as in general, but also have a little fun with this one too.

Patrick: We've seen a couple of these like influencer things gone viral with chefs that we have as clients or people that we know. So, we like to talk about these things because we know the other side, how the restaurant owner or chef takes it on, you know, on that side and so it's important that we talk about these things and let, you know, some transparency around it.

Andy: Patrick, you guys have some, uh, commonality in family lineage?

Patrick: Oh, I mean, you know, like, you know, Brenda, I grew up in South San Francisco, so, you know, my extended family, they're all Filipinos. I basically grew up and if you look at class pictures, it's like me and then a bunch of Filipino people. So, all my really long-standing connections in this world are all my friends from high school and elementary.

When I first met you, you described yourself as Filipino Creole, which kind of surprised me. Can you tell me a little bit more about that family history and in Louisiana and everything?

Brenda: So, you know, let's go back to how the Filipino settlements were even started back in the day. They were started by what they called Manilamen, and these were Filipino sailors who jumped ship because they were, you know, at the time being colonized by Spain. And went into the bayous and settled in this really uninhabitable area that they were able to manage. And as a result, the way that the Filipino community was created down there was mostly by these sailors, these men who would then go into, you know, into New Orleans or South Louisiana and they would marry into other cultures.

My dad was a Filipino immigrant and my mom was Filipino Creole Cajun. So, her mother, my grandmother, has lineage that goes all the way back to the original Acadians from Canada. So, I am a true Cajun in that way. But then, you know, we also married into Italians, Germans. I use Creole as a catch-all because it's just kind of easier. Louisiana Creole.

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Andy: We live in the Bay Area, which I would call definitely one of the most diverse areas anywhere, cities anywhere, and we love it for that. But I think you're totally correct in the complexities of New Orleans and the South and that sort of culture and the blending there is quite extensive and complicated.

Brenda: Yeah. And if you look at my 23andMe report, you'd be like, what the hell?

Andy: How many pages is it? Yeah.

Brenda: I was like, okay, which continent is not represented here?

Patrick: Oh, wow. That's really cool. Yeah.

Andy: Oh. Well, what you've created with your take on your soul food and in history and what emulates the dishes and you know, in all your businesses in the Bay Area are just, it's fantastic and you've created something very special, long lasting, popular. You are the one of the most reviewed restaurants and concepts in the Bay Area. I mean, what, something like 12,000 plus reviews. I mean, that's wild. My head spins at a few hundred when I had a business. So, you are the talk of the town and have been for a long time.

But recently, I think, you know, for those listeners here that don't know what we're going to really be diving in or using as our springboard to our conversation today, look up on SFGATE, type in "Brenda's French Soul Food goes viral for reading unhinged Yelp review." And you'll see this review, you can listen to the article. It's fantastic. There's a lot to it. So, let's unpack that a little bit.

When you first read this review or heard about it, tell us your reaction because I know, you know, as a restaurant owner, we have a lot of reactions when we read these reviews, a lot of emotions, but this one in particular, what kind of chord did it strike with you?

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Brenda: You know, honestly, my first restaurant just turned 19. And close to 13,000 reviews, you know, you become pretty jaded. I mean, for one, it's been a long time since I actually took anything personally. You know, false accusations, especially, you know, accusations of being an appropriator particularly, that still stings a little.

Andy: Yeah.

Brenda: But there was one review, I tried to dig it up where the person accused me of going out in the dining room and kicking his grandma. I mean, that...

Andy: Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

Patrick: Alright.

Andy: Oh Lord. You should have owned that, owned up to that one, Brenda. Come on. Well.

Brenda: I was in a bad mood that day. I was like, how about some elder abuse? Yeah, that sounds... You know, you read that and you're just like, one, I'm not offended. But two, I'm like, what drugs is this person on that, like, not only has to spin this crazy tale but like feels compelled to broadcast it?

Andy: I would say not enough drugs, because I don't think a lot of these folks are on drugs. I think they have nothing better to do than to really, really target you over things that are that they don't have an understanding about, things that are glorified or blown out of proportion. I mean, it just goes so far. You know?

Brenda: Yeah. So, okay, back in the day, yes, it was, I just felt like daggers were being thrown at me in the beginning and I it was a very difficult learning curve to manage. But, you know, 10 plus years into it, you know, years ago, people said, stop reading the reviews. I'm like, well, but there actually was some relevance to it, you know, like if I see something trending, like people are saying over and over again, the biscuits are hard or whatever, we need to track that.

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So, I delegated the review process to my management team and basically they only bring reviews to my attention unless it's, like, you know, a serious allegation. Which is usually like, oh, you know, they had a racist interaction or, you know, whatever. It's usually about bias.

Andy: Likewise, you did say it, though. If there's a pattern through the reviews about service, about a particular dish, or so on, then you can use that, those repetitive patterns to correct something too. So, it's not always about an interaction. It can also be about recipe execution, plating, anything like that. Yeah.

Brenda: Yeah, I think as in general, particularly with Yelp, people just tend to automatically disregard because Yelp's just become a dump site for just bitching in general. But, you know, if I see something relevant that I need to bring to the staff, then that's the one way it's still helpful. So, the only reviews that they bring to my attention are like the kind of more serious allegations, you know, food poisoning, and it's never the case. Like, you know, that's a whole other...

Andy: But no, taking it seriously or someone's experience seriously in that regard can also backfire and spiral. If you ask the right questions, you'll know if it's someone, you know, if it's food poisoning or not. We know because of our food handling education. Yeah. What's food poisoning and what's not.

And just to highlight a little bit more on this review, I mean, I love some of the key words about this review that you should all look up that she this person was being gaslit into it was like a prank being played on her about all the dishes being too hot, that she burned their taste buds off, that these dishes were served too hot.

And I personally, personally laughed out loud because my father, who I cringe to take to restaurants sometimes, he's 83, he pretends to speak Spanish. He doesn't, and I don't like that. That's not cool. And but it's hot dishes. He is an absolute like monster when it comes to a dish not being hot, served hot. And so, it had I had like a personal reaction to hearing this and absolutely loved reading it. So.

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Patrick: You know what's funny is that when I was in New York City and I was eating at restaurants, one of the first things I noticed that all dishes came out piping hot. I realized then that I was like, I don't remember San Francisco restaurants having food come out like hot or warm. You know, like I felt like from there I learned, I was like, hey, maybe it's a deal with San Francisco, food is just not coming out like, you know, right out of the oven or something like that. But I really enjoyed it because sometimes I get food and it's kind of like it's been sitting around too long. Like it's been kind of cold.

Andy: Sitting on the line.

Patrick: Yeah, yeah. And so, perhaps this person was like not used to having food delivered to them, you know, when it should have been delivered.

Andy: Brenda, when do you harness something that... I'm trying not to poke fun at some of these things, but we kind of have to laugh about some of the reviews and feedback. But when do you harness a reaction and make it public?

Brenda: So, this particular review came to my attention because it was so absurd that we shared it amongst ourselves, you know, amongst management, just because it was funny. You know, we just needed a good laugh. Like, I guess I had shared it with my social media manager, who is very good at what she does. And I was like, we should post this on social media. And she's like, no, yeah, we should do it. Like, let's just try it.

And so, I printed it out, and we were actually shooting some other stuff about specials. I think it was like Outside Lands stuff or whatever. And she goes, okay, well, let's go outside and you can read the review. I'm like, okay, whatever. It really was just me reading the review. The editing was all her, but the me reading was just me reading, you know. She was we were kind of like, oh, let's see how this goes. We'd not thought to do this before. And it went viral. And it was...

Andy: It sure did.

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Yeah. And I think what it is a couple things. It really struck a chord with people because well, one, everybody fucking hates Yelp. And it was nice to be able to like make fun of this platform that everyone loathes. Have you ever heard anyone say like, oh my God, I love Yelp? Like, that's just, it's such a...

Andy: You know, it was a novel thing when it came out, but the shine sure faded away quickly. And I think Patrick, too, one of your questions to, or one of our comments is, you know, the algorithm, how many negative reviews stay up whereas the positive ones drop off. Their algorithm really gears towards drama.

Brenda: Yeah, it gears toward drama and it really is just a place for people to go and vent because, you know, they got the side eye from the hostess that they thought, you know, or whatever. Like, it's just for people to go and be butt hurt and it's tiresome. I do believe that's a trickle down thing. I'm not going to name names, but I've dealt with people from the top to the bottom over certain issues back in the day and I just have to say like culturally, not a fan. I had no problems, you know, just saying, yes, this is a Yelp review.

Andy: Patrick, we've talked about this subject matter on other episodes and in episode 25, we had Lauren Saria of SF Standard on. She's fantastic. We really respect her work and we kind of were walking that conversation line between what is journalism versus what is social media posts and outing things and so on.

Patrick: Yeah. With like reviews on Yelp, you know, you don't know what the baseline is for these folks giving reviews, right? So like, if you have a New York Times write-up, you know what that person values in an experience at a restaurant. It's the same and they're always going to go into it with the same kind of baseline, whereas like a Yelp review can give you a one star because they didn't like your pricing, not that the food was great. And so, it's it's just not, when I was a restaurant owner, I couldn't hate anything more than Yelp.

Andy: Yeah. Well, and then again, I'm bringing up another episode, number 36, Bad Influence. We talked about different levels of really harsh reviews and the impacts on staff, ownership, canceling concepts, canceling restaurants. Patrick,

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you on that episode, you reminded us that you really took these reviews really to heart, and it was really hard. And at what, you know, at some point you had to kind of disconnect.

At what point, what year, whatever it may be, when did you actually make that conscious effort to say, I'm not going to look at this all the time and I'm not going to take this personally?

Brenda: It was probably about 10 years ago when I was like, I need to delegate this. And it wasn't just Yelp, it was like all online reviews. But what I did also is I not only delegated reviewing the reviews to each management team at each location, but I also wanted them to respond so that I could see that they were engaging, regardless of how absurd. Like, for instance, on this one review where they complained about the food being hot, my manager responded, " Might we suggest the kale salad next time you come in."

Andy: I saw that. It's not a hot salad, is it, Brenda?

Brenda: No. Even the even the plate is chilled, so they would be pleased with that.

Andy: So you did respond to the person with this?

Brenda: No, no, that's his job, and that's that was his response.

Andy: Okay.

Brenda: If he decided to come back in, we recommend the salad.

Andy: I like that passive-aggressive response. It was fantastic.

Brenda: Oh, we all enjoyed it.

Andy: Yes, very good. Did- I'm sorry, I don't know if it's a he or she or whatnot. Does this manager need your permission to respond back in that way?

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Brenda: He did not ask me first. He let me know after, but he was like, and look at my response. And we were like, like, you know. We all know each other very well at this point. Like I trust them all.

Patrick: So does this review count as the most ridiculous review that you've ever received?

Brenda: Oh, no.

Andy: Brenda's evil laugh says it all right there, Patrick.

Patrick: Do tell.

Andy: Not even close.

Patrick: What would count as the most ridiculous review?

Brenda: God, I wish I could find it.

Andy: Is it not kicking grandma?

Brenda: Yeah, it's the one where like, I mean, this one went on and on. Like it was it was vivid in their account. And it was obvious it was not based in reality. But it was things like, I served him a porcupine tail, and then I came out and kicked his grandmother in the dining room. And it just went on and on with like just one absurdity after another. And it was long. I was like, this person is on some serious drugs.

Andy: Brenda, could you essentially at this point write a coffee table book of ridiculous reviews?

Brenda: Not just reviews, but like interactions. Especially early on when I really had no, like, visible online presence, I would have people approach me, and they would hear someone say my name or whatever, and they would look at me like, "You're real." And I'm like, "Yeah." And they're like, "You're Brenda." I'm like, yeah, I had one woman actually reach out and touch me to see if I was real.

Andy: Back to the drug theme here.

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Brenda: I mean, I am in the TL. We're observing everything.

Andy: For our listeners that don't necessarily know the Tenderloin, especially, let's call it 15 years ago, I mean, not to sidebar here, but you really, really took a big leap of faith and it paid off for you. Why do that in such a it was a challenging business atmosphere there and it's a pretty wild area.

Brenda: No, you know what? So I found it in 2006 on Craigslist, and it's all I could afford. You know, I was actually living in the TL back then. I had a condo a few blocks away. And you know, my expectations for the whole thing were pretty low. I was just like, I'm going to open this little place, and it only had, I think, 20 seats. It was tiny. And the rent was, you're going to laugh at this. It was \$950 a month when I took it over.

Andy: Wow.

Brenda: Yeah, the owners were absentee. And it's just all I could afford. So I thought, I'll open this little place and I'll cover my little TL condo mortgage and be done with it. I had no expectations around it exploding the way it did. And I also, at the time, was a working chef. I had no idea that I would be able to excel at business. You know, I hadn't gone to business school. I just kind of, probably like you guys, just scrappy.

Andy: Yeah.

Patrick: So when that happened, I assume that's before, like, Google and Yelp reviews really were taking off. Like, what kind of propelled Brenda's to the next level?

Brenda: Well, one, actually that was when Yelp was really starting to explode. And that's why I'm so reviewed, because I was right there when Yelp started to take off. You know, my place was filled with young people who were, you know, online. Like, that was before everyone was online, just coming in like following, you know, all the Yelp hot and new and doing lists and Yelping, Yelping, Yelping. That trend in the beginning were mostly positive, you know, because that was when Yelp was still like...

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Andy: It was novel, it was fun.

Brenda: It was novel, it was fun, yeah. But the other thing was, it was right at the beginning of the recession, and I had everything priced under \$20. It was a very limited menu. People went without jobs for like a year, two years, but they still wanted to go treat themselves to something, and they could do that. They could go check out this cool new place that they could afford because they hadn't worked in months. And they were waiting like up to two hours to get into my little 25. So, you know, people are always drawn to crowds in SF. I'm like, what are they there? Oh, they're waiting for Pokémon cards.

Andy: And let's bring up the Tenderloin again. So they're waiting on the sidewalk in the middle of the Tenderloin for two hours for your table at Brenda's. Good for you.

Brenda: Yeah, it was it was wild. And what happened, so there was the Yelp attention and then Patty Unterman came in and wrote a glowing review and, you know, she has a lot of cred. So that got picked up. It was funny, the way she framed the review was, "My foodie friends asked me not to write about this restaurant because it's already overcrowded, but I'm going to write about it anyway." Like, that was kind of the gist of the review.

Andy: Nice.

Brenda: And that propelled it. You know, she has so much cred. It kind of blew up outside of Yelp. And we got a mention in Food & Wine Top 50 Restaurants for, I think 2009. It just, yeah, it was like wildfire.

Andy: That's it's such a fantastic story. It's a rare story. We don't hear a lot of these. My restaurant was probably a half a mile away from yours. I opened a couple of years after yours in the SoMa area, and just different. And I remember Yelp momentum Yelp had, and you know, it was love in the beginning and then it was love-hate, and then it's kind of moved to hate. So, you know, that's where we're at now.

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When you legitimately see a review that you're like, man, our service was not up to par, our dish wasn't up to par, you know, whatever the interaction was that was not up to par, the step of service, do you just reach out, apologize? Do you invite them back in? Do you sometimes have to offer them, you know, say, "Hey, we'd like to make this right. Come on in." What are some of your solutions to actually, you know, solution-oriented method to handle a review that you think is legit?

Brenda: Yeah. So, if it's about quality of food and it seems legit, you know, like, okay, we're having a fryer problem at one of my locations, or there's a new fry cook who keeps, like, overcooking the chicken, and I swear to God, I'm going to wring his neck. We reach out, we invite them back, we offer a gift certificate equal to the amount of whatever it was they found inedible or just subpar. And that usually does the trick and they almost always come back, and they're grateful. If, you know, it's a reasonable interaction.

If it's accusations of, say, this was a big one back in the day and it was difficult when we were like still in the smaller location and we were just being overrun, we would get complaints about service not being very warm. We had our waitresses back then. I could see like they were being pummeled. It was difficult for me to be like, hey, you know, I'm sorry you're being pummeled, but can you smile?

Patrick: Yeah. Sometimes there's a lack of transparency for the customer. They don't understand the other side, and they think.

Brenda: Yeah. I mean, we got to the point where I would coach certain servers who were amazing and good people to just create a persona, you know.

Patrick: Oh, love it.

Brenda: In fact, in fact, one of them went on to become an actress.

Patrick: Oh, wow.

Brenda: And she took it to heart.

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Patrick: Hopefully you get royalties from that.

Andy: You know, I think Patrick's brought this up a couple of times previously, and sometimes it's the human interaction that goes the furthest when it comes to a critique. You know, if you have a problem, say it. Speak up. That's why management's there. That's why the service team is there to accept that and try to make it right rather than going home and sitting behind your screen and, you know, evil typing.

Brenda: Yeah, that's, you know, that's the worst. Or my, one of my least favorite review is, "I've been here for years and it was always excellent until today." And I'm like, okay, so, yeah.

Andy: We all have bad days. Yeah.

Patrick: You didn't write about any of those other reviews, but today you decided to write about this one review. Yeah.

Brenda: Yeah.

Patrick: I try to keep it personal. If I have a great experience, I email directly to the restaurant and just give them my feedback. I think it's really important to kind of keep it old school and give that feedback directly. Like, we don't need Yelp or Google. Like when I had my restaurants, I was working every day. I'm like, if you have a problem, just come talk to me. I'm going to work it out for you. I think it's important to still do that.

Brenda: That does happen. It's not regularly, but it does happen. And most of the time, it's a reasonable interaction, and it's by reasonable people who are regulars who are like, hey, I thought you should know this, blah, blah, blah. But then there's also the emailers who are like, if I don't get this, then I'm going online. And you like, why do you want to accommodate that? You're already threatening me.

Patrick: Yeah.

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Brenda: You already suck.

Andy: True.

Patrick: It feels very conditional.

Andy: What do we, what else we got, Patrick? I think this is I this is too much fun. I think I should go on laughing with Brenda for quite some time here. But.

Patrick: Let's not take up too much of her time.

Andy: No, I know. I know. She do you have actually have a day off today, Brenda? Is that true?

Brenda: Oh, no, no.

Andy: Oh, sorry.

Brenda: I got to go cook after this.

Andy: Yeah. There you go. Oh, that's funny. That's funny. Well, then I think we want to ask you a little bonus question. We want to, you know, peek into your personal life a little bit, or let's call it your personal life kitchen. What are some of your favorite home dishes to cook?

Brenda: So my three kids, my oldest is 25. He called me yesterday because he wants to make my jambalaya. And he actually filmed my jambalaya recipe that's on our YouTube channel. And he's made it with much success. And he was bemoaning the fact that he could not find plain Uncle Ben's rice anywhere. I had to trying to help him source Uncle Ben's. I'm like, there's some in the Mission. He's like, I don't want to drive that far. I'm like, dude, I can't help you.

Andy: Amazon doesn't have it, huh?

Brenda: He's probably anti-Amazon, who knows. My middle child, Aurora, has a great palate. She's trying to be healthy right now. She's a volleyball player. And she actually helped me brainstorm the ube beignets.

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Andy: Really?

Brenda: Yeah.

Andy: That's sophisticated. I like that.

Brenda: Oh, she has a great palate. Right now, she's obsessed with my glazed yams, as simple as they are. She was just like, she texted me the other day, and she's like, I just want a buttload of yams. I'm like, okay, I got you.

Andy: We need to make a Brenda's T-shirt that says that.

Brande: "I just want a buttload of yams."

Andy: A buttload of yams.

Patrick: You've heard it here first.

Andy: Yes. What about your youngest? Where what does your youngest gravitate towards?

Brenda: Oh my God. He has a crazy food sensitivity. I think the only thing he might eat from the restaurant are plain beignets, or oh, no, he loves my French fries, particularly the ones at Meat & Three. I guess they fry them harder there, but he, like, he's Mr. Crunchy.

Andy: Really? A texture guy. I like it.

Brenda: Yeah, texture guy for sure. And me personally, I won't make these at home because it's too dangerous. But if I'm really treating myself, I'm going to have a muffaletta.

Patrick: Oh. I love me a muffaletta.

Brenda: Yeah.

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Andy: Oh yeah, I wish I could call out who was the muffaletta at Outside Lands last year. Oh man, they were so good.

Brenda: Sandy's.

Andy: Sandy's got it. Oh my gosh, fantastic. So, well, you know what? You bring a lot of happiness, comfort, smiles to a lot of people in the Bay Area and from all over the place. You brought a lot of that here today. You're a fantastic person to chat with, and we really thank you for being here, Chef Brenda.

Brenda: Awesome. Great meeting you, Andy.

Andy: Yeah, absolutely. I'll be on the block soon with Tanya. And that Tanya I'm talking about is actually Tanya Kollar. That's my life partner. She lives right on the corner from you. Outside Lands.

Brenda: Oh my God. She is the queen, man.

Andy: She is. You know, I've got to be on my toes to keep up with her. So, yes.

Brenda: Oh yeah, you do.

Patrick: Literally.

Andy: Literally. She's a lot taller than me, too. Thank you, thanks again, Patrick.

Patrick: I couldn't help myself.

Andy: I know, literally. Anyways, we'll come by and say hi soon. But again, thank you so much for joining us. Our listeners are going to have a nice laugh with this one and a lot of fun. So thanks again.

Thank you all for listening to this week's episode of *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!* If you're considering selling your business and would like a free consultation, reach out to patrickAndAndy@therestaurantsalesbroker.com or visit TheRestaurantSalesBroker.com to learn more.