

## Ep #54: Restaurants: Then and Now with Dan Baker



### 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.

Andy: Okay, good morning and welcome to another episode of *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!* I'm Andy. I'm here with Patrick. Today, we have an episode, very daunting title. It sounds, it's called *Restaurants: Then and Now*.

There are always constants in the restaurant industry. Simply stated, running restaurants is intense, hard work, and a high risk for failure, and historically, low profit margins. That all said, it can be so exhilarating and amazing. Myself or Patrick wouldn't trade that part of our past for anything.

The restaurant industry is always changing and evolving, and it's not just about executing tasty food on a plate combined with efficient and friendly service.

My friend at ChatGPT states that in California, restaurants account for roughly \$130 billion in revenue annually. That's not chump change. So it's no wonder that evolution within this industry is constant. Likewise, so are consumer habits, which aren't always simple about what is trending or not trending, rather are more closely tied to economic factors and spending habits. One thing is for sure, no matter how strong or how tough the economy is, there are parts of the restaurant industry that are always thriving when other parts of the industry may be suffering.

Today, we have fellow Restaurant Realty agent Dan Baker with us to discuss his experiences and views on the evolution of our beloved industry. Dan was the owner of Marché Restaurant in Marin County, specifically Ross, which is north of the Golden Gate. He owned it from 2001 to 2022, which was and still is one of Marin's most highly regarded French-focused, farm-fresh restaurants. Dan also does restaurant consulting and is now a rising star in restaurant broker at Restaurant Realty Company.

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For the purpose of this episode, I want to point out that Patrick is no slouch either. He owned Breaking Bread from 2009 to 2017 in Embarcadero Center, San Francisco, and Elmyra Cafe from 2016 to 2019 in Civic Center area. I owned School Restaurant in San Francisco from 2009 to 2020 and School Japanese Gastro pub in Midtown Sacramento from 2015 to 2019. We have both managed multi-unit concepts before owning our own restaurants as well.

So that's a little background. That's probably the only compliment I'm going to give you today, Patrick. I apologize.

Patrick: Hey, I have a question for you. How great of friends are you with ChatGPT?

Andy: You know what? It's a love-hate relationship at this point, but I'm starting to, it's starting to grow on me. Gosh, you really aged me there, didn't you?

Patrick: Dan, thank you for joining us today.

Dan: Yeah, thank you both for having me. I appreciate it.

Patrick: Yeah, why don't you tell us about your path to the restaurant industry? Are you classically trained chef? Just kind of give us a little bit of background.

Dan: Yeah, I mean, like a lot of us, I started at age 16, entry-level position as a busser in the restaurant, worked my way up into management, and then always kind of planned on opening a restaurant, and my wife, or a girlfriend at the time, we were taking trips to Europe every year and kind of honing in on what our vision would be. We'd eat at Michelin-starred restaurants and almost every night, but we found that the most memorable meals were at the small family-run places where the menu was written on a chalkboard and the food was fresh and unpretentious. And this became the inspiration for what would become Marché.

Leading up to that, I didn't have a lot of kitchen experience, and it was to my surprise when my wife said, "You're going to be the chef." And I said, "You're joking, right?" And she said, "No, we can't both be in the front of house." I think she already had her sense of labor numbers, I guess, even though neither of us had a lot of experience with managerial stuff, but it didn't make sense to her to

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have both of us in the front. So after the shock wore off, I enrolled in a culinary program for about six months and learned the basics, and then I was the chef. So we opened in 2001, and we ran it for about 20 years until we sold it.

Patrick: Before you took this class, did you have kind of a way in the kitchen before that? Did you cook a lot? Did you have a lot of experience or was this kind of like a crash course?

Dan: No, I did have a lot of, well, I had a little bit of experience in restaurants. When I first thought this could be the direction we were heading, I got a job as a prep cook at a highly regarded French restaurant in the South Bay, and I did a few stints like that, and I enjoyed it, but I wasn't sure I had the chops to actually be the chef of a restaurant.

Andy: Yeah. Well, you know, one thing you point out Dan, and welcome Dan. We talk often and work well together and I care about you a lot. So, so happy you're here. One thing you pointed out, it sounds very romantic. This sounds like that journey and path of the olden days or decades ago where it's like, gosh, I really, really, what resonates with me is the ingredients on the plate, the freshness of them, the handwritten, ever-changing menus, things like that. And that just sounds like a little bit of a blast from the past. That's really refreshing to me. So I really like that.

Dan: Yeah, I totally agree. I think of all things, how the industry's changed over the years, when we were doing it way back then, it was a lot simpler and you could almost come exclusively from a place of passion. And I don't think that's the case anymore. Today's operators, they have to look at so much more. The costs are so much higher.

Andy: Yeah.

Dan: Back in the early days, we took 20, 25% to the bottom line, and even if we made mistakes along the way or certain dishes missed the mark, there was still enough to go around that you could figure out things as you went along, and you had a longer runway and...

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Andy: Gosh, guys, did he just say 20 to 25% net on a bottom line of a restaurant? When do we see that these days?

Patrick: Well, that's because everybody back in the day, no matter if you made some mistakes, you always had kind of a safety net. You don't have that safety net anymore. I think, Dan, you basically have been in the, owned your restaurant from the early 2000s to close to 2020, and so much changed during that 20-year period. I mean,

Andy: Crazy how much changed. It's just wild.

Patrick: That's when all the things started happening with like the delivery apps and all the companies inserting themselves in the middle, Yelp and Google reviews and all the things. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Dan: Yeah, I mean, it was so much easier then. The leases were six pages long. I think I barely read my lease before I signed it. I had no idea what I was signing. But now with, I think the single biggest thing that changed the restaurant industry, I mean there have been so many, but the one that stands out to me is Yelp, more than any other factor. Back in the day, we could just do our thing night in, night out, cook for locals and regulars, and if a dish missed the mark, customers would just tell you, and you could address it on the spot.

Andy: Well said.

Dan: We had to think about newspaper critics, but that was few and far between and those were professionals who they would come in at least three times before leaving a review. But then Yelp comes along and it gives every customer a public platform and an outsized impact on a restaurant's reputation. So over time, you have to start diverting our attention to managing that reputation instead of the operational aspects of the business and it really took a toll on my psyche, mental health.

Andy: Yeah.

Dan: I'm sure a lot of other people, I would think about that one bad review for days, and I stopped, I stopped reading them.

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Patrick: I'm right there with you, man. I had the alert set on my phone every time I got a review in the early days. I would wake up in the morning and it would be the first thing that I see, and it would just ruin my day. I mean, I have such a deep core hate for Yelp. I mean, it's up there with like the Dodgers or the Seattle Seahawks as far as I'm concerned.

Andy: And it's why Patrick still has a twitch to this day.

Patrick: You know, I had to turn the alert off. I just couldn't deal with it anymore.

Andy: I want to point out, too, that other platforms like reservation systems, OpenTable and such, kind of dipped our toe. That was really useful and functional, although it came with a very large cost. I don't think people quite understood at the time how much \$1 per guest, how much it bites into the bottom line of the restaurants. But they also dipped their toes into OpenTable reviews and things like that we could respond directly to the customer. And then Yelp just took it to the stratosphere, right?

Dan: Yeah, I think that some of these things, they benefit the operator and others benefit the consumer and some benefit both and some benefit, well, I don't know if any benefit neither, but I'm like a huge fan of technology that makes life easier for the restaurant owner and the customer. So, for example, POS, that allows us to manage our costs and track inventory and view reports, and it also allows customers to order online and more efficiently and quickly and see pictures and see the menu and all that. And OpenTable, while it was expensive, and there were times I looked at other competitors, I still think it made life a lot easier for the restaurant owner. And I never questioned, you know, I resisted it for the first couple of years, but I never questioned it once I had it that this was kind of the present and the future.

Patrick: I like that idea of what you're talking about, technology that makes it easier for a restaurant owner. It's not working counterproductive to what you're trying to do. And I think both of those examples, the POS has come a long way since I started in the industry with like an old school register system that you had to count back change and now they're doing things that you could never imagine. And I think OpenTable, although it's expensive, but it's a resource, and

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you have less people, your team can't afford to have a telephone and answer the phone in the middle of a busy time, and it's managing that process for you. So I think ultimately it's probably a good thing.

Andy: Yeah, and you can manage flows and choose when to use it and when not, for example. Dan, you brought this up earlier, and when you first started talking about your journey, and you just briefly touched on this, but is passion alone enough in today's market for a chef or restaurateur to survive and thrive? You kind of answered it already, but I want you to expand a little bit on that.

Dan: Yeah, I think absolutely not. Today's operators, like we mentioned, they have so much more they need to think about. And even if they're offering a high-quality product and the location works, there's so much oversaturation in the market. There's so much competition. Even when you're firing on all cylinders, your customers have so many places to get a great sandwich or pizza. The math is just such that not everyone can survive. And you throw it all together with like the delivery apps, which we kind of briefly touched on, and the rents are higher, landlords are charging triple nets and passing through all their expenses. It's just they're getting hit from all sides and those margins that used to be 20%, they can now be, I mean, 5% or 7% if everything's going well. And if anything unexpected comes up like a recession or a war or air quality from fires or power outages or storms, like any little thing timed poorly, can kind of wipe away all the profits.

Patrick: All those things that you just mentioned are actually have happened in the last few years and it and it's just insane. The smoke from fires and wars and it's like, where are we right now?

Andy: Can I be a little devil's advocate though on this? We look back to heroes like, I'll call out Anthony Bourdain and other icons who just seemed to ooze like grit and raw talent. But Dan, you bring up all the different elements that will make up the full picture for the restaurateur these days. That's still required, right? Passion and creativity still is such a major driver for this industry. I don't want to minimize that, right? Right, Dan? What are your thoughts on that?

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Dan: No, absolutely. If you don't love what you're doing, then you really, there's just no chance you're going to make it. It's still a people business and even though customer preferences have shifted towards convenience and efficiency, I think hospitality still is the difference maker, and it's hard to give hospitality if you're not feeling passionate about what you're doing.

Andy: Or if you don't like people.

Dan: That's for sure. That's for sure.

Patrick: I've met a couple of those chefs.

Dan: Yeah, well, that's all of us.

Andy: If you could call out a thing or two, Dan, what are some of the things you missed about the industry from the very early 2000s or 90s when you're working in kitchens, whatever it may be. What are some of those things that you really, you truly miss?

Dan: Well, honestly, I think as from an operator standpoint, I just miss the simplicity of it, and how it didn't take over your life, it didn't consume you. As a customer, I don't miss anything. I think that today it is so much better for the customer than it's ever been. Aside from, you know, prices have gone up, but the quality level is like nothing we've seen before. There's such an array of choices at all different tiers. I mean, you can get amazing stuff everywhere, all over the city, all over the Bay Area, and it didn't used to be that way. You had to pick and choose, and so I think that I don't miss those old days of chefs throwing plates and banging pans and making servers cry, and admittedly, I might have done it once or twice. I'm not proud of that.

Andy: I don't believe you, Dan. You're too nice.

Dan: All of us have that streak in us. We hit our limit. But hospitality-wise, I think a lot of that got lost, like during COVID. The connections were severed, but what I find myself now is going back to those places where I really feel that passion from the owners and a connection with the employees. Over the weekend, I went to State Bird Provisions...

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Patrick: I love that place.

Dan: ...Which I hadn't been to in a decade and the owner is still cooking on the line and he and his cooks seemed like really genuinely to be enjoying themselves and everyone who touched our table was amazing, and the food, of course, was great.

Andy: I love that stands out still. It really does. We touched Seaside Metal, my old friend Tim, and it just felt like it was trapped in time from 20 years ago in such a great way, with service and details.

Let me set something up here a little bit. And this is really the core of what we're here to discuss today. We want to talk about before and after, and get some direct reflection from Patrick and Dan and myself here on the before and after of a couple of these large events in the restaurant industry, whether it be social media or technology or so on. So can I dive into this, Patrick? What do you think? Do you want to start?

Patrick: When you think about Yelp, POS, social media, thinking about the before and after, do you think that the customer and the owner are further apart or closer apart now? I mean, how would you kind of characterize all that?

Dan: I think that with social media now, being able to reach your customers quickly and relatively inexpensively is huge. Social media wasn't my forte. So we did email marketing and that was our way of through the POS of reaching our customers and building a following and I think that was one of the benefits of the new technologies. Back in the day, we were sending paper mailers. It took 10 hours every time and cost \$500 in postage and things like that. That's just seems so archaic now.

Patrick: You were sending mailers out for Marché to like customers in the area?

Dan: Yeah.

Patrick: Wow.

Andy: I did that too for my restaurants and actually found it quite effective, but it's labor-intensive, and you know, it adds up quick.

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Dan: It was effective, and you'd send a wave of 500 or 1,000 out, and you'd get like you'd fill up your private events or your special events or your wine dinners. But it felt even at the time like this can't be the future. I think that it's just gotten weird.

Andy: Maybe they're too close. This brought customer and owner too close together.

Dan: Yeah. I mean, technology's made us so impatient. We want to order quickly and we want to pay quickly and we want our food to come quickly and we want to customize everything to our needs and that benefits the consumer and it makes it really difficult on the operator. Everyone wants to know what they're going to order before they get to the restaurant. And if that item's not on the menu, they might get upset. Marché was founded on a frequently changing menu based on the seasons, and over time, I found myself changing the menu less and less just to avoid customer complaints, and their favorite dish wasn't available, and...

Andy: Wow.

Dan: In that sense, I think technology seems at odds with authenticity and passion.

Andy: Patrick, the next one's a biggie. This one's a game changer.

Patrick: What are you talking about?

Andy: The delivery apps.

Patrick: Oh, yeah. Don't get...

Andy: Before and after. Before...

Patrick: I bet you, Dan, didn't have to deal with delivery apps. I mean, yeah.

Andy: I bet. He was too elevated, I would guess from the with your concept.

Dan: You know, it's a really good question. Like you said, more than anything else or as much as Yelp, this is a tough one. I know a lot of owners, they refuse

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to adopt delivery. Some, the commissions that DoorDash and companies like that take, 25, 30%. And others because what it did to the quality of their product. Takeout at Marché was barely a thing back in the early and middle days, and I couldn't fathom why anyone would want to pay \$30 for duck confit or a piece of fish thrown in a box and sloshed around on their way home and eaten lukewarm and soggy an hour later. But we started to see that change by like 2017, maybe 18. A handful of regulars would prioritize convenience over quality and value, I guess. And when I was approached by Uber Eats around that time, I decided to give it a shot. And I was shocked at how many people would order.

Patrick: Wow. I'm a little surprised to hear that for such a high-end restaurant like yours.

Dan: I know. I was, too. The fees were heavy, but like I didn't have to staff any heavier and as long as it didn't impact my in-house diners, it felt like adding to the top line was worth it. And then of course, by the time COVID arrived, like we were already established on Uber Eats and Caviar, and that was the only way to survive. So we went all in and added DoorDash and an online store. And that was sort of like the survival mechanism that we had to take.

Andy: That surprises me, Dan. That's not the response I thought we would hear on the before and after of delivery apps. You literally didn't do delivery, you did it very nominally before, and it actually sounds like it benefited you in many ways, which I can understand, but you still highlight the cost. I had a problem with packaging, and thank God, the cost of compostable packaging and the rules and regulations, local, you know, rules and regulations around that are have changed significantly in California, but man, it sure adds a lot of cost, but that's not the response I thought I would get from Dan. That's encouraging.

Dan: I think that it's a tough one because charging 25 to 30%, during COVID, it was capped at 15% what the delivery companies could charge you. And it really like 15% is pretty nominal. Your credit card company charges you 3%, so it's four or five times that, but still, it's just extra revenue.

Patrick: But also, they changed the rules with how you can price delivery. In the beginning, they wanted it to be the exact same price as your menu price. And

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now you can have two separate prices, which I think is fair. And I think now, it's really a strategy and if you can really price things correctly and have a menu that delivers well, it can be fine. But I think a lot of restaurant owners are not doing that and they're not really making a lot of money on that. They're getting that check at the end of the month, but they don't really know how much is actually profit. It's just like \$3,000 or whatever, you know.

Andy: Here's a question for both of you, my fellow agents here. How many P&Ls have we seen that were like, wow, the revenue looks pretty strong, a simple P&L, but then I have buyers inquiring about this listing or restaurant, and they go, there's no one ever in there.

Dan: Yeah.

Andy: And I said, well, welcome to 2026. 60, 70% of their revenue is third-party delivery app.

Dan: Yeah.

Andy: So less bodies in the seats.

Dan: Totally. And as like a consumer, I don't get it. With all the fees and the markups and like you said, Patrick, adding 20% or whatever to the menu item price, that \$24 burger and fries can cost you \$40. And the quality kind of sucks, but I have seen that owners who don't play ball see a decline in revenues, and they lose market share to others who will.

Patrick: They're forced. Yeah. Exactly.

Dan: It kind of reminds me of like when you would see on in TV or in the movies like these mob shakedowns in like New York or Chicago, they come in and say like, you got to give us 20% of your take, or we won't protect you. It feels like the delivery companies just have too much power.

Patrick: I like that idea that DoorDash is like a big bully in the industry. I feel like I got bullied by them in the early days. I don't like it. I miss the days of getting Chinese food and pizza delivered. I mean, we should just go back to those days.

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Andy: Yeah, exactly. Patrick, you let you know, my brain goes to Home Alone with the pimple-faced teenager, keep crashing into the statue, and bringing the pizza every night. I love this scene. But yeah, delivery was pizza, and oftentimes we don't want to limit it just to Chinese or Asian food, but that's what it felt like in my youth.

Patrick: And I was fine with it.

Andy: Yeah. Patrick, what's this last category? This is a big one, too, and pretty nuanced.

Patrick: What are we talking about?

Andy: You know, labor, right? Labor's changed and all the rules around that. What's the before and after on labor and staffing structures and things like that? This is a major component of restaurant operations, and it sure has changed in the last 20 years.

Dan: Yeah. What we're finding, I think all three of us, is that these larger footprint restaurants, you know, 4,000 square feet, that used to be desirable. You could get 100 guests in there and 120 seats and now it just costs so much to staff those larger spaces and the demand for in-house dining is waning and people aren't sitting as long. Back in the old days, people wanted to spend two, three hours in a restaurant, maybe learn something new or get to know their the server. People actually enjoyed each other's company and weren't on phones at the table.

Patrick: Yeah.

Dan: That now it just seems like being able to control your labor is like number one.

Patrick: Do you think that restaurant owners kind of, so after the pandemic, I noticed a large push by restaurant owners to get you in and out of your chair as quickly as possible? Like sometimes in San Francisco, I feel like, because they're trying to get that extra turn or turn and a half, that they're like, oh, you can only be here for an hour and a half, and you have to like bounce. Whereas,

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like, you know, in Europe, it's like you can just hang out and relax and everything like that. And so I feel like the restaurant owners kind of created that whole kind of push you out as quickly as possible.

Andy: And/or penalties for reservations and no shows, large penalties to be honest. There's, you know, that's kind of tied into that. But I just think that speaks to the cost of operating in these big urban areas in California.

Dan: We've all accepted that with like hotel reservations or airline reservations. You can't just not show up and get a credit. I think it was long overdue. It's still very hard to enforce and you don't want to piss off your customers.

Patrick: Yeah, I don't think that's our generation. I think that's the generation below us who just don't show up.

Dan: Yeah.

Andy: Yeah. Guys, do you think that staffing, restaurant labor, is over-regulated? Because it used to be much more simple, but now the owner again is so hyper-focused on making sure breaks happen at the right time and so on. So I think there's been, you know, like there's one size doesn't always fit all, and running a restaurant, you can't stop in the middle of your busiest times because that's when you make your money in those few couple shorter hours. And so I think there's a lot of rules and regulations that are great because we want our employees to be protected and paid fairly and have sick time and all these things, but it sure is hard from a restaurant owner perspective to keep up with all the laws and regulations in the Bay Area or California as a whole.

Dan: Absolutely. I have to admit, I was pretty clueless about labor laws. We were open dinner only, so the shifts were pretty short. I didn't know what meal break violations were and when someone needed to go on break and nobody wants to take a break. A lot of the employees, they don't want to unpaid 30-minute break in the middle of their shift.

Patrick: That's true.

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Dan: But then it was honestly one of the reasons why I decided to sell my business was fear of non-compliance and maybe repercussions from who knows what rule I violated. And I started to get scared about all that.

Andy: Yeah. Agreed. And also, I just, it goes back to that time of that romantic time of let's just sweat and work together and get through this, you know, this long, hard, busy shift. Those days are gone. We can reminisce about it, but they're gone.

Patrick: A certain famous chef in San Francisco told me that it's not that Michelin restaurants aren't something that you can do today, but that the team that you used to have in place that would go through those crazy times with you is harder and harder to find. After the pandemic, they found that people were just not down to go through that crazy, insane Michelin-type chef experience anymore. And I think with having to give someone a lunch in the middle of their like shift and all these other breaks, and you're right, I think it's created a complication in the restaurant industry.

Andy: Yeah. You know, I kind of want to conclude here and recap a little bit. It was really nice talking to both of you guys and Dan, especially get so many great insights. I miss the romantic years and these grindy, sweaty, working hard, crazy years that were really passion-driven. However, it seems like those are going to be for fiction in TV and Netflix these days, and it's those days are gone. And it's not necessarily a bad thing because, as Dan pointed out and Patrick pointed out, that technology that really helps an owner better and more efficiently operate his business. These things are all great. There's still a bridge between owner and consumer on social media and stuff, but those are also tools and they're here to stay. So the then and now of this, it's really food for thought and discussion. This has been really, really fruitful. I enjoyed it. Thank you, Dan.

Okay, so after a little recap there, we want to move into the dreaded bonus question. I'm going to put Patrick on the spot and start with you.

Patrick: Why me?

Andy: Because this is going to all of us. We're going to point out what is one thing that each of us miss most about the old days in restaurants.

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Patrick: Wow.

Andy: Or our old days.

Patrick: Our old days? Like, you mean working in a restaurant or..?

Andy: Yeah. Whatever, whatever you miss from back those, you know, 90s and early 2000s, whatever it may be.

Patrick: I just miss the hustle, man. I miss being in the kitchen and you know, having that feeling of like the train is about to pop off the track, but everything like stays on and you get through it and then once you're through the night, you just be like, you know, wow, that was awesome, you know. So,

Andy: Love it.

Patrick: I really missed the hustle and...

Andy: Patrick, I'm going to make you a t-shirt that says, "miss the hustle." Okay? Dan, how about you?

Dan: I guess for me, it's it used to feel like you had your team, your kitchen, your front of house, and you were all like had this common goal to like get through service and do it well.

Patrick: Exactly.

Dan: And it felt like really close. We had employees that were with us 20 years.

Andy: Wow.

Dan: But then, toward the end, it starts to feel like you have a bunch of guns for hire. They're there. They want to know, like, how many hours am I going to have to work, and what will my tips be? And it just changed. Like some of that camaraderie and familial feel just kind of, I don't know, went away.

Andy: Disintegrated. Yeah, it sounds like you missed the camaraderie and the culture.

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Dan: Yeah.

Andy: Yeah, well, well said.

Patrick: How about you?

Andy: Man, I missed the physicality of it. I literally missed the physicality of it and the multitasking. You could have a staff member melting down, a customer problem over at table five, and the kitchen is backed up with a 45-minute wait, but you better still be smiling and shaking hands and being polite. So I miss the physicality of it. Sitting at a desk is tough for me. So thank you, guys. I loved this episode. It was so fun to discuss the past and the now and then hear about what we missed about the past. So until next time, have a great day.

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](mailto:patrickAndAndy@therestaurantsalesbroker.com) or visit [TheRestaurantSalesBroker.com](http://TheRestaurantSalesBroker.com) to learn more.