

Ep #52: How Journalism and Influencer Culture Shape the Restaurant Industry with Alex Barreira



Full Episode Transcript

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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 Totah: Hey, everyone. We are back here on *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!* We are off the record with Alex from the San Francisco Business Times. In today's episode, we are talking about how reporting, journalism, and influencer culture compete in shaping the public perception of the food scene. While most restaurant industry journalism is thoughtful, accurate, and valuable, there are times when those of us working directly with chefs and owners see a more nuanced story behind the restaurant closure or a subject that makes it into the headlines.

In past episodes, we have discussed sensationalized social media posts and also interviewed more thoughtful guests like Lauren Saria, food editor of the San Francisco Standard. And today, we're sitting down with Alex Barreira from San Francisco Business Times to explore that gap. Alex is the hospitality beat reporter for San Francisco Business Times. Since 2020, he has covered hotels, restaurants, food, tech, travel, tourism, retail, and arts as part of the American City Business Journals Network. He brings experience from previous roles at The Associated Press, The Japan Times, The Daily Californian, East Bay Express, and more.

I've had the pleasure of working with Alex on a few stories over the years, and I would much rather read a story from a credible journalist like Alex whose experience and background is a known commodity. Too often today, the public's main source of media and information comes from social media and influencers, especially within the restaurant world. Thank you, Alex, for joining us.

Alex Barreira: Thank you guys for having me. I was afraid I was getting teed up for maybe a negative comparison.

Patrick: No way.

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Alex: So, I'm relieved and it's a pleasure to be here.

Andy: Well, we haven't started yet, Alex, so beware. I'm just kidding. Alex, nice to meet you. We haven't met face to face and really nice to have you here. And I want to say welcome as well. So, I guess that kind of teed up my question. So, thank you. How do you feel about that intro?

Given the intimate professional relationship that brokers like Patrick and I have with our clients, we're most often selling businesses. And we really get to know our client pretty intimately, the good, the bad, and the ugly. And not a lot of that is public sometimes, right? So, how does the whole accurate story often get shared in the media about closures or other reasons or trends within the industry? How do you get the most authentic and what you think to be true information from the people you are interviewing in the restaurant world?

Alex: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question because the news cycle moves faster than it seems to have ever before, and we see that there's plenty of people who enjoy kind of alternatives to reading traditional media. And the absorption of it is so passive, too. It sort of washes over you. You don't really have to look for it in the same way that you kind of do need to in your job when you're trying to stay informed on the on the industry and also, I would say that, you know, how I feel is I try to do my best within the time constraints that we have, you know, in the news cycle, and being as human as possible to, you know, sources and subjects where it turns out, what we really don't want to do is to misrepresent businesses because businesses are also our readers compared with a traditional publication where a lot of the restaurant writing is a lot is, of course, about the consumer experience. We're approaching it from a different angle.

And so, what ends up happening there is we, it changes how we, the kind of stories that we choose and like the kind of attention and stance that we take on certain types of news.

Andy: You know, you bring up one thing in what you just said, and Patrick loves when I do this, but I'm going to fast forward to one of my future questions here, because you already touched on it. What kind of timelines are you working

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under to create and release an article today? You mentioned that everything seems accelerated, and one of my questions I was going to ask is, what are those timelines? If you're hit with a bit of something that you should pursue and probably write about, how quick do you have to turn these things around?

Alex: I'm going to give you the same dissatisfying answer that my editor always tells me when I ask about a headline or something, is it's an art, not a science. I'm writing about seven to nine stories a week, so I'm kind of balancing where to really accelerate and push to publish versus where I can kind of give a couple extra days.

I would say that when it comes to certain types of filings, things like liquor license filings, you know, those are not done on a whim. And so we were able to kind of like see from certain things, get a certain level of certainty about just the very, very basic outline about this kind of project is coming to this place. And so, like with that, we can move pretty quickly on that.

And of course, like, you know, every story, we're trying to talk to as many people as we need to feel really confident about what we're describing, that it's accurate. But at the same time, we do, we do know that just because we're publishing earlier and, you know, in a more speculative way, I would say, than some other publications in terms of rather than trying to publish two weeks or a week before a restaurant opens, we love to break that news closer to when the lease is signed.

And so because that, our readers want to know how neighborhoods are changing, you know, where's the next thing that they can do. And so because that's so anticipatory, we sometimes can go with like just a small amount of news beat to really get out a story as opposed to, you know, we like to follow up later with the, you know, the more in-depth, you know, sit down with the restaurateur. But we do definitely make all efforts to try to talk to people and get, you know, how they're thinking about the project.

Just one more thing on this is just that because things are very early innings a lot of the time, you know, where the restaurateur might not have even decided

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yet what's the aesthetic of this place, what is the menu going to look like. For us, for our publication, it's more important to know, hey, this restaurateur or this operator that you know is working on a new project here. And so we like to just kind of tip off our readers in that way.

So, yeah. So it can be a pretty quick timeline. It can be a day. It can be, you know, like if I see a really significant-looking indication of like a Michelin-starred operator, you know, coming somewhere, these are public filings. So in those kind of instances, we do want to move fast because we also want to be, you know, get the story out first. Yeah.

Patrick: So, you kind of touched on this a little bit, and given your timeline and also that it looks like you're, you know, you said something like seven to nine stories a week. So, how do you pick and choose your battles? Like, what is newsworthy, and what are you going after? Like, what do your followers want to hear about? And if you can talk a little bit about that.

Alex: Yes, a lot of our readership overlaps with the commercial real estate community. So that is a good way to sort of filter sort of the ramifications of what we're writing about. It might seem strange from the outside to be using that kind of lens to write about, you know, to write about food businesses. But like, you know, the idea is really from like a development sense. Like we're trying to really point our readers in the direction of where the next thing is going to happen.

You know, we also, we're valuable to our readers if we're giving them that information before anyone else. If we are following the longer profiles that, you know, other outlets might be doing, and so much happens in this dynamic city that we could be doing that like, we could be, you know, that would that would be more than enough to just kind of do all the time. But we try to choose things that are novel, try to do things that we can move on quickly, so that we can, you know, so we can like sort of see the shape of it. We just don't, unfortunately, have the luxury for those stories that, you know, take weeks of reporting. But, you know, we do have some, you know, print features where we can do that, you know, for like kind of more broader scope stuff.

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Andy: Makes sense. Alex, you have a specific niche kind of within the SF Times and in the style of and pieces that you work on. What personally draws you to the food scene, food business, things like that?

Alex: I think that restaurateurs are, you know, the most hard-working, some of the most hard-working people in this city. They're also some of the most romantic in the sense that, like they really are, they really people who are dreaming on something. This is not an industry you go into if you are looking to cash out and to make a ton of money. When we talk with people and we get to know how these, how these folks are thinking strategically about their business, which is like a whole other skill set on top of the hospitality side of it. I think it just is a really enlightening thing for me.

I'm very attracted to I would say just the people are always interesting and kind of endlessly fascinating here. So that's that's what I find interesting, but also I do really like the people, you know, when we find those people who are first movers who are being very deliberate about, hey, this is, we know this is a risk, but this is why we're doing this. Those are obviously great for us because, you know, there's, I think maybe the most informative to, you know, our readers and they're the kind of people who, you know, our readers would like to probably to work with honestly and to, you know, just sort of to watch and see, you know, how they are looking at the market, what are they going to do next.

Andy: That's great. Patrick, what do you think? Because yeah, I love what he said about restaurateurs are romantics essentially, right? I think I can relate to that. I mean, we wanted to make money and stuff, but gosh, it's the love of what we do when we had our restaurants.

Patrick: Oh, yeah.

Andy: And I think the clients that we work with and the buyers that we get, we still get 80% romance and 20% are like, no, no, no, we got, we're after the numbers. We're after the profit. We need to see this has cash flow.

Patrick: You have to really have a passion for this business at this point in time more than ever, I think, because, like what Alex said, I mean, it's not like they're

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making money hand over fist in some cases. And so if you don't love what you're doing, I mean, I think that you're going to get, you know, pushed out sooner rather than later.

Andy: And burn out sooner. Yeah, totally.

Patrick: Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, you know, I probably said this a couple times already. I think the only real TV show that captures this is *The Bear*. When I watch that show, like, I feel that passion again. I want to like be in the kitchen. I want to like start expediting. I want to like do all the things. And like, I feel like it really captures that passion in a way that nobody else does.

Andy: I feel stressed when I watch that show. It gives me anxiety again.

Patrick: But that's what I miss.

Andy: Yeah, exactly. You're right. You're right.

Patrick: That's so funny. Alex, tell me what are your primary sources of finding out information? I know you touched on the ABC public information, escrow, what are the other, you know, sources that you have to kind of follow all this information?

Alex: Yeah, real estate brokers and restaurant brokers and people who are in the industry. People who are more meshed than me in the day-to-day of these actual deals are a great source to, you know, hear about something early on to follow up with later. You know, I do like the exactitude of public documents because basically, you know, one of them alone can only mean so much. But when you sort of like triage between a couple different places, you know, it really starts to tell a story, you know, and sort of confirm things. And so when we do that, it feels like we're not always going to be on the same team, unfortunately, as the people we're covering just because we're a business publication, but...

Patrick: You're doing your job.

Alex: We're not there to promote people and promote their agenda. So, you know, like we sometimes do have to make that call of like, well, all the public

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indications suggest that this is coming, and we're not hearing back from the people involved. And you know, maybe that's because they don't necessarily want to talk about it yet. But then, you know, I have my job to do with readers.

Andy: Yeah. We have to set expectations with our clients, too. And we've seen this be an uncomfortable situation when that ABC posting goes or, you know, a media gets their claw into an escrow file or something like that. And then the staff finds out or the public finds out ahead of what the actual business owner has said or not said to folks. And it, yeah, it can be uncomfortable at times. But I think as long as from our role as brokers to set these expectations on when the proper or most appropriate time would be to either introduce them to a buyer, new owner, or inform your staff so, you know, there's not a mass exodus or there's not a lot of surprise and anger.

Alex: Yeah, no, and there's totally, I mean, working in advance with folks is so important, too. These things are never happening all at once. They've been always in progress for a certain amount of time. So it's just, you know, a matter of sometimes coordinating to see, you know, what makes the most sense in terms of because there's this trade-off of how much detail like you can get and how much detail you can get like immediately, you know. I mean, when it comes to deciding how to try to break the news on something.

Andy: Yeah. Patrick, you got to get to number five here because last year we had a lot revolving around this subject matter and I'm really curious.

Patrick: Yeah. Let me just touch on a story that I have that I think kind of summarizes like a lot of what we're talking about here. There was this grocery store deli prepared food thing in Palo Alto. It was called JJ&F. I don't know if you've ever heard of this business, but you know, the owners were getting up there in age and at some point, they decided to close down the business and the entire neighborhood like was really angry because it had been in kind of a in the community for a very long time and they assumed it was like a landlord issue and it kind of took like a life of its own. And you know, with journalism and the neighborhood and, you know, and they were like fighting for this business to kind of stay alive and find a new location and all this stuff. And after like this is going

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on for, you know, a little while, at some point the owners had to like basically come out and say like, we just want to retire. Like, we don't want to find a new location. And I think, you know, things like this happen, you know, it's just like, anyways, it's just.

Andy: It could snowball a little bit, and they just wanted their happy ending.

Patrick: Yeah.

Alex: It's funny that, you know, when especially when something becomes kind of like an institution, it's like the public feels a certain kind of obligation to like a certain ownership of it, you know?

Patrick: Yeah.

Alex: And so it's like just quietly retiring, like to them, the humble, humble business owners forever here, it's like that's a private decision. But it's actually ends up being, you know, a public one, you know, in the scheme of things. And you know, just I think maybe the idea of getting comfortable with like, we're going to prepare a media plan for this kind of, you know, personal decision is like...

Andy: That's a good idea.

Alex: It's uncomfortable to people and I totally, I mean, I totally understand because, you know, it's we're immersed in it every day, or I'm, you know, I'm immersed in it every day, but people are encountering it for the first time, you know, a lot.

Patrick: This happened with Joe's of Westlake, you know, when it closed down several years back, there was like a petition in the neighborhood. And I mean, like I went there as a little kid, so like, you know, and I'm sure I've talked about Joe's 100 times on the show, but there was a petition. I mean, the neighborhood was pissed, and they were just going to close down and they were in transition with their ownership and at some point, they did come back, but yeah.

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Andy: You better go buy some food from their booth at Outside Lands this year, huh?

Patrick: I better, man.

Andy: Can you imagine? They're in the lineup.

Patrick: I don't know if I can, you know, that's the kind of food I want to sit down and eat, not like, you know, eat standing up, but

Andy: Okay, fine. Then I'll retract your ticket that I got you. It's okay.

Patrick: Oh, okay. So, how do you view influencer pieces and posts as related to honest journalism? Like, what do you see influencers as?

Alex: Yeah, I think influencers are trying to accomplish a different thing. But they are, I think what they're tremendously successful at is, I think from a business's perspective, it is a really great resource to have because it is so visual, it's like so aesthetic. It really isn't, it's meeting readers in the place where maybe they're, in a way, they're most susceptible to being persuaded is when they're passively absorbing it. And they see these beautiful images of this and that.

Some of the influencers we deal with are folks who like take our stories and then like narrate them like on a background of a screen grab they stole from us. So,

Patrick: And there's often no context in that, right? I mean...

Alex: Yeah, and it's also kind of like you don't know where that information is from because it's, well, it's not cited. Like we, influencers, if you would call those folks influencers, like and just people who also are just, you know, the more professional operations there, they're not in the business of like they're in the business of marketing. They're in the business of selling you something. And that's and whether that's selling you the mystique of their personality or selling the, you know, the their clients, which is the is the main thing. Their clients' businesses, you know, these partnerships.

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It's amazing the restaurant, I mean, it's maybe it's not amazing, but the number of you notice at when you go to these like grand opening events for really kind of glitzy restaurants, it's so many influencers, and it's not a ton of media as much as, you know, as maybe you would you would think.

Patrick: Do you think that the introduction of like paywalls with, you know, papers like yours and stuff like that, that when you can go to social media and it's free, basically, and that's where people are getting their news and information these days because going to like publications like yourself, they have to pay for it, and a lot of people probably don't want to do that, right? And that's kind of scary in some way.

Andy: They also have to sit down and spend minutes to read.

Patrick: Yeah. Well,

Alex: Yeah, who has time for that, right?

Andy: Just saying it. Yeah, exactly.

Alex: Yeah. Yeah, no, I mean, Patrick, it's it's completely that is a fair point. I mean, we think about that all the time. Every publication has a different approach to like kind of how strict their paywall is, and that can be a really, it says a lot about who their audiences are, you know, whether you're entirely reliant on page views versus being relying on subscribers, which, you know, give you some breathing room. But then limit your, limits the size of your audience with paywall.

So, and there's not, I don't really know the solution to that. I would say that influencers like, I mean, are so good at I think telling the sides of a story that only really good art would otherwise do. And they get out the very, very basic facts in a way that, you know, that's the audience as consumers, that's all they really are looking for. They don't need, if they want to know more, that's when maybe they Google something and they look for the news story.

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If you just are thinking, where am I going to go, you know, for dinner tonight, and you see a great thing, it's so much more digestible to do one of those reels than it is to do a. And actually, it's interesting, too. I mean, the downside to that is if you're trying to make business decisions on these things, if you're trying to, if you're hyping up something to a client because you saw, you know, a couple different things suggestive of it on social media and you're not qualifying it like that, then it could be totally wrong.

Andy: That something that was produced for essentially for that business, for the benefit of it. It's not a very, yeah, yeah, I get where you're going with that angle.

Patrick: Instead of like looking at like, you know, like the San Francisco Chronicle, like, you know, food writer or the New York Times food writer, where you know what the benchmark is for that person, and then, you know, if they suggest like this place is like great, you know that it's most likely going to be great based on where their past reviews have been, whereas like an influencer's job is just to make you go.

Andy: Typically, to highlight the positive. Yeah, exactly. So.

Alex: There's the negative influencer out there. Maybe they're the that they're all working for like the California Post or something. I don't know.

Andy: I really like how you kind of helped us highlight a little bit where the two, where your two lanes of work or professionalism can align and also where they can collide a bit. So, thank you for that. That was good.

Alex: I mean, I could go on forever. I, you know, but I but yeah, no, I mean, we're talking with I mean, we're talking with people in the industry wherever we can and doing that regularly and trying to find, you know, common ground, of course, because we're we're human beings and it helps both sides when it helps enrich both sides of things if you can like do it the right way. It's just, you know, the we, you know, our preference and, you know, we're we're not going to hold something because I think sometimes communicating like what is a priority for media versus what's a priority personally for like a business owner is like that can be, that can be sometimes a big disconnect because I think that some

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people approach like see like a, you know, our paper and they'll say, oh, it's a trade publication. So that means that you're basically just like, you know, writing free PR for me. And it's like, unfortunately, we, you know, or fortunately, we're not going to be doing that. So.

Andy: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I'd love to round out today with something a little more just in general about San Francisco. Patrick and I have lived in SF. I mean, essentially, during kind of the same time periods, had our businesses during the same time periods, faced a lot of the same restaurant challenges and city challenges, and a lot of the good times, too.

And I want to know, Alex, you know, does San Francisco feel a little bit or just in general different today than it has in recent years with the new mayor, different initiatives, and so on? Is there a different vibe, energy from especially from through your lens, the business the business times?

Alex: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that's the question, right? And I think any small business owner, many of them are going to say like that yes, the city feels different. It feels better. The vibe has shifted. You know, and they probably actually just got done doing like a little Reel with Mayor Lurie. So they have that too.

Andy: He's out there, isn't he?

Patrick: He's out there. He's hitting the streets.

Andy: I love it.

Andy: You know, that's part of the thing, is that like that change in, you know, effective 2025 has been, it's restored so much investor, like, confidence in the city, so much is happening now that it feels like it wasn't trending towards that before he was there.

But at the same time, it's like it's not like it's just one person who's, you know, single-handedly doing all this. I think we've had the benefit of some of the trends in, you know, in these larger industries and people sort of starting to say, okay, I

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think that there's enough I can get behind. So looking at it in a glass half full way. And I think that...

Andy: You can say it. You can say AI, it's okay. You know.

Alex: I'm not going to say I'm This is the one the one podcast, the one conversation that I won't say it. But yes, I think that the economics are, of course, what comes with this is the economics for restaurants are still always really challenging, especially as, you know, the kinds of things you want to import, all the costs that go into making that happen is hurting them right now.

I mean, I was talking with a guy the other day, he was going to open a cafe in Hayes Valley and then he heard about the Strait of Hormuz being closed and he immediately went and like canceled that lease because he's like, I know that like he's like, look, I listen to, he's like, I listen to the BBC, you know, I listen to like international news and that kind of helps tell me like how people are actually thinking. And he said...

Andy: Not just within our bubble, within our SF bubble. He's looking more macro.

Alex: We're a victim to it a little bit, too, just where it's like, I mean, it's really interesting this whole perception reality thing because, I mean, it has such a big impact on things like tourism. I mean, we're definitely on the upswing here, and it may never be like 2019 again. But some people think that maybe there was actually, you know, when it comes to restaurants, maybe there's some kind of market correction there where, you know, it's how many can, you know, the city support?

Patrick: It's a new normal, right? I mean, it's like everybody keeps waiting for this like reset to take place, but maybe it's just a different thing altogether, right? I mean, I guess my question is given that your guys cover this type of thing, you keep hearing about all these AI leases and this new kind of like, you know, leases are being signed at a record rate in San Francisco. And I know my brother does SF rentals, and so he told me that rental prices are like through the roof right now in San Francisco. So I assume that means that people are signing a bunch of leases, but does that translate to people spending in retail and

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restaurants and all that stuff? I think that's maybe everybody's just looking at restaurants a little differently now.

Alex: Yeah, I mean, every day I check the permit filings, and I'm seeing people, you know, making that bet to jump into this industry that has no guarantees, but is so important because it's our nightlife. Like that's San Francisco's like it is our calling card in a way it isn't for other cities. It's so important in like a just like a cultural sense for the city and an economic sense from the all the employees and everything like that.

I don't think that direct translation is happening like immediately because prices for everything, like the cost of your Starbucks, are still very high. You know, and also when I say restaurants, like we write about cafes, we write about like any, you know, kind of like food, it'll be really anything that can sort of, you know, manifest physically as like a, as a new thing, yeah.

Andy: Well, we really appreciate you having you here today, and we like, you know, there was some really neat little gems. I loved you pointed out that you said to your boss that what you do is art, not a science, as pertaining to some of these pressured timelines and such.

Alex: Oh, no, he's telling that to me and then...

Andy: Oh, he tells that to you.

Alex: But then when it's convenient, I can relay that back to him. So.

Andy: Makes sense.

Patrick It's a back-and-forth.

Andy: Exactly. I mean, restaurateurs are romantics. I love that. I'm going to hang on to that one for a while because that made me smile. And it really was nice that also that you brought up, you know, that what you do with SF Business Times, you are your journalism is about businesses and it really does overlap with what Patrick and I do in real estate world and business lease development, all that stuff. So, we see a lot in line with you.

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All right, real quick. I got to ask you an extra question, Alex. Can you name one of your San Francisco favorite restaurant or food, you know, institutions? Something new or old, we don't care. We just want a recommendation from you.

Alex: Gosh, you know, I really, one restaurant that I miss every time I go by on North Beach is Kasava. When that was, you know, over there on Columbus. But their new place in the financial district in this like really kind of cool, you know, cool setting is a place that, you know, I think is a kind of one of the one of the neater little gems around the city. But, you know, yeah, I would say I went to The Morris for the first time this past week.

Patrick: Oh, yeah. They've been there for a long time.

Alex: Yeah, they have been. And I had talked to Paul Einbund a couple times, and he was really delightful, but I had never like gotten out there to actually go, and that was, I think, maybe my, one of the best meals I've ever had. So.

Patrick: Oh, cool. That location is before that, it was called the Slow Club back in like the 90s, and...

Andy: That was my Blowfish area down the street. Yeah.

Patrick: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Slow Club. So that location has been something good for a very long time. The Morris is great. Yeah.

Andy: Cool. All right. Well, thank you so much, Alex. Patrick and I both very, very thankful that you've used your valuable time to be here today.

Join us next time for another episode of *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!*
Until next time, thank you.

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