

Book Proposal

“I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant.”

By
Bill Stephens

16809 Springhill
San Antonio, Texas 78232
Telephone: (210) 496-5880
FAX: (210) 495-2449
E-mail: billstephens@satx.rr.com
www.billstephensassociates.com

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Overview

Successful food expert and fanatic, Bill Stephens, “always wanted a restaurant.” How hard can it be? The reality of restaurant ownership was a hard lesson for Bill when he turned his gustatory attention to professional food service and later to consulting – a wildly successful 30 year career. Now he wants to offer readers the ultimate recipe for their own restaurant success story.

The National Restaurant Association’s projection that of the 974,000 foodservice

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operators in the USA in 2006, seven out of ten are independent single units mostly owned by people “who always wanted a restaurant” (Restabees). In his study covering the years 1996-1998, Professor H. G. Parsa of Ohio State University stated that 61% of single unit restaurants failed within the first three years. Fold in this statistic, and blend in about ten-to-one s who’ve never tried, and it’s easy to support the belief that 20 to 30 million Restabees are out there willing to buy a book that speaks to their secret dream. The National Restaurant Association reports that on an average day in the USA, 130 million foodservice patrons will purchase \$1.4 billion in away-from-home food. Interest in and knowledge of food and wine has grown exponentially in our society as evidenced by the success of The Food Network on TV, movies such as “Sideways,” the increasing importance of newspaper food and wine sections, and the large number of food and wine periodicals. *Publishers Weekly* projected back in 2001, that over 600 million cookbooks and wine books would be sold this year. None of these books speaks to the host of Restabees who watch “Emeril Live” and “Recipe for Success” on The Food Network and dream of their own restaurant. “Recipe for Success,” one of The Food Network’s most popular shows, documents entrepreneurs who have taken their idea for a food product or restaurant and actually made it work. This group of Restabees who **watches it happen** is vastly larger than those **who make it happen**. Bill Stephens’, “*I Always Wanted A Restaurant*,” includes this much larger group of “watchers” and entertains them while convincing them they should or should not follow their dream.

Each of the book’s Parts speaks to the fundamentals of restaurant development and operation.

1. **Be Careful What You Wish For** – There’s a big dessert waiting if you perseverer, but consider the downside first.

- 2. Serve What You Like at Home** – You need deep pockets if you plan to change the way people eat.
- 3. You Need How Much?** – Get your financing before you need it – it won't be there when you do.
- 4. Stay Out of the Kitchen 'til The Paperwork's Done** – Planning, accounting, costing, reporting, licensing, leasing, permitting, insurance, controls – It's boring stuff, but it will save your butt.
- 5. Now This Is Fun!** – Design, build out, finish out, furnishing, equipping, decorating – this is all good stuff.
- 6. We've Just Got to Get Organized** – By the seat-of-your-pants vs. Operational Planning
- 7. Help!** – Employees! God love 'em. You can't live with 'em, and you can't live without 'em. But you can train them, and sometimes you can keep them honest.
- 8. You Need a Drink** – To booze or not to booze, that is the question. Alcohol and wine help the bottom line.
- 9. Do You Really Need Customers?** – If the answer is yes, then you better learn how to treat them.
- 10. Where Have All the People Gone?** – “Word of mouth is the best way to grow” and other myths. Gorilla Marketing 101 for the Restabee restaurant.
- 11. Dessert Course** – For that certain type person, the restaurant business can provide a very fulfilling life.

There is an audience of millions who harbor the thought and sometimes voice aloud, “I've always wanted a restaurant.” This audience grows geometrically as the appreciation for good food and great wine skyrockets in our society. A small percentage of this audience leaps into the

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abyss of restaurant ownership completely unprepared. The vast majority muses over their dream while watching The Food Network, reading epicurean periodicals, and wishing they could learn more about it. *“I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant,”* a 220 to 250-page book, is the first to speak to this audience in understandable terms about the philosophy, the lifestyle, and the knowledge required to succeed in the restaurant business. And most importantly, to answer the questions: Can I really do this? And more importantly, should I do this?

About the Author

A passionate amateur cook and wine aficionado for most of his early life, Bill Stephens “always wanted to have a restaurant.” During his many years traveling and selling equipment to the world’s largest construction projects, he made it a point to dine in the finest restaurants on four continents. At age thirty, he felt he knew what a restaurant should be, especially from the customers’ viewpoint, and forsook the comforts of the corporate life. His My Place Restaurant in San Antonio, Texas, flourished with the help and guidance of successful restaurateur friends.

Now, twenty-five years after he sold My Place to someone who “always wanted a restaurant,” (the new owner failed and closed the restaurant in less than one year), My Place is still remembered as an institution by its customers. Stephens successfully diversified into other types of food service. At one point during his three-decade tour of duty in active food service, he concurrently owned and operated a leading San Antonio white tablecloth restaurant, three airline in-flight kitchens, three employee feeding facilities, catered a dinner train, and his company was the third largest off-premise caterer in South Texas.

Stephen’s catering clients included Texas governors, presidential candidates, the family of the King of Saudi Arabia, The Prince of Wales, Pope John Paul II, Tom Jones, Neal Diamond,

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Willie Nelson, and many other notables.

During these three decades he wrote over 1,000 weekly wine columns for *The San Antonio Express News* (circ. approx. 300,000) under three owners; Harte-Hanks, Murdoch, and Hearst.

His wine features appeared in *Wine News*, and he has contributed to *Wine Enthusiast*, *Wine Spectator*, *Food & Wine*, and *Chef*. His short story “The Decanter – A Christmas Carol” is the only fiction ever published in *Wine News*. He has traveled extensively in the wine growing areas of Australia, France, Spain, South America, Germany, and The United States.

Stephens served as a wine competition judge in the Sonoma Harvest Fair, The Sonoma County Wine Festival, and the *Dallas Morning News* Wine Competition. He has lectured many times at The Texas Hill Country Wine and Food Festival, and served many consecutive years as broadcast auctioneer for South Texas public television stations’ fundraisers. Stephens served as Executive Chairman of *The San Antonio Express News* Wine Festival (www.sawinefest.com).

His fun loving approach to wine and food makes him sought after as a speaker and for cooking demonstrations for civic and social groups and TV talk shows. He has food-styled for television commercial clients from Burger King and Budweiser to Plantation Poultry and Roegelein Provision Company.

Stephens has traveled the world and written many travel features in *The San Antonio Express News*. He also is an avid outdoorsman and has published in *Field and Stream*. His short story, “Toby Tire’s Erratic Curve Ball,” was published in Texas A&M University English Department’s “Big Tex(t)” Ezine.

He graduated from The University of Texas with a degree in engineering and studied postgraduate economics and creative writing at Trinity University, San Antonio. He is a past

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President of the San Antonio Restaurant Association, past Director of The Texas Restaurant Association, founder of the Cordon Bleus Brothers, an anonymous organization dedicated to feeding the homeless, and the 25th inductee into the *Dallas Morning News* /Texas Department of Agriculture “Who’s Who in Texas Food and Wine.”

He lives in San Antonio, Texas, with his wife, Kay. His company, Bill Stephens Associates, is an active restaurant consultant (www.billstephensassociates.com).

Competition Analysis

There are many published books and internet E-books on “How To Start a Restaurant.” They range in content from 60 page “You Too Can Own A Restaurant” to 600 page fact-laden tomes on “Everything You Might Ever Want To Know About Running A Restaurant.” The commonality of all these “How To” books is they are written for Restabees actually launching into the restaurant business. Although format and style varies, there is little variation in actual content.

The fundamentals of success in restaurant ownership are very well defined, and fundamentals are all that are offered in these books. Example: One book quotes a restaurateur who owes his success to “Good food, good service, and good people.” This is not a breakthrough in restaurant operation.

The reviews of all these books vary from “Really great information” to “Don’t waste your money.” Obviously the first reviewers are Restabees with no experience, and the second group is experienced. So how do you satisfy both groups? An old saying goes, “The person who knows ‘how’ will always work for the person who knows ‘why’.” To satisfy both groups, the author must draw on their own experience and share unique knowledge of “Why to” as well as

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“How to.”

Start Your Own Restaurant and 5 Other Food businesses, by Jacquelyn Lynn, Entrepreneur Press, 2001. Also available in E-book. A step-by-step guide for starting a restaurant, coffeehouse, bakery, caterer, pizzeria, or sandwich shop/deli. Very basic information regarding equipment inventory, staffing, legal structure, location, permits, sanitation, marketing, and financial management.

How to Start and Run Your Own Restaurant: An Insider Guide to Setting Up Your Own Successful Business, by Carol Godsmark, Gardners Books, 2005. A “How to” covering the basics of setting up any business with specifics on restaurant business startup and continues into daily operation.

The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Starting Your Own Restaurant, by Howard Cannon and Brian Tracey, Alpha; 1st edition, 2001. The basics of starting a restaurant. The book separates itself from other books by spending some time in explaining why readers might not want to become restaurateurs.

Start Your Own Restaurant, 125aday.com Publishing. A 186 page downloadable E-book with all the basic information about restaurant startup.

The Restaurant Start-Up Guide, by Peter Rainsford and David H. Bangs, Kaplan Business; 2nd edition. 2000. A 12 month plan for successfully starting a Restaurant. Focuses on “What to” and “When to” and is complete with resources, timelines, sample financials, facilities checklists; etc. Received good reviews from readers.

The Restaurant Managers Handbook, by Douglas Robert Brown, Atlantic Publishing company; 3rd Edition, Ocala Florida, 2002. Six hundred pages of everything you need to know about the restaurant business. 2004 winner of the *Writers Notes* Book Award

Marketing Summary

The Market – Determining the market for “*I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant.*” requires defining the motives of those who say, “I’ve always wanted a restaurant” (Restabees). Lifestyle and interest in things epicurean seem to resonate more with Restabees than profit motive. So the market for this book is not hard-nosed businessmen looking to make a buck. Rather it is people whose avocation is food and wine, and who dream of a business that allows them freedom of action and economic opportunity, while working at something they enjoy.

The question, “Can I really do this?” separates Restabees into two groups, the “Doers,” and the “Dreamers.” Doers represent a small percent of the total Restabee population and consist of risk takers willing to hazard a leap of faith, often without sufficient knowledge and experience to succeed. The much larger group of Dreamers may, or may not, follow their dream, even if the answer to “Can I really do this?” is yes.

Restabees are an easy target market that buys a lot of books written about their passion, food and wine. From the Overview you learned that over 600 million food and wine books are forecast to sell in 2006 (half of them in hard cover). The Wine Institute’s statistics on the American population’s wine consumption habits indicate that from 10% to 15% of our 300 million population is interested in wine enough to buy a wine book. If we assume that 10% of those interested enough in food to buy a food or wine book have at some time said, “I’ve always wanted a restaurant,” their number could easily be 20 to 30 million Restabees.

Tapping the Restabee Market for “*I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant.*” requires a dual approach:

RESTABEE Dreamers habitually haunt wine shops, food emporiums, local and national food

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and wine events, visit wineries, and read food and wine periodicals.

1) Working with the publisher to prepare a book brochure for direct mail to retailers and special events producers offering personal appearances and soliciting book placements within their stores.

2) The general interest style of the book lends itself to national and local talk show interviews on the subject of “So You’ve Always Wanted A Restaurant.”

3) Direct mailing inserts to customer lists of wine and gourmet food emporiums

4) Direct mailing brochures to the Food Editors of small market newspapers, and review copies to large market Food & Wine Editors

5) Entering the book in food and wine periodical competitions.

6) Providing review copies to the editors of national publications containing food and wine sections (Examples *Wine Spectator*, *Southern Living*, *Food & Wine*, *Good Housekeeping*, etc

7) Entering the book in the International Association of Culinary Professionals book contest.

8) Actively seeking speaking engagements at food and wine events (Example: Food & Wine Classic at Aspen), cookware shows, etc.

9) Retail and E-tail book placement in the cookbook, food, and wine book sections.

10) “*I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant.*” website marketing launch based on search engine meta tag and keyword algorithms for food and wine, and pay-per-click advertising. The website will offer direct purchase at cover price or purchase through the major Internet booksellers. A Blog network will offer Restabees a discussion forum about the restaurant business.

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- 11) Soliciting readings and book signings in major markets.
- 12) Sending review copies to major market newspaper food editors

Restabee Doers have already become proactive and are seeking specific knowledge. To the twelve items above we can add:

- 1) Website targeting of restaurant associations, restaurant suppliers, restaurant equipment, and restaurant conventions.
- 2) Seeking book placements in restaurant supply and equipment vendors
- 3) Secondary book placements in bookstore and E-tailer “Business” and “How to” sections
- 4) Speaking engagements at restaurant association meetings, shows, and conventions.

Spin-off Possibilities

Periodical Republication is possible by excerpting stories from chapters of *“I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant.”* Several chapters can be republished as self-contained, stand-alone stories. There are both promotional components and revenue components to republication of segments of the content in restaurant industry, wine, and food periodicals.

A Follow Up Book – *“I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant.”* will provide the national platform required to launch Bill Stephen’s second book, *Uncorking & Forking: It’s Been a Good Life*, an epicurean memoir of the author’s life in food and wine. The book will view the epicurean world from a personal perspective rather than that of the restaurant business. He chose good food, great wine, and close friends to enhance his entire life. “Uncorking” pulls the reader, laughing all the way, into a consciousness and appreciation of the celebration of life, the affirmation of love, and the spiritual enrichment that enjoying a good meal with people you care about can bring. (see

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attached book proposal for *Uncorking & Forking: It's Been a Good Life*)

Table of Contents and Chapter Outline

Part 1

Number of Pages

Be Careful What You Ask For

Chapter 1— Into the Fire 7

The author recounts in detail how he chose to leave a comfortable corporate job traveling the world, selling construction equipment, and eating in the finest restaurants to become an independent restaurant owner, and the soul-jarring life-changes that ensued.

Chapter 2 – Get Out of the Kitchen if You Can't Stand the Heat 5

When other people are playing, you're working. When other people are working, you're still working. A no-holds-barred litany of the life you can expect as a rookie restaurant owner

Chapter 3 – Where's the Good News? 4

Those special people who grasp restaurant philosophy, get excited about restaurant environment, and are fulfilled by customer pleasure have just reached Nirvana owning their own restaurant.

Part 2

Serve What You Like at Home

Chapter 4 – I've Got This Great Idea for a Restaurant. 5

Serve what you like at home –serve what they like at the restaurant. How to craft a menu that is both innovative and saleable.

Chapter 5 – Yeah, Let's Serve That Too 6

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I don't know what success is, but failure is trying to please everybody. The economic realities of a successful menu.

Chapter 6 – Recipes for Success 5

It's down and dirty work, but recipe development and accurate menu costing are the heart of maintaining profitable food costs.

Chapter 7 – Well . . . In Theory 7

The "Theoretical Food Cost Report" is the most powerful tool for profitability.

Part 3

You Need How Much?

Chapter 8 – Get It While You Can 6

Raise all your capital before you need it – it won't be there when you do. Under-capitalization – the #1 cause of restaurant failure.

Chapter 9 – Planning for the future 7

How to make a business plan that works.

Chapter 10 – I've Got This Great Deal for You 6

Looking for money in all the right places. Some creative methods of capital formation

Chapter 11 – How much do you really need? 4

Some rules for making sure you have what it takes to survive.

Part 4

Stay Out of The Kitchen 'til the Paperwork's Done

Chapter 12 – I'll Do That Tomorrow 5

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But tomorrow never comes, and you have no idea that you're broke. Don't spend a nickel until all of your management information systems are in place.

Chapter 13 – Running the Gauntlet 5

You will be amazed at the governmental hoops you must jump through to start a restaurant. Knowing in advance what is required is essential for site selection, especially for leased space. And don't forget to pay your taxes.

Chapter 14 – Space For Lease 7

Buy/build vs. lease? Site selection and what to look for in leased space and lease agreements. How to buy a restaurant and survive.

Chapter 15 – You're Not Sure? Then You Better Insure.

How much, what type, and what are the insurance requirements. Why not self-insure?

Part 5

Now This Is Fun!

Chapter 16 – Almost Better Than Sex. 5

That creative itch that lured you into the restaurant business can really get scratched designing your restaurant, but the fun ends when you put the key into the door the first time.

Chapter 17 – Unnatural Desires 6

The fundamentals of a good restaurant design. Things you need and things you don't need.

Chapter 18 – I Can't Afford It? 5

Cost guidelines for construction, equipping and furnishing your restaurant

Chapter 19 – A Do-It-Yourself Restaurant 6

A look at the various ways to accomplish build out and furnishing – including doing-it-

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yourself.

Part 6

We've Just Got to Get Organized

Chapter 20 – By the Seat of Your Pants 5

No amount of native ability and aptitude will substitute for operational planning.

Inventory comes in the back door, customers come in the front door, and they collide in the dining room. That collision must produce profits.

Chapter 21 – Buy? Oh My! 8

The basics of a profitable purchase/inventory system – product specification, vendor bidding, delivery inspection, bid/invoice reconciliation, accurate yielding, precise portion control

Chapter 22 – Until You Get Paid, You're Just Practicing 7

Point-of-sale equipment selection, pre-checking, accounting/reporting data collection and integration, and application of the Theoretical Food Cost Report.

Chapter 23 – What's Yours Is Mine 6

Employee theft is the second biggest cause of restaurant failure. Locks, security systems, and inventory controls keep honest people honest, but you've got to work to catch a thief. The concept of time theft.

Part 7

Help!

Chapter 24 – You Just Can't Get Good Help These Days 5

Defining your requirements, establishing your compensation, locating and screening applicants. The importance of feeling important.

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Chapter 25 – Don't Miss Your Train 7

Train, train, train, and train some more. Kitchen procedures, employee interaction, service techniques, customer relations, sales, and sanitation training . . . it's endless.

Chapter 26 – You Can't Strangle Employees 5

From sexual harassment to safety – what you can and can't do with and to employees. What you **must** do for employees, and better yet – what you **can** do for employees.

Part 8

You Look Like You Need A Drink

Chapter 27 – To Booze or Not to Booze 4

The pros and cons of alcohol service as it relates to various style restaurants. Liquor laws – how they are written and how they are broken.

Chapter 28 – Alcohol and Wine Help the Bottom Line 5

Liquor, wine, and beer as a profit center can produce a major profit/labor cost ratio.

Chapter 29 – A Wine Cellar? How Much Money Do You Have? 6

How to design a kicking wine cellar program with limited capital. More importantly, how to sell the wine you have.

Part 9

Do You Really Need Customers?

Chapter 30 – The Customer is Always – Right? 6

The care and feeding of customers and the basic philosophy and mind set of the successful restaurateur.

Chapter 31 – Gettin' Rid of the Gotchas 6

The "Gotcha" is the ultimate weapon in the restaurant employee's battle for recognition

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and social equality.

Chapter 32 – No Holds Barred 5

Rules that benefits the restaurant and not the customer – a big No! No!

Chapter 33 – The Rules of Engagement 4

An overview of customer relations including some do's and don'ts

Part 10

Where Have All the People Gone?

Chapter 34 – Word of Mouth is Best -- Right? 5

Wrong! Relying on customer endorsements to build and maintain business has put as many restaurants out of business and any other negative influence.

Chapter 35 – Here today, Gone Tomorrow 5

Even your most loyal customers get lured away and forget you. You must constantly remind both customers and potential customers that you're still in business. Customer

Chapter 36 – Freebies 4

Customer incentives that do and don't work. Two-for-Ones and other hoaxes.

Chapter 37 – What Else Can You do?

A look at revenue enhancement through catering, special events, and packaged products

Chapter 38 – A Forty Pound Gorilla 7

Most Restabee owners are short on time and money and often lack the expertise to promote their operation properly. With a little help, you can mount a low cost gorilla marketing campaign that works.

Part 11

Dessert Course

Chapter 39 – The Good, The Bad, and The Committed

5

You've worked hard, made the sacrifices, done some things right, done lots of things wrong, but you've stayed committed. Now What? The restaurant business, unlike most, offers a cadre of friendly competitors willing to share experience, knowledge, and often times more.

Chapter 40 – Life After Restabee.

5

Sweet success. Why not relax – and let the whole thing go to hell? You've earned the right to live a normal life, so how can you really enjoy it.

Sample Chapters

Chapter 1

Into the Fire

When I say, “Yeah, I’ve always wanted a restaurant,” you’ll yawn and say, “Well, get in line.” I call all of us, “I’ve always wanted a restaurant,” people, “Restabees.” And there are millions of us spread throughout forty-nine states. I say forty-nine states because the only thing North Dakotans ever wanted was plenty of Lutefisk and a warm place to eat it. If all Restabees (including the three in North Dakota) said the magic words, “I’ve always wanted a restaurant” in unison, the vibrations would rock around the world, causing earthquakes, tidal waves, and soufflés to crater all over France.

The gestation period and birthing of a Restabee is a long and involved process. A mindset must mature in the candidate that food preparation is creative, enjoyable, and something they would like to do more of.

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Few Restabees have borne the “drudgery” of cranking out three scratch meals a day to feed the family. Those with the drudgery mindset want desperately to run screaming from the kitchen, and like the biblical Sodomites, never look back lest they turn into a pillar of Salt-imbocca a la Romano.

Someone defined “work” as those things you *must* do, and “play” as those things you *want* to do. Sensing the unrest in our home kitchens, profit motivated capitalists have reduced meal preparation to minutes without so much as turning on a stove or getting our hands soiled. Add in meals eaten outside the home, and our kitchens are now hollow echoes of their former selves. It is in these kitchen-cocoons that Restabees hatch.

Since we no longer *must* cook meals, food preparation ceases to be work and now is *play*. Not just play, but a vehicle for genuine creative expression. Creative expression with a big bonus. The food we create tastes better than the manufactured stuff, and often is better for us. So we can smile that smile of smug creative satisfaction as we devour our culinary masterpieces.

Scurrying around in these kitchen-cocoons are the larva of Restabees. These Foodies and Winos are fascinated by the culinary and gustatorial arts. Nourished by dozens of food and wine periodicals, movies like “Sideways,” The Food Network’s 24/7 TV food shows, and the millions of cookbooks and wine books sold every year, Foodies and Winos (both men and women) soon feel confident enough to show off their skills by entertaining their friends. With enough home entertaining under their belt, they then say to themselves, “Why don’t I make some money while I entertain my friends?” Shazam! A full-grown Restabee, ever so slowly, emerges from the cocoon, stretching their wings, blinking into a bold new future, and proclaiming to the world, “I’ve always wanted a restaurant.”

The vast majority of Restabees never act on their restaurant dream and are simply content

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to watch “Emeril Live” or “Recipe for Success” on The Food Network and muse inwardly, “I could do the too, but. . . .” Restaurant flames are so alluring to a small percentage of Restabees, most lacking the necessary knowledge and experience, that they fly immediately into the fire and their ultimate destruction. Approximately 40,000 of these bold, but unprepared, adventurers follow their dream each year.

<Sad Fact –Two-out-of-three Restabee restaurants will be gone in three years.>

The questions that must be asked by every Restabee then are: “Can I do this?” “Should I do this?” and eventually “How do I do this?” You’ve come to the right place because these are the questions this book answers.

In 1972 I was living a single’s life and had a good paying job with all weekends, nights, and holidays off. I drove a luxury company car, and I traveled the world on an unlimited expense account. Let me just say that these were great times for a single guy with a little money to be alive. I was a competent and creative enough cook to lure the occasional damsel to dinner. Being an aficionado of wine also helped my conquests considerably. But “I always wanted a restaurant.” I had never worked in one, but, hey! I was a pretty good cook, right?

In defense of my “always wanting a restaurant,” I was tired of traveling, and I did not fit well with the new owners of our company. I just wanted out

I was on another business trip waiting in the gate lobby for a flight from Denver to Pueblo, Colorado when I saw an interesting guy. He was short, mustached, wore dungarees and a Harvey Wallbanger T-shirt, an ensemble he’d topped with a flat brimmed leather hat. A guitar swung over his shoulder. It would be a decade before airlines issued seat assignments, and I was skilled in maneuvering to sit next to anyone I chose.

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I eased into the seat beside to my target and held out my hand. “Hi, I’m Bill Stephens.”

The smile was genuine and the handshake firm. "Buffett, I'm Jimmy Buffett." In the early 70's, Jimmy Buffett traveled by himself. The Coral Reefer Band was only a dream partially fulfilled by recording studio pickups. He was doing nightclub solo acts. His props – a wooden stool, his band – a six-string acoustic.

One of my sales engineers picked me up at the airport, and we gave Jimmy a ride to his gig. He invited us back for a drink that evening.

That night changed my life. Jimmy sang in a unique style that over time would come to be known as, well . . . Jimmy Buffett. He sang his own songs. Request someone else's, and he would say, "Hell, I pretty much just do my own stuff." He was singing his own songs and didn't care if anyone else liked them or not.

Jimmy was doing his own thing and, me, I was doing somebody else's. His life was full of momentum and verve. My life was pedestrian and stale.

When I returned to the office, I tried to explain to my father, who had sold our company and now worked under the new owners, that I would be leaving the company to start a restaurant. He offered both his emotional and financial support.

Three people saved me from self-destructing. My banker almost fell out of his chair laughing when I asked for a loan to buy a restaurant, and then told him I'd never worked in one. Luke Postolos, partner in the Old San Francisco Steak House Restaurants, my friend and later my business associate, let me work part time to learn what I was getting into. My future wife, Kay, toiled endlessly without pay in my first restaurant.

I worked in the kitchen and dining room of the Old San Francisco Steak House for a year

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every night and weekend that I was in town. Luke took me in as an intern and shared his vast knowledge of what it takes to succeed both in life and in the restaurant business. It was OJT to the max. He taught me every phase of the business from the front door to the back door. That experience was the most important contributor to my success.

I finally took the leap September 1, 1972, at age 33. My banker loaned me the money to buy an operating restaurant, which I would later convert to my dream format. At that point I knew just enough to be dangerous. Luke suggested that I make my mistakes under the old restaurant's name and format. Eight months later I closed, redecorated, and launched My Place Restaurant. Did you get that? My Place! From the decor to menu items – it was all me.

My first day in the restaurant business was twenty-three hours of nonstop cleaning. I went home, took a bath and came back to open for business. I worked sixteen-hour days for one year without a day off, except for Christmas Eve when I married Kay in the restaurant. Our honeymoon was Christmas Day because the restaurant was closed. We had to get married because there was no longer time for romance.

It didn't seem like drudgery because I was doing "my thing." I had endured "fine" restaurants all over the world that tried to convince me I did not belong there. My Place's thing was customer comfort and pleasure. Heaven help the employee who made a customer uncomfortable. It was definitely a saleable concept.

Apparently Jimmy Buffet also was a Restabee because I could live happily just off the T-shirts sold in his Margaritaville Restaurant chain.

What lessons can you take away from my Restabee tale of adventure? Hopefully, you'll have a better reason for starting a restaurant than getting drunk with a singer in a bar somewhere. But if you look deeper into that story you will find some truths:

<You are a fool if you invest in a restaurant never having worked in one.>

<Without enthusiastic total commitment your chances as a restaurateur are zero.>

This toe-in-the-water entry into the restaurant business probably sounds boring and laborious to a leap-into-the-fire Restabee. But, hey! Listen up. I'm one of the 39 percent of Restabees that survived. Along the way Kay and I have had many personal and business challenges, much excitement, great emotional fulfillment, met interesting friends who changed our lives, and made some money.

I sold My Place restaurant in 1978, but remained in foodservice. After two decades my partners and I owned, Casa Alegre Mexican Food; Barron's, a tablecloth restaurant; three airline catering kitchens serving every major domestic airline; three employee feeding operations; the food service concession for a dinner train; and the third largest off premise catering company in South Texas. We catered for Pope John Paul II, the family of the King of Saudi Arabia, Britain's Prince Charles, presidential candidates, governors, and many other celebrities. I retired from active foodservice and became a consultant in the mid 1990's.

Do I recommend the restaurant business for everybody? No! Do I recommend it for certain people? Absolutely! Now, let's find out if you are one of those people by answering these questions: Can you also follow your dream? Should you also follow your dream? and How do you follow your dream?

Chapter 30

The Customer Is Always – Right?

Ok, I'll admit it. Some customers have gotten to me, and on some of those occasions I didn't handle it well. Like the time I threw an obnoxious son-of-a-bitch bodily out the front door and offered to kick his butt all the way home. I will say, in my defense, that I got a standing ovation from the dinner guests he had been annoying all evening.

<Believe This! – Customers may not be right, but they are always.>

At least we hope they are always – around, that is. The episode I just recounted and a couple of others I hold as the darkest days of my restaurant career. Occasions when I took the luxury of putting myself ahead of the customers, and, trust me, that always costs a restaurateur

Restaurateurs must hold a mirror up to themselves and not see their own image, but rather the image of their employees' attitude toward customers.

<Believe It! – Your employees will triple any negative customer attitude you exhibit.>

Mostly first-time customers, and to a lesser extent frequent customers, had an annoying habit in my early days of restauranting. They would announce officiously while leaving the restaurant, "We'll be back!" Even considering how much better this statement was than the opposite, I felt it was both an affront and a threat. As in, "I've sanctioned your restaurant, but one strike and you're out." I had just never heard a customer stand in the front door of laundry or drycleaners and announce ceremoniously to the proprietor, "I'll be back!" Or for that matter, a service station, a barbershop, an auto repair shop, a grocery store, or you name it. I wanted to, but never replied, "Why wouldn't you be back, you pompous ass?" This is the type of attitude that inexperience engenders, and an attitude, that if ever vocalized, will take months to overcome the fallout both with customers and employees. It finally occurred to me that many customers are not really articulate, and the best compliment they

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can come up with is “I’ll be back.”

<Now Hear This – Customers will forgive many things, but never a bad attitude.>

I traveled to New York with a couple of fellow Winos for the first *Wine Spectator* “Wine Experience.” In a paragon of planning, we had made reservations at several famous restaurants including the old Le Cerc. As a wine and food writer I was savvy enough to know the Le Cerc that celebrities experienced and the Le Cerc the rest of us grunts experienced were quite different. I was fully expecting a table just inside the kitchen door, but we were seated instead in a corner booth, well away from the front door and kitchen (without even tipping the maitre’d). The tuxedoed waiter approached to take a drink order.

In an effort to show respect and call the waiter by name, I said, “You’re not wearing a name tag, so I don’t know your name.”

He replied haughtily, “This is not a factory.”

I thought for a moment, reached into my coat pocket, and took out my *San Antonio Express News* reporter’s notebook in which I had written wine notes all day. I placed it on the table where the waiter could read the newspaper’s name, then opened it, and began writing.

“What are you writing?” He fidgeted as he asked.

I glanced up and smiled. “I’m writing, ‘This is not a factory.’”

His eyes widened in shock. “You can’t write that.”

“Of course I can write it. It’s a direct quotation.” I turned to my friends. “Didn’t he just say, ‘This is not a factory’?” They nodded agreement.

“Yeah, but you shouldn’t write that.” He seemed a little panicked.

“Why not? Isn’t that what you just said?”

“Yes, but . . .”

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I lay my pen down and smiled up at him, “Maybe we got off to a bad start.” I held out my hand, “My name is Bill Stephens. What’s yours?”

“Carl, sir. My name is Carl.” He was shaking my hand like an oilfield pump jack.

Still smiling I said, “Carl, I have to ask you a serious question.”

“Anything,” he replied.

“Are you going to be part of solution, or part of the problem tonight?”

Carl did everything except a soft shoe dance that night, including giving us free desserts and cognac. The average diner lacks the props and leverage to pull off that kind of bad attitude adjustment in restaurant help. Instead the diners forget how lovely your restaurant is and how good your food is. They just remember the waitperson’s negative attitude, which they will share with eleven other people, according to the National Restaurant Association.

The care and feeding of customers is a book unto itself, but we can cover some points that are overlooked in many restaurants. In my opinion the position of host, hostess, greeter, maitre’d, or whatever you want to call the person at the front door, is the most important in the restaurant – with the possible exception of the dishwashers. Yet in many restaurants the person assigned to the all-important task of making your customers feel welcome, is given to someone socially inept and completely untrained for the job.

Picture arriving at a party and standing at the entry door of a large room filled with complete strangers. Everyone is staring at you, but no one is inviting you into the room. You are completely ignored. That is the feeling of any customer who comes to your restaurant, sees the “Please wait to be seated” sign, and then stands there wondering if they are invisible, because no one is greeting them.

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We play a hostess game when I hold dining room staff training classes. A volunteer leaves the room with instructions to come and stand in the doorway when they are summoned. The remainder of the staff is told they must stare solemn-faced at the volunteer when they arrive at the door. With a stopwatch I time how long the volunteer stands without fidgeting and saying something like, “What? Why are you staring at me?” The volunteer knows everyone in the room, and yet seventeen seconds is the record time before they become uncomfortable. Your customers will turn negative in less than eight seconds if not greeted.

<Chain your greeter to the entry podium so they will never miss their eight second deadline.>

And while you’re at it, show your customers some enthusiasm. Let’s say you’re walking through a shopping mall, and you spy one of your dearest friends whom you’ve not seen in a great while. The greeting is spontaneous. Smiles, laughter, hugs, and genuine joy abound. What are the chances that your friend will take out a bunch of money and hand it to you? Zero! Now picture your customers (the ones that are about to hand you a bunch of money) entering your restaurant. Where are the smiles, the laughter, the hugs and the appreciative joy? Where is the excitement? Let me tell you, folks, I can get excited, enthusiastic, and appreciative over someone who is about to hand me a bunch of money.

<Show your appreciation by greeting customers enthusiastically.>

Why not go one step further and call your customers by name? If you take reservations, the greeter already knows their names. If you don’t take reservations, and you are on a wait for seating, you already know their name. You know this because you asked for their last name for the wait list. If you’re not on a wait, ask for their last name anyway and write it into the wait list.

When a customer is seated, write the name on the seating chart next to their table number. Keep a small pad of slips at the greeters podium printed with slots for “Table No.” and “Name” and

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check boxes for “New” or “Return” customer.

The person seating the guests hands this name slip to the waitperson, who then can approach the table with, “Thanks for dining with us tonight , Mr. Smith.” When taking the order the waitperson can open with, “ Since this is your first time with us, Mr. Smith, let me offer some suggestions.”

Later, using the table diagram with the names listed, the owner or manager can approach the table with, “Since this is your first time with us, Mr. Smith, I want to make sure we’re living up to your expectations.”

<Believe It –There is nothing more powerful than calling your customers by name.>

We’ve discussed the importance of greeting customers promptly when they arrive. A prompt greeting at the table after seating is double that importance.

<You must do something for customers within in ten seconds of being seated>

That “something” may be as simple as the waitperson passing the table and saying, “ I need to serve some hot food, Mrs. Smith. Then I’ll be right with you.”

In several of my restaurants we gave the table greeting responsibility to the bus people. Their task was to serve ice water, a plate of butter, and a basket of rolls within ten seconds of seating, along with a verbal welcome to the restaurant. The waitperson can be really in the weeds and unable to get to the table for several minutes, and the customers will wait patiently, if they’ve been acknowledged – even better, if they have something to munch on.

If the customers were properly greeted at the door, if they sense caring concern from the staff, if they feel appreciated because of your enthusiasm, if they’re hearing their name used, and if they were properly greeted at the table, you have put all the odds in favor of an enjoyable dining experience. The customers now are handed off in a receptive mood to the care of the wait staff and

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the kitchen personnel who must craft a memorable experience for them.

You might say, “Hey, this is really basic stuff!”

I would reply, “Hey, if it’s so basic, then why isn’t it being done by rote in every restaurant around?” Trust me, as I survey restaurants as a mystery shopper, few operations score well on these principles of customer care. If these concepts are really basic, then stick to the basics.

Completion Date

The writer estimates that it will take six months to complete “I’ve Always Wanted a Restaurant.”

Support Materials

“Poetry in Motion,” feature, *The Wine News*

“*The Decanter: A Christmas Tale*,” short story, *The WineNews*

“Tipping the Scales,” Series, *The San Antonio Express News*

“Losing to Win”

“The Will to Change”

“Three of Me Weigh a Lifestyle Change”

“When Will Power Takes a Holiday”

“Home for the Holidays”

“The ‘E’ Word Doesn’t Come Easy”

“Dear Diary: I’m Gonna Change My Life Style”