

An Open Letter to the Atlanta Restaurant Industry

By: Raven Gibson

I think a lot about a lot of things. And I am now into the practice of writing things for the sole purpose of archiving how I felt about them at any given moment in time. Over the course of the past few months, I've come across a few heavily resonating articles about events in the Atlanta food world. I'm referring to Kessler's interview with Lauterbach, the Marcel Manifesto, and the corresponding Eater article specifically (1, 2, 3). While I've been a bit hesitant about my approach to this particular collection of ideas, I don't think either of those dialogues are isolated moments in food time here. A steady simmer has persisted in the Atlanta restaurant industry - dating back to well before the Keith Lee, Michelin inspired events of last summer (4, 5). And Atlanta, Atlanta has a problem. She has a broad, insidious, multi-dimensional problem. She is becoming pervasively inhospitable - by and large, behaving in ways deeply to her own nature.

We are descending carelessly into a swath of ungraceful contempt. I've been here my whole life. I am a living fruit of the geography's long-standing, hospitable nature. As much as the physical landscape has changed, the texture of some of other things has too. I see it. I live it. I feel it. Especially in restaurants. A lot of these restaurants in Atlanta are not only bad; they're only getting worse. So yes, we absolutely have a problem, for which there is only one real solution.

In the first instance, the food is bad. I also should add, that yes, of course - this is not all restaurants. But it's enough of them at this point for me to say something. Historically, we've been held up against some of the greatest food cities in the world and maybe have not met the mark? But I know the food is good here; it can be, at least. It can be so diverse. It can be so creative. It can be so effective. From Ikalah's, to Busy Bee, Desta, even Waffle House holds the Atlanta food name high in ways that have radiated around the world. So, yes, while comparatively speaking - as people have once spoken, we are no Chicago or New York, but our food is good and it really always has been. Up until now.

It seems like almost everything is bad. This isn't independently an Atlanta problem, but my even PubSubs have been bad lately! The steaks, the pizzas, the BBQ, the chicken sandwich place, the Mexican places and all the birrias. The breakfast. It's all gotten so expectedly less than desirable. There are a few places where I can still go and have a phenomenal food experience like APT4B, Indaco, and Aria - which I talk about another time, but by and large, it's gotten dismal. I know much of it has to do with the fact that the actual food the restaurants have to sell is shit now. But have you enough dignity to allow the IQF cake to fully thaw before putting it on the plate and sending it to a table. Salt and pepper is still not only important; it is fundamental. There are so many rather tangible instances that we are not tending to the gift of food in the way we once did. And the city can tell. We can feel it and we can taste it. We are also paying for it - in more ways than one.

You'd be surprised at how many people underestimate how big of a deal food is. Then you realize, that is only a part of the equation. Y'all service bad, too. It's incredibly bad. Atlanta is tinkering on a slippery slope towards the uncharacteristically unwelcoming. And that pattern of behavior is so counter-intuitive to the very nature of Atlanta that it doesn't even make sense. It's the type of bad service that doesn't greet you when you very obviously have walked through the door. It's the type of bad service that doesn't look you in the eye when speaking or proficiently recover guest conflicts. It's too loud music, dirty dining rooms, and silverware. It's the type of bad service that ultimately creates a reverberating discontent throughout our industry, city, and world as a whole. We're talking about the same place where "news, history was being made", not-so-subtly changing entertainment with the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939 (6). Atlanta's ability to take care of others and the world is inherent and historic. This fly-by-night, get-rich-quick quality of service is in such severe opposition to who and how we are. By our native nature, we are socially edifying, edified people. The actual "peach tree" after which so many of the city's streets are named was a hilltop place on which the Muskogee people used to gather; "Atlanta is the city built on food" (7). Even if the collection of events on our hospitality home front are abnormal, they are also becoming so habitual that it's on the verge of becoming our character. Again, this is not all restaurants in Atlanta. I will also even submit that there are a few places in the city that I haven't even been. But I have had enough experiences, and have heard of them, to know that there is not enough service. And everything is entirely too many vibes.

But the most significant of the contributing factors is that there are so many under-educated operators. There is capital, but no restaurant conscience. Sometimes, there are connections, but no experiential context. Generally, there is always "culture", without true service leadership cultivation. There are the premier groups, of course. But it is incredulous how many of these places are run by people that don't know what you absolutely need to know to make a restaurant work. It may manifest in operations. The food not being good means somebody's missing some technique. Management then has to decide to pay a real chef. Kitchens being unnecessarily slow is because of intentional under-investment in systems and their staff's development. Faulty leadership is certainly the tree from which poor, arrogant, uniformed service falls. You can even trace an unhappy employee back to a potentially inept superior. A recent DDI study revealed that "57% of employees have left a job because of their manager" (8). Now, imagine that for an industry with already high turnover.

Hospitality is an art. You're either hospitable or you're not. And that's okay, because if you aren't, you just have to learn. Just like even if you aren't the voice of a generation, you can still technically learn to sing. You can learn, but that takes a type of commitment that requires discipline. More importantly, learning how to chemically, physically, and emotionally take care of other people - often complete strangers - necessitates a type of integrity. And it's somehow, the very thing many in positions of power, at food concepts of all levels, are deficient in. Not only do they lack integrity, they lack self awareness; the self-awareness needed to truly care for others, for obviously not being able to truly care for themselves. They are perpetually dishonest and dissonant. Non-transparency and harassment are common place. Production becomes susceptible to their emotional volatility, their inconsistency, and reverberating lack of professionalism. And they are the kind of leaders that create more individuals incapable of comprehensibly leading. At a very specific, borderline, professionally abusive level, the industry is being run by ego-driven ownership, passive aggressive managers, liars, haters, and lames. And at this rate, education is only the hope. It is both our only hope and the only viable solution to avoid deteriorating into the spoils of abandoned waste. What else happens to fruit not served properly?

As a result of all of these elements in conjunction with one another, there somehow seems to be this overwhelming, unspoken trend of treating people like things and things like people. In a world that regularly considers the streamlining and optimization of processes, the disposable essence of machinery spills now grotesquely into the way that we treat each other. It's everywhere. And I am not perfect. Neither is my business model, or my life or any of those things. It is not my intention to position that I am in anyway. But being born and raised here, I am confident when it comes to standards in the matter of our hospitable environment. Atlanta is one of the planet's many rich wells of hospitality and service - whose products have been so consistently exported to locales all over the world.

Coca-Cola having been the world's most widely recognized commercial product at one point in time is an example of that (9). Hartsfield Jackson International Airport being the most efficient airport in the world in another glaring indication of the cultural, economic, political distribution center Atlanta is (10). Atlanta does indeed influence everything. And the course of action our restaurant and hospitality scene is taking - like many others, I imagine, is unfathomably more consequential than it may appear. The Atlanta market is so culturally significant and impactful that other markets always respond accordingly. So we have to be careful. Yes - for the world's sake, but for our own. We are unknowingly fashioning for ourselves a city made of those that can never truly feed - and can also never truly be fed. What was once an act of craft - a display of art - is now a parody. It becomes a lie that you are telling yourself about the way that you are. It

works for a while, but when the integrity starts to dissipate, you become tangibly aware in almost every element of your business.

It calls to mind Harry Belafonte detailing a final conversation with Dr. King (11). He recollects that Dr. King expressed concern about potentially having led and “integrated his people into a burning house”, a violent, disruptive illusion far reaching from the objective, even-achievable reality. Atlanta has become, in many ways, a warm home to the entire world. There is a resting and refreshing of cultural, capital, and creative feet that occurs here in Atlanta in ways incomparable to anywhere else on the planet. With the World Cup approaching, Atlanta is more radiant with life and potential than maybe ever (12).

However, one of my guiding life principles is more than one thing can be true at a time. We’re really shining in a lot of ways - minus the astounding wealth inequality, of course. Most are quite familiar with the old adage about glitter and gold. There’s also the one about style and substance, both illustrating where our issue lies. Our house is an utter mess right now. It’s beyond a mess. The home we so skillfully have welcomed our neighbors into for generations is in tremendous disarray. Our home is in real trouble. The house is burning. The fire is coming from the kitchen and it’s past time for re-education on the sacred recipe of really taking care of others - and ourselves.

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