32nd Annual Restaurant Awards

Is Vancouver Failing Its Restaurants?
The Pandemic Isn’t the Only Problem

BEST PIVOT
Making It Work in 2021

TOP TAKEOUT
The Champs That Delivered

HALL OF FAME
The Most-Awarded Rooms of All Time

PLUS: HARDWICK’S POLARIZING PATH | DID TOJO REALLY INVENT THE CALI ROLL?
HERE IT IS: our most unorthodox Restaurant Awards in three decades. But while much is different, we also want to celebrate what’s the same. The big heart of the industry, its ability to push forward through tough times and the pure joy of eating out with friends and family. We raise a glass to all of you.
Many of the restaurants we had hoped to fete were forced to close, our Restaurant Awards issue was put on indefinite hold, and B.C. and the world started the long process of first understanding and then fighting COVID-19. It was, on all accounts, a slog, and few industries suffered more ups and downs and downs—and more downs—than the restaurant sector.

At the magazine, we did ultimately regroup and, through much heavy lifting, we put the 31st edition of the awards out last September, and held a virtual event. But even then, it seemed almost an exercise in nostalgia: a throwback to a time that may have been quite recent but also felt a million miles away.

Which brings us to the more optimistic outlook we’re enjoying right now. For the first time in 16 months, the industry seems genuinely hopeful that a corner has been turned and that normalcy (or, better, a new and improved normalcy like we kick around on page 42) is imminent. But for us—who are the stewards of this great tradition of celebrating the city’s restaurants—the question remained: What to do about our Restaurant Awards?

So, we hit on what follows here. We’re calling it the “32nd” Annual Restaurant Awards.” There’s only one category that has been carried over from previous years: Best New (because we thought it unfair for spots that had the courage to open during the past 16 months to have to wait another year to be lauded). For the rest of the categories, we tried to follow the trends that arose during the pandemic: they’re all takeout related, and they echo the way we were eating this past year.

A big thanks to our many Restaurant Awards judges, who volunteered their time to help us make this year’s awards a reality.

It was February 2020 and the judging for our 31st Annual Restaurant Awards had just concluded. Our amazing panel of judges had spent the previous 12 months scouring the city for restaurants that excited and enthralled them, revisiting the classics and re-revisiting the new rooms that were creating a buzz. And then… whomp.
PERHAPS NOTHING SPEAKS MORE to the resilience of the industry than the number of new rooms that opened during the pandemic. It takes a certain type of dreamer/lunatic to look straight into the eye of a hurricane and say, “Let’s go sailing.” (Although, to be fair, when your banker demands you go sailing, it may be more about financial obligation than straight-up courage.) And even limiting the candidates to spots that opened in late 2019 and 2020—the scope of this year’s awards (the 2021 rooms will be on next year’s slate)—still left us with the most competitive race we’ve had in years. And after all of the votes were tallied, it was the spectacularly low-key Oca Pastificio that emerged with the Gold.

The place screams focus, but it never feels studied: there’s chef/owner Greg Dilabio, dialled in at the front of the open kitchen and steadfastly hand-making the sublime pastas that form the bulk of the small chalkboard menu. There’s his business partner, Antoine Dumont, making everyone in the small room forget about the wait (this is no-reservation territory) and transporting you to what feels like that perfect trattoria you happened upon during your trip to Italy years ago. The entire effect is that of comforting brilliance at a shockingly low price point.

Our Silver winner is also defined by brilliance, in this case that on frequent display by head chef Gus Stieffenhofer-Brandson and his uber-capable kitchen. Published on Main was one of the most ambitious openings we’d seen in years when it opened its doors on a stretch of Main Street more used to craft beers than a Michelin-star-worthy tasting menu. The room was gathering some serious word of mouth for its high-wire cooking and unflinching devotion to the best ingredients when the pandemic hit. But while others retreated, Stieffenhofer-Brandson stayed the course for month after gruelling month. Everything coming from the kitchen continued to be exacting, with the team never accepting less than perfection with every dish as the world strived to return to normal.

Taking the Bronze is Sean Reeve and company’s crazy mash-up of Italy and Southern U.S. that is Fraser Street’s Say Mercy! The novel concept required a constant balancing of richness and acidity, seriousness with fun, and Reeve’s kitchen executed night in, night out. All the while, the team simultaneously spearheaded the Staff Meal initiative that saw a small cadre of restaurants helping front-line workers with food, and crafted affordable takeout for the rest of us.
Best Sushi

One of the lasting images of the pandemic is Masa-san, the uber-perfectionist behind the elaborately controlled environment of Masayoshi, cheerfully smiling behind his bar while making to-go chirashi and other delicacies for his takeout customers. No doubt many a restaurateur thought, “Well, if Masa-san can do, so can I,” and the orders that came out of the Fraser Street institution, with Masa-san working solo for the most part, will be long remembered as one of the few silver (or Gold) linings in a supremely tough year.

Silver goes to Temaki, the overnight sensation that’s only been around for 18 years. Perhaps it was the numerous chefs who posted themselves picking up takeout (Boulevard’s Alex Chen, we’re looking at you), but word has definitely gotten out that this Broadway spot mixes an accessible menu (in both selection and price point) paired with a commitment to ultra-fresh ingredients that’s seen it become the go-to spot on the west side. Bronze goes to Sashimiya, a jewel box on an overlooked and tough-to-find section of Hornby specializing in no-frills, perfectly presented sushi and sashimi paired with a well curated selection of Japanese grocery staples.

Best Pizza

Well, evidently the best pizzeria in town is also able to best translate their perfectly crusted pies to takeout. Via Tevere has won Gold in this category for the last two years, and here they are again, on top. It helps that its style of warm minimalism—never too many toppings, never too wacky—means there’s less to go wrong in the box, and it also helps that the entire operation offers a comforting embrace of hominess, a boon this past year. In second place is the no-longer-under-the-radar AJ’s, a place that’s always been an industry favourite for its effortlessly convivial vibe and as-authentic-as-you-can-get Brooklyn-style pizza (which has the attitude to travel well). Taking the Bronze is another continued presence on this list: Main Street’s Farina, whose small room meant it spent years perfecting a pie built for takeout.
**TAKEOUT**

**Best Chinese**

While takeout at entry-level Chinese restaurants has long been a staple in most Vancouver households, the elite restaurants at the top of their game often eschewed the idea. But as it became clear that wouldn’t be an ongoing option, many of the top rooms began to show that they could be masters at to-go as well. Chief among them was Gold winner Chef’s Choice, which opened on West Broadway mere months before the first shutdown but nonetheless captured the attention of the city’s die-hard foodies with its interpretation of classic Cantonese dishes like gold coin roasted chicken. A stone’s throw away is Silver-winner Dynasty, no stranger to these awards, which was able to translate its magic with seafood into take-out—no small feat. And taking Bronze was another newcomer, the opened-in-February iDen & Quan Ju De, whose somewhat gimmicky promise of 5D dining belied the fact that it did the near impossible: create a Peking duck that could travel.

**Best Casual**

Our co-winners in this category are both new spots, they’re situated only two kilometres from each other, and, like all great restaurants, they have both filled voids we didn’t even know we had. First up is Superbaba, fresh from its multi-year beta-testing in Victoria and backed by a well-regarded team of industry pros (Medina’s Robbie Kane, Jason Bussman of Tacofino, Ryan Spong of the recently sold food.ee), and led on the ground by Abdallah El Chami. This brain trust has come up with a take on Middle Eastern fare that has people losing their minds over the fresh, generous portions and inventive takes on a compact menu. More singular is Justin Cheung’s Potluck Hawker Eatery, an ode to the casual greatness of Malaysian cooking that sees the Angus An protege crafting a menu that’s equal parts innovative and nostalgic, opening up the taste buds of Vancouverites to the joy of laksa, roti and salted egg yolk chicken. Taking Bronze is Doug Stephen and Lindsey Mann’s now-iconic Downlow Chicken Shack, the perennial Gold winner that reinvented how this city saw fried chicken (spoiler—we love it). And while the pandemic had its challenges, one of the calming influences was seeing how some things stayed the same—like the never-ending lineup out its Commercial Drive door.
**Best Formal**

It’s easy to look at Gold-winning Boulevard’s deep-pocketed owner and think, well, the pandemic was a cakewalk for them. But anyone who ordered takeout from this spot in the early days was greeted by GM JP Potters—and seen out by him too, as he walked your bags to your car himself—while acclaimed chefs Alex Chen and Roger Ma toiled away making meatballs for patrons and selling prime meat at cost. Three people, that was it.

As the months clicked by, the offering from BLVD Provisions expanded (exceptional chowder, make-your-own sea bream in salt crust) and the fact that Boulevard—with its level of greatness that has dominated these awards in the past few years—was able to translate its excellence into takeout was a source of near normalcy for many. Across town, JC Poirier’s St. Lawrence, our Silver winner, took a little longer to figure out how to recreate their intricately devised meals into a takeout format, but when they did, wow. That telltale blue bag holding the multi-course extravaganza mirrored the restaurant’s renewed commitment to table d’hote dining at the highest level. And rounding out the podium was the tour de force of TopTable2U, an Avengers-esque grouping of CinCin, Blue Water, Elisa and Thierry that quickly became an essential service, be it for a bag of flour or a Holstein striploin, and continued delivering a wide array of perfectly executed dishes at an even wider array of price points.

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**Best Burger**

Burgers have never been a standalone category in the Restaurant Awards, but it’s tough to think of a food item that’s been more on people’s minds lately than a classic, well-made burger. And this year, no place captured the public’s attention more than the awesomely lo-fi Between 2 Buns. What started as a passion-project food truck that drew lines at every stop morphed into a bricks-and-mortar spot occupying the former digs of the much-missed Bestie. Smash burgers are the order of the day here, and don’t even think of asking for tomatoes (or any substitutions, for that matter). Your subservience will be rewarded by warm-hearted staff and even more warm-hearted prices ($10 for a burger)—and because it’s already smashed, it travels like a pro.

A jump up the elegance scale is the very unsmashed marvel from Kits stalwart Au Comptoir, all Gallic pride in its juicy thickness and topped with caramelized onions and raclette. As a takeout option, it’s an exercise in messiness, but worth it. And last on the podium is the most bittersweet of the bunch—the legendary beefy star of Gianmarco Colannino’s Trans Am, then its offspring Turbo X Trans Am, both victims of the pandemic: a burger so great and pure that it started a movement.

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**Restaurant Awards 2021**

★ Boulevard
845 Burrard St.,
boulevardvancouver.ca

★ St. Lawrence
550 Powell St.,
stlawrencerestaurant.com

★ TopTable2U
Various locations, toptable.ca

Honourable Mention

Hawksworth
801 W Georgia St.,
hawksworthrestaurant.com

Folgin
350 Carroll St.,
folginvancouver.com

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**Between 2 Buns**

105 E Pender St.,
instagram.com/between2bunsburgers

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**Au Comptoir**

2276 W 4th Ave.,
aucomptoir.ca

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**Trans Am/Turbo X**

Trans Am (closed)
979 Powell St.,
transamrestaurant.com

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**Per Se Social Corner**

891 Homer St.,
peresocialcorner.com

Dreamow Burgers
926 Main St.,
dlburgers.ca
Best Pivot

This category is the five-letter word that no one will ever want to hear once the pandemic is fully behind us, but it was also one of the dominant skills required for survival during the dark days: take your modus operandi and radically rethink it as quickly as possible, or you’re finished. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Gold winner Pidgin is that owner Brandon Grossutti’s first response in the face of upheaval was: “How can I help my community?” His answer was to create FromTo, a grassroots delivery system that sought to shield participating restaurants from the high costs of delivery services through a transparent cost-based model that benefitted both consumer and producer. Pidgin and their acclaimed takeout may have been the test case, but soon dozens of thoughtful owners signed up as well, willing to explore the idea of another way to do delivery. Taking Silver is the one-two punch of Caffè la Tana and Pepino’s who, like Davey Boy Smith and the Dynamite Kid, joined forces to offer everything under one metaphorical tent: groceries, pizza, fresh pasta and wine with a side of the welcoming hospitality that both are known for. Bronze goes to Say Mercy!, whose Staff Meal initiative gathered a disparate group of good souls (from Masayoshi to the Arbor to Belgard Kitchen) to cook affordable takeout, earmark funds for food banks and lend a hand to front-line workers—all while trying to stay afloat in a terrible business environment.
The Front of House Rules

EVERY YEAR when we hold these awards, we carve out a page or two for Premier Crew, a recognition of five or six front-of-house workers who, in the eyes of our judges, have gone above and beyond. We get them together for a photo shoot, write a few nice things about them, and the next year we do it again with another batch of honourees, and so on. But this year it all feels a wearisomely inadequate response to the people in an often-overlooked segment of the industry who were, without a trace of irony, our goddamn heroes.

Let’s have a short recap. The pandemic started for many in the FOH with an icic started for many in the FOH with an

And for the lucky few who did come back to work, here’s what they faced: an environment radically worse than the already precarious one that existed before COVID. There were, at best, half the number of tables, so one can imagine how that affects the livelihood of people whose compensation has been hounded to a customer who enjoys unfettered discretion in what they offer. Vancouver’s FOH folk found themselves spending their entire day masked and gloved up. They found themselves in the role of enforcer as customers grew lax on provincially mandated mask requirements. They routinely had to ask people not to mingle or visit other tables. And all of these unenviable tasks were rarely met with decency—let alone respect—by the unmasked mouth-breathing offenders.

And then there was the constant fear and uncertainty of being around large numbers of people day in, day out, when our knowledge about COVID was changing by the week. In a final insult, when the province started to prioritize who would be eligible for early vaccination, they—the very definition of front-line workers—were on the outside looking in. Work is a plant that processes chicken? Here’s your shot. Spend all day serving that chicken to a revolving door of randos? We’ll get back to you.

For many, it’s been too much. Restaurateurs are desperate for FOH workers right now, and while jaded people point to the CERB subsidy, the reality is that after the year and a half that FOH folks have endured, many just don’t know if they can keep doing it. Here’s hoping that everyone involved can find a way to remakethe FOH place worth working in, because without these professionals, restaurants as we know them will cease to exist.

Step one in that journey is gratitude. So, for our part: thank you. Thank you,thank you,thank you. You fully respect the job you’ve done over these impossible 18 months, and we promise not to forget in the months and years to come that you answered the call when asked. The work you do is invaluable in keeping the social fabric of our society together—without you, restaurants don’t exist, which means neighbourhoods don’t exist, which means we’re all on our way to being little more than those energy pods from The Matrix. With you, our life is richer, and we want you to know that we appreciate you.

The Hidden Costs of COVID

From takeout to Tock, your favourite restaurant has been facing more of a financial strain than you may realize.

“Tock’s reservation service is $250 per month. Ritual’s takeout service is 13 percent of sales. Approximate $3 for a party of two people ordering brunch. People went from $12 per box of 100 to $22 very quickly and we likely doubled our glove usage during this time. Hand sanitizer is $25 per litre. Acrylic shielding cost $10,000. This is sadly a temporary solution.”

"This January, we’ll have been in the business for 14 years," says Robbie Kane, owner of Café Medina. The always-busy spot originally opened in 2008, but COVID-19 saw it transition from brunch hub to online store in a matter of weeks. "It was a huge, huge learning curve," emphasizes Kane. “We went from serving 400 people a day to walking into an empty room and taking an order for three lemons, two potatoes and a side of hummus—it was a kick in the gut.” But while everyone knows it’s been tough, no one seems to be laying out the actual nuts and bolts of the extra costs restaurants took on to serve fewer people. So we sat down with Kane to take a look at his keeping-afflato-in-COVID price list.

Hall of Fame

While we’re all looking forward to the end of the pandemic, this global pause has also given us a chance to look back at three decades of these awards and marvel at some of the rooms and personalities that have dominated their respective categories. Here’s a list of spots that have garnered the most hardware over the previous 31 years—and a celebration of what made (and makes) them so special to the city.

Tojo’s

CATEGORY: Japanese
RECORD: 17 Gold Medals in a row from 1992 to 2013

In each of the years Hidekazu Tojo’s Broadway restaurant won Gold it was not only the best Japanese restaurant in town, but in the country, too—and probably the continent. He was our first culinary superstar and, more so than anyone else, he put Vancouver on the world map for dining. The standard he set was so high (and remains so) that Vancouverites who travel to much larger cities are frequently perplexed to find only one or two high-level Japanese spots, compared to back home, where Tojo’s created an atmosphere of excellence that raised the entire industry. And all while the chef himself has continually exhibited the traits that helped define the tenor of his elegant room: hard work, humility, preternatural focus and never beating his chest about his accomplishments (like when he didn’t lay off a single employee when COVID hit). Tojo-san, you are a generational talent.

“Everyone knows that Tojo-san helped put Vancouver on the culinary map, but most people don’t know just how funny and generous he is as a person. He is not only a friend to me, but to every chef in the city.” —Michel Jacob, Le Crocodile
Meeru and Vikram’s New Indian cuisine introduced Vancouver to a fresh constellation of flavours and spicing, rooted in tradition but always pressing forward. Lamb popsicles rained over us! And they never rest: each dish continues to reveal complexity without complication, served forth with effortless charm.”

—Jamie Maw,
VanMag Food Editor Emeritus

**Vij’s / My Shanti**

*CATEGORY:* Indian/South Asian  
*RECORD:* Vij’s, 19 Gold Medals in a row from 1997 to 2015; My Shanti, Gold Medals in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2020 (together, Vij and Dhalwala have won 23 out of 24 years)

Do you know how hard it is to win Gold 19 years in a row? Do you know how hard judges and magazines try to add some variety when at all possible? The reality is that, save for a blip of a year in 2019, the team of Vikram Vij and Meeru Dhalwala have dominated the entire idea of what South Asian food is not only in B.C., but also throughout North America. Want another scary fact? The only reason they don’t have three more Golds is that we didn’t even have a Best Indian (as it was then known) award for three years of the restaurant’s operation, after which point it became embarrassing that a spot that was not only attracting Martha Stewart and Harrison Ford but also making them line up like regular joes might be worthy of its own category.
RESTAURANT AWARDS 2021

Cioppino’s

CATEGORY: Best Italian/Best New
RECORD: 17 Gold Medals between 2004 and 2020

Running an acclaimed fine Italian restaurant is sort of like being a famous gunslinger back in the Old West: there’s always some young whippersnapper looking to ride into town and take your title. But, since 2004, that’s mostly been an exercise in futility for anyone challenging Pino Posteraro for dominance in the realm of cooking Italian food at the highest level (he was knighted by the president of Italy in 2018, to underscore the point). His Yaletown room (recently redone, as if to prepare for another 17 years of Golds) seems like one of the pillars upon which our local industry is based—setting unreasonably high standards for both customers and chefs, and then exceeding them.

———Angus An, Maenam

Since its founding in 1981 by my friend Jack Evrensel, Araxi has established itself not only as one of the best restaurants in B.C., but as one of the best restaurants in the country. With culinary director James Walt bringing his expertise and talent for using local ingredients to the restaurant, Araxi continues to share envelope-pushing food with diners from around the world.”

———Rob Feenie, Cactus Club

Araxi

CATEGORY: Best Whistler
RECORD: 17 Gold Medals in 18 years, from 2000 to 2008 and 2010 to 2016

Legendary restaurateur Jack Evrensel was not someone to do something—or anything—lightly, so when he bestowed his Whistler restaurant with the name of his wife Araxi, you knew it was a venture that would strive to be the very best. Early on, he took a chance on a young chef named James Walt and the bet paid off in Gold (a winning trend that continued after Evrensel sold his restaurant to the Aquilini family). Under Walt’s watch, Araxi became the standard that all resort dining had to live up to: locavore, inventive, the type of spot visitors would return home from and rave about to their friends. In so doing, it brought the entire level of Whistler dining up several notches—and made the competition for future Gold Medals that much harder.

———Rob Feenie, Cactus Club
It’s hard to think of a region of Canada that’s had a more dynamic last two decades than the Okanagan. The wines have gone from pleasant curiosities to consistent world beaters and the food has been in quality lockstep: not a month goes by that we don’t hear of some chef leaving Vancouver for the Valley so they can open their own spot, be closer to their suppliers and actually consider buying a house. But you know what’s not dynamic? The Gold Medal winner. Mark Filatow cut his teeth under another local legend, Rod Butters, at the Wickaninnish and ultimately followed his mentor east. He opened the lowkey Waterfront in 2004 and within a few years his mix of precise cooking in a casual atmosphere paired with his deep knowledge of wine became the paradigm of what a modern restaurant in the new Okanagan should be. Except that whenever anyone else tries to follow that model, they have reliably fallen short of the standard that Filatow and his team continue to set. Who knows when this streak might end?

“I have had the pleasure of working with many chefs over the years with events and winemaker’s dinners, and Mark has always been a favourite of mine to work with. He possesses a calm demeanour that is rare in his profession: his combination of having a great palate for food and being a trained sommelier is a winner, and he’s excellent at making dishes that complement and accentuate the wines he is pairing. A rare talent who is a pleasure to work with, ski with or crush riesling with.”

—David Paterson, Tantalus Vineyards
Sooke Harbour House

In a time before a seemingly endless series of World’s Best lists, Sooke Harbour House reigned supreme as the one spot in Western Canada that could attract the international foodie set (a class of patrons far smaller than it is today). When Sinclair and Frederique Philip opened the restaurant-focused inn in 1979, there was no such thing as a destination restaurant in Canada. But through the early adoption of slow food techniques and a whole lot of sweat and passion they transformed SHH into one of the great rooms in the country. It was also one of the top training grounds for chefs: at various times James Walt, Brock Windsor, David McMillan, Melissa Craig, Jonathan Chovancek, Rhonda Viani, Andrew Richardson and Marc-André Choquette passed through the kitchen here. We started the category of Best Vancouver Island in 1997—in large part to recognize them—and they dominated it for years, spreading a legacy of relaxed fine dining that continues in the province today.

"My time there came immediately after working in some of the best restaurants in France. What I learned at Sooke Harbour House shook me to my core, changing the way I cook and how I think about food, wine and service forever. Sooke Harbour House during the Philips family reign was one of the most historically important restaurants in North America.”

—David McMillan, Joe Beef
If you had been lucky enough to snag a table at Harry Kambolis’s C Restaurant in its early-aughts heyday, you were in for a treat. The economy was humming (the average price for a detached home in Vancouver was then a “crazy” $400,000), tables were packed and the food—prepped by Robert Belcham, a young sous chef from Peace River a few years removed from the French Laundry in Yountville—was easily among the best in the province. If you had the money and wanted the best seafood, you made the pilgrimage to the foot of Howe Street—and if you wanted a beautiful piece of wild salmon line-caught by the Hawkshaw family of Prince Rupert, it would set you back a cool $25. A small price to pay, thought most Vancouver patrons.

Now imagine that, instead of buying that salmon, you took that $25, invested it in the S&P 500 and waited. All the way until July 2019, by which time it had magically transformed into $116.02. To celebrate your enviable restraint, you might want to treat yourself—and, as luck would have it, not only is that same chef still cooking and not only is he still preparing salmon, but he’s still buying it from those exact same fishermen: the Hawkshaws. You stroll to Campagnolo, his popular Main Street homage to regional Italian food (that he was able to buy with industry partners on his chef’s salary), and order said salmon... for $28.

That’s a 12 percent increase in 16 years. Detached house prices are now hovering at an average $1,417,000 (more than 300 percent higher). Commercial rents have shot up, and minimum wage has almost doubled: two numbers that are of grave importance to someone running a restaurant. But you, the consumer—whose house value has quadrupled, whose stock portfolio has quintupled, whose salary has almost certainly increased—you don’t have to pay for any of that. If you adjust for inflation, the price you’re paying for that salmon has actually decreased in value while all those numbers surrounding it have shot up.

Is anyone surprised that Campagnolo shut its doors last year? And not because of the pandemic, but because, even once recovery began, Belcham still couldn’t see a situation where a reasonable rate of return might be earned from it. No wonder the restaurant industry is screwed.

What happened? How did a restaurant go from a stable business through which a reasonably successful owner could anticipate...
Colannino's suppliers implored him to raise the price again, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He'd spent his youth working in restaurants in Montreal and he had vowed that when he opened his own spot, he'd do everything he could to make it the watering hole of his dreams. “I knew I was crazy, but this is what I do,” he says. “And we’re far more house-poor to boot.” The result is that, as Trans Am is now permanently closed, Colannino in his happy space—the already closed Trans Am.

One of the most basic answers to this question is hospitality. The majority of people in the industry—both employees and owners—relive in the act of welcoming people into their establishments and enjoying the daily back-and-forth that’s foreign to most other industries. They simply don’t want to charge their patrons huge amounts.

When Gus Stefkenhofer-Brandom opened published on Main in 2019, it was important for him to have an accessible price point for the neighbourhood, notwithstanding his plans to cook at the highest level with top-drawer ingredients. So when it became clear that the prices of a few menu items had to rise given their attendant costs, he was hesitant: “I had a certain sense of guilt as a chef raising the prices, but at the same time valuing the work we’re doing in the kitchen.” A similar situation played out at Trans Am, where people lost their collective minds over that restaurant’s much-lauded burger. And why wouldn’t they when a patty made from honest-to-goodness 100 percent wagyu was selling for $17 when it needed to be $27 to break even? Even when Gianmarco Colannino raised the price to $21, he still never came close to breaking even, let alone making a profit. (He subsidized the burger with profits from his liquor sales.)

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Colannino’s suppliers implored him to raise the price again, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He’d spent his youth working in restaurants in Montreal and he had vowed that when he opened his own spot, he’d do everything he could to make it the watering hole of his dreams. “I knew I was crazy, but this is what I do,” he says. “And we’re far more house-poor to boot.” The result is that, as Trans Am is now permanently closed, Colannino in his happy space—the already closed Trans Am.

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The less rosy answer to raising prices is that, given the issues, most restaurateurs are fearful that this city won’t accept a hike thanks to a combination of our demographics and our relentless culture of perpetually low prices. One of the harsh truths is that, as friendly as the industry is with each other, there’s always cutthroat competition just below the surface. Of particular note right now is the high degree of poaching that’s going on for both front and back of house among the restaurants that are struggling to find staff. On the one hand, it’s a boon for the employees, at least in the short term. But on the other hand, it’s wreaking havoc within an industry already operating on razor-thin margins. Everyone is friends until someone needs a line cook. Likewise, notwithstanding common interests, the industry rarely moves together even when it would be in the owners’ self-interest to do so—say, like agreeing to raise the price for a piece of sustainably caught salmon. There’s a reason that supermarkets and gas stations are always profitable—their prices rise and fall in near-perfect lockstep. And yet, in the restaurant industry, it rarely happens. A few months into the pandemic, for example, restaurants were reeling. And one of the things they all routinely put up with—no-shows—suddenly could mean the difference between a gain or a loss on any given night. Chef JC Poirier of St. Lawrence was the first to implement a solution that’s been growing in popularity at fine-dining restaurants throughout the world: the prepaid reservation. “Why is it okay to not show for your reservation?” wonders the chef. “People prepay for the theatre, cinema, concerts, vacations, even yoga classes—why would restaurants be any different?”

St. Lawrence, desperate to maximize its small number of seats, put the policy in place. You could still cancel free-of-charge, of course, but you couldn’t simply not show up. According to Poirier, the benefits to the system are huge: “We can plan ahead, schedule the right amount of staff, purchase the goods needed for the service, we can schedule payments to suppliers with prompt certainty—it’s just a much healthier environment to run a restaurant.”

But even though a few spots tried the concept out, ultimately everyone but St. Lawrence reverted to the terrible old system, fearful of customer backlash. Perhaps the most ironic aspect is that there is already a level of de facto collusion—it just works against the industry, to keep prices low. Want a piece of halibut? It’ll cost you $14 Boulevard. And at L’Abattoir. And Botanist. And Bearfoot Bistro. Hawksworth knocks it just works against the industry, perpetually low prices. One of the most ironic aspects is that there is already a level of de facto collusion—it just works against the industry, to keep prices low. Want a piece of halibut? It’ll cost you $14 Boulevard. And at L’Abattoir. And Botanist. And Bearfoot Bistro. Hawksworth knocks

The most obvious yet heartbreaking line item is staff salaries. You’d be hard pressed to find an owner who wouldn’t want to pay all of their employees a living wage (there’s a reason many staffers use the word “family” to describe their work environment).
Mea Culpa

Which leads to our role—the media—and our complicity in this Catherine wheel of an industry. If Published on Main did the proper thing and charged $50 for its halibut, who do you think would be the first to point it out to the whole wide world? “Newbie thinks they’re better than Boulevard,” the headline would blare.

And that’s not even scratching the surface of what the majority of mouthbreathers on Yelp would unleash. For years I’ve been parsing bottle prices, careful to catch an establishment slipping in a greater-than-3x-markup and castigating them, publicly, for their greed. It was done in the interest of serving the consumers and protecting them from unscrupulous owners. But pull the lens back on that myopia, and see the big picture: in order for the industry to get to a place where establishments can make sufficient profit to pay everyone involved properly, order sustainable local produce and protein and offer an environment of mentorship for both the front and back of house—then costs need to rise, even on those bottles of wine.

The B.C. government’s recent decision to finally allow restaurants to buy liquor at wholesale prices is a help—but it’s not enough. We must evolve our thinking to encapsulate the true cost of running a restaurant. Belcham puts it best: “There’s always a cost to cheap food. Sooner or later down the line someone has to suffer. It might be the owner, it might be the farmer in the Fraser Valley earning less than their parents did on the same land—or the migrant labourer toiling under unreasonable conditions, or an actual enslaved labourer catching shrimp in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, there’s always a cost, and if you care about that, you need to change how you approach dining in a restaurant.”

The Results

Boulevard is hands-down one of the best restaurants in Canada. But it’s also owned by a billionaire. So is Blue Water. And Elisa. And Araxi. Cactus Club is satisfying 1,000 customers as you read this. And Superbaba and the growing Downlow empire are showing that you can do casual fare at a high level with no apparent sacrifices. If that’s enough for you, then don’t worry. They’re probably all safe.

But what about Chambar? L’Abattoir? Burdock & Co? I have no inside knowledge as to their finances, but how do we expect them and their ilk of chef-driven spots with personality to make a continued go at it when the numbers will never add up to a return that is commensurate with their experience and the risks they take? The eating public has a binary approach to a restaurant’s financial health—either you’re out of business or you’re doing great—but the reality is that there’s a huge pool of precariousness in the middle.

And, unlike with other speculative industries, there’s almost never a potential pot of gold at the end. Are you comfortable telling JC Poirier that, despite having ascended to the heights of his profession such that, were he a lawyer, he’d be making seven figures, he still needs to continue giving his all for the salary of a first-year associate?

There’s not a single chef or owner whom I talked to who had a bad word to say about customers—even off the record. Most wouldn’t stop talking about their gratitude for the acts of kindness and support they experienced during the pandemic.

But that triage is over. We’re now in the less-exciting rehabilitation stage of the process, where our support is even more important. The easy answer is that everyone has to do more. We need to affirm to the industry that, just as we will not buy a t-shirt made in a Bangladeshi sweat shop, we will likewise pay the appropriate amount of money for food prepared by a seasoned professional that’s supplied in an ethical manner for everyone along the chain. But appreciating the underlying concerns is one thing; getting comfortable saying “I’ll have the $55 halibut please” is quite another. FIM