

Introduction

It's important to get it out there right up front so that there's no confusion. I am no genius, clairvoyant, or saint. Never pretended to be any of these things, never aspired to be either. My flaws, though perhaps not obvious, are very iceberg-like—unassuming peaks supported by treacherous footings beneath the surface.

Throughout my many years in the restaurant business, I have struggled and failed. I have gambled and won. I have tasted major windfalls, and have swung and missed so hard I corkscrewed myself (and my marriages) deep into the mud.

Make no mistake. This is not a 'How To' book, or guide to achieving unimagined success. God knows there is a plethora of that kind of pulp out there to choose from. Instead, you're about to read a compilation of life experiences and trials and tribulations that are intended to inspire, entertain and amuse. Think of it as an insider's look into the field of restaurant concept creation and management.

The restaurant industry is (at least before COVID) the second largest employer in the United States after government. This look into the all-consuming industry is not always flattering and is often NC-17 rated. It's a field filled with quirky—often bat-shit crazy—characters that have probably figured into a bite or two of food you've enjoyed over the years.

It's an industry that has become a 'default' employer of Hollywood dreamers, wanna-be rock stars, the uneducated, and immigrants yearning for opportunity. It's a field that has the heady pastiche of glamour that almost everyone wants to talk about, invest in, and otherwise become involved with. Mostly because of the seductive cosmopolitan social currency it so often expends. It's a show unlike any other.

My first job in the business was flipping burgers on a real charcoal-fired grill in Wayne, New Jersey. The spot was called Anthony Wayne Charcoal Grill on Route 46. I was a young teen and it provided me with pocket cash and a stage upon which to elevate my social standing among friends, strangers, and girls whose attention I craved. Never in my wildest dreams did I think this would evolve (devolve?) into a lifelong passion.

No, my dream was to go to college to study journalism and become a writer. Hell, I had already picked out a pen name: “McCane.” I read vociferously at the urging of my teachers, my mother, and my grandmother and my thirst for understanding things and people through the written word never died.

Wait, who am I kidding? I had already won the hearts of the prettiest cheerleaders with my sensitive poetry and ability to weave witticisms into every paragraph. I felt sure my approach to love and fame was bulletproof. I had no doubt my word prowess would lead to multiple Pullitzers, a string of best sellers, and an entourage of beautiful women.

The key was to earn a degree in journalism from the institution of my choice—Ithaca College. Ithaca is nestled in the idyllic town of the same name located in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. I was sure my dad would gladly pay the freight. What could go wrong?

“No fucking son of mine is going to become a pansy-ass writer,” my father shot back. “You’re going to study business. The health care business.”

My father served in the Air Force during World War II. When he returned home from the war, he and my mother married and produced five offspring in rapid succession over a period of just seven years. My father also teamed up with his buddies from the service to launch a packaging business when plastics first became the rage on account of their versatility. After they successfully designed and built packaging equipment, their company grew to an impressive size before my father was ousted in an early version of a hostile takeover.

Out of a job with five kids at home, he fell back on his field of study in college: pharmacology. He worked tirelessly to provide for us at a steep cost to the health and stability of our family. My father was not one to mince words or refuse a cocktail. But for whatever faults he had, he was my hero and the most influential person in the early part of my life by his example of hard work and service to others, and by epitomizing a true entrepreneurial spirit.

My father’s stinging words about my dream of becoming a writer and his sermons about me never being good enough or smart enough, rang in my ears. I am both tormented by, and grateful for, his words: tormented by their psychic wounds, and grateful for the determination they sparked to prove him wrong.

Still, that was that. His pronouncemeent ruled. Writing would have to wait. Four years after matriculating at Ithaca College, I earned a BS in Health Care Administration, cum laude, class of 1975. The piece of paper was as useless as a fifth prong on a fork. I leveraged that into a masters degree in hotel and restaurant management from Cornell University. Armed with all of that knowledge and credentialing, I found myself back to slinging burgers for a living.

Yet, as I look back, this pursuit has filled every crevice of my body with food and wine sensations and knowledge, and experiences both positive and negative as it drained and filled my wallet. It also took me from New York, to Washington DC, to Chicago, to Houston, and finally to Dallas.

In addition to burgers, I've created and sold tacos, pad Thai, lasagna, chicken fried steak, vindaloo chicken, barbeque, and rib eye steaks. To wash it down, I've peddled Long Island Ice Teas, Genesee Cream Ale, Old Style beer, frozen margaritas, sake, mango lassi's, and ruinously expensive chardonnays, Champagnes, and 20-year-old tawny ports.

I've conceptualized better airport fare, upscale fast food, white table cloth dining, family style Italian cusine, hot dog stands, and delis. I've traveled from Bangkok to Bombay (Mumbai), New York to New Mexico, London to Laguna Beach, Vancouver to Venice, Cabo San Lucas to Cayman Island, and Hong Kong to Honolulu. Over those years I have dated and written poems to beauty queens, prom queens, and once even a drag queen! (it was a blind date set up by a friend who never suspected her friend was a man in drag. I won't share how I found out....)

This book is part travel log, part human interest story, and part real life fairy tale seasoned with a healthy dash of saucy expose. The message that my parents drilled into me as a boy lives in this book: be honest, don't blow smoke up anyone's ass just to appease them, don't compromise your values, and do not shy away from hard work.

The more succinct message of famed restaurant concept development virtuoso Phil Romano also lives within these pages: "If you don't like it, go fuck yourself." And so it begins.