On running a business with integrity

Chef and restaurateur Eric See on fostering community, promoting creativity, and how authentic allyship is active.

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As told to Christina Lee, 2629 words.

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Whether with the Awkward Scone or Ursula, are you looking to the market and seeing what's missing, or chasing this desire to see what you want to eat?

I'd say that it was more in line with that selfish desire of centering myself and my own needs. This is what I want to eat, and how can I tailor that to what the market can bear, what people are interested in, and what's trending? I really feel like eating watermelon every day for the next three weeks. How can I make that a reality and make other people buy it? That's actually what I'm working on today, a watermelon salad.

Especially through Ursula, this has been the case through all of my ventures. Even at the Awkward Scone when I was doing more catering and events, generally everything has some kind of sensory attachment to a memory of mine. Now it's easier for people to identify that because I am from New Mexico, I'm New Mexican, my family is still there, that's the food I grew up on. So they're like, "Oh, that's part of his identity."

But when you go back and look at pretty much anything that I was making, there was some kind of sensory memory attached to it or some general interest of mine that not everybody can see from the exterior of viewing me through a pastry case. At the Awkward Scone, one of the big things that I was trying to do there was blending herbal tea. It was taking the idea of an English tea garden or an afternoon tea and turning that into a retail concept. I'm not too keen on black and green and traditional teas, and people who are into that are really really into it, and I just didn't want to get in a territory that I didn't know enough about and be scolded for not using the right temperature water or steeping for long enough. So I was blending herbal teas because that was a very creative canvas. And I loved being able to go back to Southwestern herbs and medicine, and using those as flavor profiles or as the background notes for teas that also had some kind of holistic or medicinal purpose.

I have liver damage from being crazy when I was younger, and I had to take a long break from drinking for my health to rebound. I'm one of those people that always had some kind of vice at the end of the day. So I was like, "Well, if I can't drink liquor, like what… I don't want to drink water." And so the whole herbal tea program at the Awkward Scone was born out of this need to heal my body, and through this personal journey that I was going through. These are the same teas that I'm selling at Ursula.

I have a huge infatuation with things that are morbid and grotesque. And so I had a period where I was using a lot of bugs and doing stuff with the Oddities Flea Market here in Brooklyn. My friend Lonnie used to always call me The Dark Prince Of Pastry during that period because I was always doing really weird, weird stuff.

I think this is true for most chefs that it's all a reflection of their own personal journeys, but I think it really rings true for me in everything that I'm doing.

That being said, were there initial reservations behind making breakfast burritos? How do you balance your creative vision with specific feedback?

You do have to find that balance between what is personal and what you have the upper hand and knowledge of versus what the market actually desires, and whether or not you want to dig your heels in to not do it or to change it and alter it to appeal to that market or not. The breakfast burrito thing, I got pressured into by other New Mexicans in the neighborhood coming into my spot. Beyond that, I realized that there was a lack of burritos in the New York City market (or good ones), but it didn't make sense to the concept that I was trying to build at the Awkward Scone. Back home in New Mexico, everybody sells breakfast burritos. You can get them at Chinese restaurants. But here, I just didn't feel like dealing with the public being like, "Why do you sell breakfast burritos at a place called the Awkward Scone?" I wasn't up for it. But I was like, "Fine, I'll give it a shot." And it ended up being wildly popular and, I guess, needed in the market.

I don't know if this is running away from your question, but I do have plenty of people that come in that have their own ideas of what a breakfast burrito is supposed to be, or what New Mexican cuisine is—that it's its own separate culture and cuisine that's entirely different from Tex Mex or Baja or even Chipotle. We have plenty of people that come in here with their own expectations about what they're supposed to be getting, and then they're upset if we're not living up to those expectations. But I am resistant to offering or changing certain things, because then it's an erasure of the culture where I come from. Ursula is a very specific opportunity for me to tell the story of New Mexican food and embedding queer community and culture into it as well. I can't do that if I'm letting other people dictate how that story should be told.

Not just in food but in media, people are really concerned about representation regarding race, gender, and sexuality. When you are figuring out how to tell your story about New Mexican cuisine, what becomes your standard for "authenticity," especially with how specific food memories can be for people?

Some of it comes down to the specificity in ingredients that we're using and where I'm getting them from. It's hard to find this balance of sustainability and locality, choosing to support your local community but also paying respect to the culture where your food comes from. The beans, blue corn, and juniper ash are all from Navajo-owned, agricultural companies in New Mexico. All of the chiles come from New Mexican companies as well. That's part of maintaining that integrity of quality and culture and community. And then, where I can, using other local food purveyors, like getting local organic chicken that we use for the chicken sandwich. Using a balance of authenticity and integrity to add integrity with myself or the food that we're making. It's a sustainability process, but it's also making sure that I'm giving back to the communities that birthed this cuisine and this culture. The beans and the corn that we use in our cuisine, even the chile, all came from indigenous Southwest Pueblo culture. It wouldn't feel right to me to not pay back those communities by buying the products from them and supporting their industry. That's a big part of authenticity to me is identifying the importance of the contributors to your culture.

I'm trying to imagine the lengths you have to go through to source this stuff out. Like in all aspects of consumerism, it's easy to default to the most convenient source.

I get a lot of help from my family. My mom literally ships the beans and chile to me from New Mexico. She drives up to Farmington, New Mexico, which is where the beans are from, and she drives hundreds and hundreds of pounds of beans back to Albuquerque, and then she'll ship them from there. She works for an airline, so she gets a discount on shipping. Otherwise, I don't know how sustainable it would be to be shipping 500 pounds of beans to Brooklyn every month. My mom's a big part of that process. And it's a lot of work. She's busy this week and I feel bad telling her like, "Hey, I'm out of beans and chile. You need to get that in the mail."

There are times when I've had to reach out and get some direct shipments, but that kind of affects the ability to make the food accessible, which is another weird balancing act. You want to price your food accordingly to be able to make sure that the people within your establishment are getting paid more than fair wages, without pricing everybody out of it, but then also giving yourself the grace and love to get paid what you're worth.

Going back to that question of authenticity and finding that balance here in New York: New Mexican food only has

five or six real standard items in it: enchiladas, burritos, green chili cheeseburger, posole. It doesn't have the huge diaspora that like Mexican regional cuisine cooking has. I could just do those and be real authentic New Mexican. But I put "New Mexican Inspired" on the window so that I have flexibility and creativity. I think I owe it to myself to be able to create the food that I want, evolve and change as I see fit, and invite my staff to inject some of their culture. We keep it on brand with New Mexican food, but we get to be playful. Watermelon salad isn't part of New Mexican cuisine, but it's a way to be creative and seasonal here. I feel like we owe it to ourselves as food professionals to be able to create what we want, and not just what the consumer desires.

What lessons from running the Awkward Scone have you brought into Ursula?

Less about the Awkward Scone specifically, and just about the way the industry was in the past versus the last year, is that Ursula's also an experiment at setting specific boundaries between me and the staff. We're closed two days a week, and we close early during the week, at 4:00. We stop selling burritos at 12:00. We could sell a hundred more burritos every day if we wanted to, but that's not what I want to do. That's not creatively fulfilling to my staff to just be doing burritos all day. So that's part of that, giving ourselves the grace to do something different.

That was a lesson that I learned, is to start setting boundaries that center my personal and mental health, physical health, and that of my staff. It's actually physically very draining on the weekends to just be serving hundreds of burritos all day. That 12:00 hard stop doesn't make a lot of people happy, but it makes us happy. That's an important lesson to be learned, is to make sure that you're valuing yourself and your staff before the consumer because you'll burn yourself out.

The biggest lesson that I learned from the Awkward Scone, and this is less an industry thing, is to really know your business partner prior to a partnership. I won't delve too deep into that, but that was the biggest takeaway —to trust myself and my instincts, and make sure you're going into business with somebody while being on the same page on your future, business ethic and desire. I have been very, very fortunate and lucky and blessed—all of the good words—to have been able to reopen a space in the middle of a pandemic after having lost everything that I had spent six years building, and not necessarily because of the pandemic but because of a core business partnership. But now, being able to be given this opportunity to run a business the way that I desire, and that I can be at integrity with, it allows me to be in community and not just being in a community. That was something that I really missed about getting to do without abandon at the Awkward Scone. And I'm getting to do it now.

Community is a thing that you do. It's the thing that you're in, that you have to be involved in, and not just exist in. A big part of the business ethos for Ursula is to be involved with our community, to give back to our community, to support and uplift our community. Often that's the queer community.

My staff is 80 or 90% queer and POC. And so we're very involved with any kind of community engagement, celebration, joy, anything that involves that community, anything local here in Crown Heights that I can be involved in as well. By and large, I feel like restaurants and chefs are really wonderful at doing that. Even last year, during the pandemic when restaurants were shutting down and everybody was losing their businesses and staff, I really feel like restaurants and chefs stepped up to the plate to take care of our communities, so much better than any other industry.

The last bit of coverage I read of you was on Vulture, in a review of Chipotle's [Pride Month] collaboration with *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In the end, the reviewer decides to head to Ursula because it's a local, queer-owned business. Not that there's a clear-cut good vs. evil divide, but I think you're getting at what authentic allyship looks like, and how *active* it is.

I definitely feel like that's a part of our vision, and not just finding those allies for us, but being those to other people. I've been doing this queer community takeout pop up series here, where we've been inviting other queer chefs who have either been displaced because of the pandemic from their jobs, or started new businesses, or need to make some money, or try something new. We've been doing this since February with different chefs in house, who come to take over Ursula to do a pop up.

I have this space. We're closed a couple days a week, and we're closed early. I have the resources. There's no need for me to hoard them out of fear or continue creating this scarcity model. I can share resources with people, give back and reinvest in my community. I think that that's a big signifier of allyship versus performative allyship, like Chipotle's. The amount of money that they have, they can do something more than just partnering with *RuPaul's Drag Race*. But when you have a business model that's setting community over consumerism, for me that's the true goal or desire I have for this industry, and what we're trying to create at Ursula.

Our neighbor down the street, Hunky Dory, my friend Claire [Sprouse] is the chef or the owner there. She does an incredible job for uplifting and supporting the community. And that's actually how I got started with Ursula. She allowed me to do a couple of pop-ups there to test the market.

Eric See Recommends:

A night of live music on a stoop in Harlem with The Soapbox Presents, a community-driven initiative bringing Black and Brown art and expression to Black and Brown communities

Supporting Auxilio Space in Brooklyn, who will begin hosting classes in August with subject matter like navigating Medicaid and food stamps if you're HIV positive,and who works in tandem with Kia Feeds The People, a mutual aid initiative working to help fight food apartheid and get quality food to Black and QTPOC communities in Brooklyn.

Pelmeni and kievsky at an Eastern European Banya Brunch with Dacha 46 in Prospect Heights

My brother Mike See's work integrating music and high-end collectible art, like his recent collabs with Gorilla Nems

Supporting all the incredible queer chefs that pop up at Ursula!

Name
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Vocation
Chef and restaurateur

Jaclyn Warren/Star Chefs