

# Episode 54

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Ohio Restaurant Association, restaurant industry, Wendy's, Dave Thomas, hospitality, local food economy, downtown revitalization, food cost and labor cost, restaurant franchising, restaurant marketing, crisis management, pandemic recovery, restaurant technology, Brew Fountain, small town dining

## SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, John Barker, Ethan DeLeon

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- J** **John Barker** 00:00  
I live near Plain City and Dublin, and Dublin downtown, if you looked at it 20 years ago, it was pretty sad, quite honestly. And now it is a place where people go often to see what economic development can be. And what's the anchor there? Coffee shops, ice cream stores, restaurants. I mean, the places, the people, and then everything fills in around that.
- E** **Ethan DeLeon** 00:28  
Welcome to the Small Nation Podcast, brought to you by Coverlink Insurance, where people are more important than policies. On this show, we unpack lessons from entrepreneurs to break down development strategies and do deep dives on small town success. Our goal is to provide value to our listeners by hosting conversations that teach, inform, and inspire. John, welcome to the show.
- J** **John Barker** 00:46  
Great to be here.
- J** **Jason Duff** 00:47  
Awesome. Good to have you. John is holding, and we all are today, a big shout out to Sweet Aroma Coffee. Which this is kind of a big day, John. We were excited to have you to Bellefontaine today. You are in our brand new studio here for season 2. So congratulations.
- J** **John Barker** 01:03  
Very first guest here. Very nice.
- J** **Jason Duff** 01:04  
Did you know that you were that big of a deal?
- J** **John Barker** 01:07  
I did not know. Of course, I've arrived now.

J

**Jason Duff** 01:09

So we're glad you're here and just excited about this segment because we are going to be talking a lot about restaurants and local food and why that matters to towns, communities, particularly for economic development. So just thank you. Thank you for being on the show today.

J

**John Barker** 01:23

But Ethan, you got me here with this Guatemalan coffee that the coffee shop, the person working there knew a lot about it. It was impressive.

J

**Jason Duff** 01:32

Yeah. Why is that important?

J

**John Barker** 01:34

You think about authenticity of these brands and these small businesses and, you know, the owner, of course, has their heart and soul in it. But if you can get the staff, because she was not the owner, she's the staff. I said to her, do you know how to make all these different coffees? How long has it learned? She says, I poured my heart and soul into this. I got to know all these different recipes, all these mixtures. She said, Every once in a while I get stumped a little bit. I have to work on it hard. Okay, fine. Well, what coffee should I get? And she just went right into explaining this coffee and the flavor of it, the profile. I was impressed. John asked a lot of great probing questions today when we were on the tour.

J

**Jason Duff** 02:06

It does take that. And Ethan's our, our connoisseur.

J

**John Barker** 02:09

Yes.

J

**Jason Duff** 02:10

Ethan, does that matter to you when you're buying a cup of coffee?

J

**John Barker** 02:13

100%.

J

**Jason Duff** 02:13

Yeah. That's kind of how I gauge the quality of the coffee shop is if I can ask the barista You know, what do you have on light roast? And they're able to tell me the— is it a single origin or, you know, where it's from, things like that. And that also determines whether I'm getting a fun latte with lots of flavor or if I'm getting a pour over where I'm trying to taste the notes of the coffee and whether that town— I mean, if tied back to economic development— is a coffee town or not. So in fact, it's funny you mentioned that.

J

**John Barker** 02:40

I brought all my pour over stuff up here.

J

**Jason Duff** 02:42

So when I'm spending long hours in the studio, that I am ready to go. That's going to beat our Keurig, I think.

J

**John Barker** 02:48

I can do that with beer, but not coffee.

J

**Jason Duff** 02:53

Cool. Well, John, you know, for those of us who may not be as familiar with the ORA, can you just give us the basics? What is it? Where are you guys out of? And what service are you providing?

J

**John Barker** 03:05

So the ORA stands for the Ohio Restaurant Association. It's been around 103 years. Some of my younger staff think I actually founded it. Not true. That's a rumor. But it's like a lot of trade associations. Our job is really to service anybody that's in this industry all the way from the food truck that opens up their first little location somewhere and they're just trying to survive all the way up to— in Ohio, we have some very big restaurant companies here. This is a state that has birthed many big companies as big as Wendy's or you might be familiar with White Castle and there's many more, Donatos. We service everybody. By servicing really anything they need, we're a trade association, but we really think of ourselves as consultants. And so whatever problem you have, we either have the solution or we'll go get it for you.

J

**Jason Duff** 03:53

That's awesome. Growing up, tell us about where was home for you and did you have the idea that you were going to be working in a restaurant, let alone a restaurant association?

J

**John Barker** 04:02

Well, I grew up in a little town just south of Pittsburgh called Washington, and my dad was a steelworker. And his dream, though, was to open up a little restaurant. Restaurant bar. So he and his, his brother and their best friend decided, we're going to go do this. Had zero, zero talent, zero culinary expertise, had never run a restaurant, had never worked in a service industry. Wow. His brother was an insurance guy, and their buddy, the other buddy, he was a bricklayer. Perfect backgrounds to open a restaurant, right? But like a lot of people, they were just in love with it. I mean, that's what happens, right? People fall in love with their business. And if they have a lot of determination, it can happen. And so they did. They opened up a restaurant bar called the Rustic Inn— Rustic Lounge. And I was at about age 6 when this started. My dad would take me up there on Saturday and Sunday in the mornings and I'd help clean. I went because I wanted to hang out with him. And by clean, you know, I was so little, I was sweeping some things, maybe wiping some tables down. And my pay was anything I'd find on the ground, which back then a quarter would be a lot of money.

J

**Jason Duff** 05:04

Yeah, sure.

J

**John Barker** 05:05

And then all the free Coca-Cola I could drink.

J

**Jason Duff** 05:08

That sounds like a deal. You know, it was a big deal at lunch today when we had Pepsi at Brew Fountain and we didn't have Coke. Oh, I'm a Coke drinker too.

J

**John Barker** 05:15

Me too. Team Coke. I barely, barely made it through.

J

**Jason Duff** 05:18

Actually, that's probably going to be the debate in the comments is like, is it Pepsi or Coke today? Yeah, right. So what, what brought you to Ohio then?

J

**John Barker** 05:29

So, um, long career, different things that I had done in my life, but I was in Cleveland working in Cleveland. So I came to Cleveland to work for American Greetings, which, you know, big company based, you know, Fortune 1000 company based up there. Had a great career there and got recruited to Wendy's, which is in Columbus, really Dublin, and went down. And after a few of the rounds of interviews, I was mildly interested because I, you know, I hadn't really been in the restaurant space since I was just a kid. And in the final round, they said, you're going to meet Dave Thomas. And I said, Are you serious?

J

**Jason Duff** 06:02

The Dave Thomas?

J

**John Barker** 06:03

Yeah, the Dave Thomas. And I said, I'll come back for that interview, sure. So drove back for that interview, sat down in Dave's office for about an hour. We talked not about business at all. We talked about values, your commitment to work, your family, your faith, all the kind of things that he wanted to know about me. And he wanted me to tell, you know, other people and that kind of stuff, because we were going to spend a lot of time together in my role. I had a kind of a front-facing role with investment community and the media and things like that. And he wanted to know, was I the right fit? I walked out of it and I'm a bad negotiator at that time. The HR person said, well, let's go down to my office and kind of talk about maybe an offer and all that. I said, I'm taking it. You don't even have to. I don't even care.

J

**Jason Duff** 06:47

You were that sold.

J

**John Barker** 06:48

Jumped the gun on them. A little bit, right? But it worked out, right? Because I had a great career there. And I got to spend time with one of the only two Level 5 leaders I've ever been around.

J

**Jason Duff** 07:02

And you were there at the time there was massive growth in the Wendy's company.

J

**John Barker** 07:07

We had, we created so much wealth for franchisees, employees, and Dave used to say something real simple about let's make the pie bigger. Let's not worry about fighting over it. Let's make the pie bigger. Let's make sales at each restaurant let's open new restaurants, let's open new distribution centers, let's open new regional offices, let's make the, the whole Wendy's family benefit from this. I learned a lot.

J

**Jason Duff** 07:31

Well, you know, Wendy's, as I look back and help a lot of our independent restaurants understand marketing, I look back to a lot of the today what are viewed as vintage marketing campaigns. And, you know, Where's the Beef really sticks out. It's kind of one of those classic, you know, business case studies for how they changed the game in communicating why they were different from a place like McDonald's or Burger King.

J

**John Barker** 07:56

When you're third in, in a space, so McDonald's was founded in the 1950s, Burger King not too long after that. Wendy's didn't come around until 1969. And many of the investors that Dave talked to in the very beginning said, we don't need a, a third hamburger restaurant. What do you, you're gonna get killed by these guys. Don't do it. But he was insistent, right? He had this dream and, and he was able to get it going. but you have to differentiate from a marketing perspective. You have to be very different. Every business that is listening to this or kind of paying attention, you know, really, what is that, that, that, that differential is going to allow you to survive, to get kind of get your business lifted, and over time get people to continue to come back? I teach a little marketing down at Ohio State, so we talk about these concepts all the time. And so Dave had— think about square hamburgers, all fresh beef. He had a Frosty. Everybody else had a shake. He had baked potatoes. Everybody else had French fries. He did have salads, you know, I mean, just like things that fast food weren't really doing at the time. And he was able to create space and carve out that space and be number 3 for a long time. They have since passed up Burger King. They're now number 2, rightfully so. What do you think if you're watching Wendy's marketing, the social media stuff that they're doing now, you follow that?

J

**Jason Duff** 09:05

That is out there.

J

**John Barker** 09:06

Bold.

**J****Jason Duff** 09:06

That must work.

**J****John Barker** 09:07

You know, the Wendy's brand has had to continue to evolve its voice. And I think these voices today are appropriate for the audiences that are interested, right? Young people really react well to that. Back when Dave was the spokesperson, there really wasn't social media, right? He'd go on the air and we would run a national campaign. You know, we used to run \$270 million of advertising media, right? And, uh, and it was mainly Dave. Dave on radio, Dave on TV, Dave in print. Can't do that anymore, right? You just— it's just impossible. Plus, a founder doesn't live forever. So Wendy's continues to find these new voices, very creative. Their, their marketing is excellent.

**J****Jason Duff** 09:42

I struggle when I have weekends or time off. I don't watch a lot of television, but when I do watch television, I'm gonna binge watch television. So if you've not watched on the History Channel, The Food That Built America, I am totally bought into watching it. And I have— if you followed those series, like, they really tell the story. And I've enjoyed watching about, you know, everything from Wrigley's gum to Hershey's to Kellogg, to understanding the burger wars with Wendy's. I just wanna give that a shout out, 'cause I think that so much of our DNA of what's happening in restaurants and entrepreneurship today really came from those pioneers, people like Dave Thomas.

**J****John Barker** 10:26

And the nostalgia marketing right now that's happening. You look at Pizza Hut, who I think lost a lot of market share, and now they're bringing back the lanterns or the lights, right? And everything that made them popular back in the day. Yeah. Well, Pizza Hut's not gonna beat you on authentic pizza, right? 'Cause we just, we walked into some of your great restaurants here in town and, you know, the one we went into and I specifically asked about the dough, right? Like, what, like, I wanna know that. And Pizza Hut, you know, what differentiates Pizza Hut? The Hut, right? The Hut. So like, how do they figure out the way to contemporize that in 2023 and going forward, right? It's a big operation. You can't count them out, right? Owned by Yum Brands again. Smart people there.

**J****Jason Duff** 11:09

So, well, we appreciate you visiting Brittany Saxton, the owner of 600 Downtown. We had Brittany on the podcast, and that's one of the things that she shared is that it really is about the dough. I mean, you hit it on the nail there. They basically make the dough several days prior to when it actually is eaten because there's a science process that happens in the kitchen that gives it its taste and its flavor. And places that, that don't do that, they're missing out. That's a differentiator. So yeah, though, thanks for, for mentioning her. But yeah, so just to continue on with your story, you're at Wendy's, you had a career there. What, what, how did you end up in the ORA? If, was that the next step or was there anything in between?

J

**John Barker** 11:52

So, uh, almost 2 decades at Wendy's and multiple, multiple roles within that. So representing the company was publicly traded, so represented it on Wall Street, you know, ended up managing Managing all the internal, external communications. Ran several other things, including things like crisis management. So big company like that, there's a lot of crisis that happened.

J

**Jason Duff** 12:12

If you— did you get the 3 AM phone calls?

J

**John Barker** 12:14

I did. Yeah. In fact, the worst time was Friday at 5 o'clock. I get a call from a quality assurance person or a general manager somewhere, and of course that's all we were going to work on for the next 24 hours. But big companies have a lot of those. And then, you know, different roles. And, you know, we went through lots of changes at Wendy's, like lots of big companies go through. So we got It was a merger. We bought brands, we spun up brands, we did IPOs. So I got a lot of experience in all those things, which was fascinating because I get kind of— I have to have new things, right? I have to constantly be challenged. And so that was a place I got a chance to do that, including at the end, you know, one of the functions that reported to me were all the facilities. And I remember when they said, you're going to run all this, I said, I don't have background in this. You'll figure it out, you know. So it's interesting as people think about their careers, you know, I keep an open mind. You know, if you're smart, you know how to manage things and you're enthusiastic, and you bring the right attitude every day, you can learn things.

J

**Jason Duff** 13:09

I admire that. And then the association, you mentioned it's been around just for a few years.

J

**John Barker** 13:14

Yeah, a couple years.

J

**Jason Duff** 13:15

Yeah. When you joined, what were some of the things that were trending at that time? And maybe as you think about your career there, some, some big victories that you guys have had?

J

**John Barker** 13:25

Yeah, it's interesting. So when I left Wendy's after being deeply involved in marketing and all the public relations and all that, You know, I took about a year off. I teach at Ohio State, so I was doing that full-time, and I got almost got a drug back into a full-time job into this. And but I also had public affairs that reported to me, so we had done all the, you know, the DC work and the statehouse and all that. So that's what— that's a big part of this role. Started in 2016, and we literally had to start from zero. The organization had kind of weakened over time. You know, the membership had had— when old board of directors were leaving. And so they recruited me and said, you need to turn this place around. I said, fine, this will take about 2 years and then I'll go do something else. Well, not more than about 2 or 3 years into it, the pandemic hits, right? Easy peasy, right? Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, I, I do, I do have a lot of faith personally. And I said, God put me here for a reason. I actually have, like Liam Nilsson, I have a very particular set of skills.

J

**Jason Duff** 14:25

Hopefully a different set of skills.

J

**John Barker** 14:26

Yeah, different than him. But it was the skills that were needed at that time. I know how to manage crisis. So we actually stopped every normal thing that we were doing at the RA and moved into crisis management and ran crisis management for 2 years. Wow.

J

**Jason Duff** 14:41

Well, and I think to highlight Adam, Adam owns the Brew Fountain. He's also working here as our Vice President, Small Nation. He and I at that time, we were new restaurant owners and we were coaching and mentoring a lot of the early stage restaurants here in town that we were, as we were rebuilding downtown Bellefontaine. And I just want to share, like, we were so thankful to have the Ohio Restaurant Association kind of the daily emails of, hey, here's what's trending, here's the latest, you know, information coming from the governor. And I think at that time an invitation was extended for Adam, which You know, Bellefontaine's a small town. There are 13,000 people here. You know, we've been in business probably for about 5 years with a number of the restaurants that were here, but you said, I think, having Adam's voice on the governor's task force for restaurant restart would mean a lot. And I just want to give you a shout out for stepping on that because for Ohio getting through that, we had a very different set of regulations compared to most states. I mean, you go to the north in Michigan, and, uh, the restaurants up there really were faced with much more regulation and many more challenges than what we were facing here. And I credit that was work collaborative with the government and people actually on the ground in the industry working together.

J

**John Barker** 16:10

Yeah, and we were all on different committees and things, and, um, I mean, it was long nights and weekends, and Trevor did a fantastic job leading all that up.

J

**Jason Duff** 16:19

And honestly, with the Restaurant Association, I can't even say enough. I've kind of found my tribe and found my people, the Gary Calicoats. And it's just, uh, it's a lifestyle. It's, uh, I think everybody that is in the restaurant business enjoys having a good time, showing people a good time. At least that's, that's what I do it for.

J

**John Barker** 16:36

Um, it's certainly been challenging the last several years, but Getting up every day, it's an opportunity that I wouldn't change for the world.

J

**Jason Duff** 16:44

Being able to bring to the community different things that we've experienced other places.

J

**John Barker** 16:50

But I have not met a better group of individuals and people than our board of directors at the ORA ever, and the staff.

J

**Jason Duff** 16:58

Everyone makes you feel so welcome, like I belong there.

J

**John Barker** 17:01

And I'm in rooms with Cameron Mitchell's team and Jeff Ruby's team and guys that I have idolized.

J

**Jason Duff** 17:08

And I didn't know anything about restaurants when we started. We were 3 guys who liked good music, good beer, and we thought, why can't Bellefontaine have a spot so we don't have to drive to Columbus?

J

**John Barker** 17:17

You guys got to get a little saying like my dad did. So, you know, it was a steelworker, a bricklayer, an insurance guy, you know, open a restaurant. So perfect for a restaurant. It was a surveyor, it was a chimney sweep, and a marketer.

J

**Jason Duff** 17:31

Perfect.

J

**John Barker** 17:31

3 guys walking through a bar. Yeah, this sounds like a joke.

**J****Jason Duff** 17:37

Well, and it what, what that history— and I think what I hear from your story, John, is that you, you learned that from your father in, in that restaurant. And, you know, how that's kind of paying it forward today. We have started these restaurants that rebuild the base, the pyramid, for getting traffic, life, and energy back to downtown Bellefontaine. And you were on the tour today where you got to meet with many of these restaurant owners, their employees, their staff, people doing dishes. I mean, all the way from the the top of the pyramid to the base. And now specialty retail stores want to be next to those restaurants. People want to live above those restaurants. You know, today, and I was just walking into our studio here, there's not many empty parking spaces here in downtown Bellefontaine. And it's because that people, you know, you have to create the vision, but then people like Adam and his business partners and others took the risk to open something up. How does your association give people more confidence to make those big, bold moves?

**J****John Barker** 18:39

Yeah, well, going back to, you know, sort of this, you know, what do we do and all that, we don't always work on crisis. I mean, that's, that's, you know, that hopefully that's a once in a century situation, you know what I mean? We agree. Yeah, but, you know, when that's not happening, there's still always challenges, right? This is not the easiest business in the world. Hospitality requires a certain attitude, which Adam absolutely has. And he'd mentioned he threw a lot of names around it. All of them do this because they love it. There's no other reason to get into this. You would have to be crazy, John. Right, right. Well, I think we are crazy. But, um, you know, you love hospitality, you like interacting with people, you typically like liquids and foods and all that together, right? And you're willing to take a chance and roll the dice, and oftentimes you fail. I can't tell you how many people that I deal with that they say, I failed at this, I failed at this, my first restaurant failed, and now I made it. And you got to persevere. A lot of tough lessons, and a lot of those hit the pocketbook, but you learn, you get up, you put yourself together, and you won't make that same mistake again.

**J****Jason Duff** 19:41

What is some of the discipline as you give advice to existing restaurants that are trying to dial certain things in or new restaurants that are opening up? Do you have any advice for what are the kind of metrics and things that you're kind of always working on and looking at that matter?

**J****John Barker** 19:55

Well, I think the main two, John, in our industry is food cost and labor cost, right? I mean, those two metrics make up what? I mean, 80% or, you know, a big majority of, you know, what you're doing day in and day out of your business. Yeah. And so honestly, if you squeak out 10% margin in the restaurant industry, you know, I consider that, a success most times.

**J****Jason Duff** 20:20

But, um, and can we pause on that? So most people when they hear that, yeah, a small town restaurant — is that accurate, John?

**J****John Barker** 20:28

It is. Actually, the numbers are more about 6 to 7%. If you look at restaurants, anybody in hospitality across the board, it's about 6 to 7%. So to put that into numbers that people could get their heads wrapped around, if you had a restaurant doing \$1 million, right, you're only pulling 6 or 7% of that into your pocket after tax. \$60K on a million, right? And so, yeah, you know, do you, do you want to spend a million dollars or anything to build a business or whatever you have to do to build it? You have to really understand the economics of this. And that's the first thing I— when people say to me, I have a dream, I want to open a restaurant, I said, okay. And they just, they just tell you all about it. I make chili, I love this, my pizza, you know, they're just so excited, so excited. And I said, okay, fine, slow down, take a breath. Have you heard the phrase P&L? You know, profit. And most people have it, right? They have it. So let's talk about that. Let's talk about the investment you need to make. Do you buy? Do you lease? Do you have people that know about equipment? Do you know people that know how to manage money? Do you have a good attorney? You know, do you know about workers' comp? Like all these things. I just want to make chili. Yeah, right. So if you're— if that's what you want to do, you better have a good partner then that likes to do those things. That's what I would say. Find somebody that has skills that you don't have, and then of course, talk to us, right? We can help you from stage 1 through stage 10 and make sure you don't make as many mistakes, right? We can really help you avoid that. That's, that's what we do. So we, we help new people, but we also help people who are in it already and say, I'm ready, I want to go to 2 locations, I want to go to 3 locations, right? I said, what are the lessons you learned on the first one? And you kind of get that out on the table, and then you start working on what are you going to do. Like, are you going to, you know, do something exactly the same, or do you want to do something that's different so you have some kind of, you know, flexibility, you know, to your business. You have maybe a pizza place, but you also want to have a coffee place because coffee could be higher margins if run the right way. So you just have to think through all that. Yeah, and on the whole franchise, John's been in, you know, you mentioned the word franchising a lot today on the tour and things, and honestly, I've thought about Brew Fountain and how that could do in other small towns. Do you think it's worth kind of looking at that model and pros and cons to that?

**J****Jason Duff** 22:33

I mean, that's kind of your background and model with Wendy's. I mean, you're setting everybody up for success.

**J****John Barker** 22:38

You've got the blueprint, you've got, you know, a lot of the resources for people, um, and then, you know, they come in and use those systems for success. I think it's, it's one of the greatest American kind of business models that I can see out there. You can't franchise every business, but our business you can, because you're basically trying to create a box, right? And say, okay, I have a box that works. What do you— so I have a, you know, 1,000-square-foot box I have figured out how to run this and sell something, and I can make 10%. Okay, so if I can replicate that, I can use my money to replicate it, or I can sell somebody the system in the box concept. They do it, they put the risk, and I take 4% of all their sales as a royalty. Typically royalties are 4 to 5%. You can provide other services as well and charge for different things like advertising, but not a bad model. Now, Dave Thomas did okay.

**J****Jason Duff** 23:29

And it's always— I admire looking at people that have accomplished and done that because it's not easy. But the ones that do, I want to celebrate their success. I remember, you know, 25 years ago going to the North Market and eating Jeni's Ice Cream for the first time. And of course, that's that perfect example of her story of how she was so passionate about the recipes and how the food was sourced and the care that went into serving every scoop. And then you meet someone like John Lowe and the business perspective that he brought and we're having him on. He's coming as a future guest on the show, but then me having an opportunity to get to know him and how he contributed his gifts to growing that operation. And now just seeing where they're at today. And another success story out of OSU, I met Joe DeLoss from Hot Chicken Takeover at a catering event for a student-run business competition where he's literally, you know, serving food out of a, you know, a van. And just, just at the time, just being inspired by him and seeing how that company scaled and has grown. And those people are the kind of fuel that inspire what we're doing. And I think there's a lot of exchange in lessons and knowledge and learning. And I also think that's something that your association sets up with training and mentorship.

**J****John Barker** 24:52

So we do a lot of training. We do webcasts. We do webinars. We do in-person meetings. We really try to provide as much to everybody to just help them. And then they get the bug. They say, OK, I've learned that. Hmm, now I want to know more. One of the things we're digging into right now is technology. And the reason is it's so expensive. And you just can't make mistakes in that area. You can make a mistake by saying, I was buying beef over here for a little while. And I was paying too much. And it wasn't all that good. And I learned. I talked to a couple people. People, peers, friends of mine, now I'm buying beef over here and my business didn't fail because of that. You invest, you know, \$100,000 in some kind of technology system and it doesn't work and you got to replace it, you might not make that, you might not survive that. So we're really digging into that. And it's everything from everybody has to have a, you know, point of sale system. So getting that all right, all the way to we have some companies based here in Ohio. So, you know, we're lucky enough to have White Castle, which is a technology pioneer. It's amazing what they're doing. We also have the back office of Chipotle. So headquarters for Chipotle is Newport out in California. Too expensive to have the back office. So guess where it is? Downtown Columbus.

J

**Jason Duff** 25:58

It's great.

J

**John Barker** 25:58

Let's go. And so we get a chance to be around these folks. Of course, Wendy's with my friends there, right? And the tech there, they have the accelerator to the floor on learning about technology, automation, AI, completely transforming their business models because business is hard. And if they can figure out a way to bring those costs down and create a better service system for customers, particularly millennials and Gen Z, they're just going to take more market share if they can get all that right. But we have to learn all that because then we have to share it with all the independent restaurants and the mom-and-pops. We have to figure out how can we scale it down so that they can take advantage of these things. AI is huge right now. And I know Wendy's is doing the drive-through, right? Do they have the— doesn't she— don't she have a name, John? Like— Actually, it's Wakehouse and it's called Julia. Julia. But everybody's testing it, all the big QSR.

J

**Jason Duff** 26:47

And even with AI, there's always though the contrarian argument that if you get too automated, um, there's an opportunity for a segment of people to really do the opposite. And, and so I always love— that's what I think is great about these conversations is that you're right, those are where the trends are going. But then also that personalized experience that we're talking about with the coffee shop that we opened up, it's hard to replicate.

J

**John Barker** 27:09

That you won't, you won't do AI at that coffee shop. You won't do it at a fine dining restaurant. You might do it in the back of the house though, where the customer doesn't see it, right? But a fine dining, white tablecloth, you know, restaurant, I think there's always going to be a place for that where there's just that incredible service and interaction and you just feel it's a special day, night, whatever you're doing. But a drive-through where it's already kind of impersonal, guess what happens with AI? Accuracy actually goes up. And it understands foreign languages.

J

**Jason Duff** 27:38

Wow. Wow.

J

**John Barker** 27:39

I'm telling you, like, the future is here, and it's gonna just—

J

**Jason Duff** 27:42

it's gonna be—

J

**John Barker** 27:42

well, you up— you roll up to McDonald's now and you have the app, and it's like, uh, you know, hey Adam, would you like your breakfast sandwich and large sweet tea again this morning? You know, they know what you want every day. They know your name, right?

J

**Jason Duff** 27:53

Tracking rewards— I know rewards is a big theme. And maybe we just kind of do a quick rapid fire. I know coming out of COVID a lot of things have been innovating, which has been the positive side of that, but for a lot of independent restaurants, the growth in online ordering seems to continue to just scale up. Would you agree?

J

**John Barker** 28:11

It's interesting. Uh, some people are trying to push back on that. Some of my operators are saying it's so expensive and it just makes it harder operationally. If I could just do less of that, we watched Toast.

J

**Jason Duff** 28:23

Toast luckily rolled that back, but in the industry, I'll tell you, that's one thing that freaked us all out because many of our restaurants are using, um, the services like Upserve and Toast. And what happened, just to— for those that are listening, Toast decided to, um, voluntary kind of, you know, charge \$1 per transaction for ordering online, which if you buy something that's \$5 and you pay a buck, that percentage is very different versus \$50 and a buck. And then restaurants and, and users you know, they didn't even know. The restaurants didn't even know what was happening to our customers.

J

**John Barker** 29:03

Wow. And we can go down a whole rabbit hole with DoorDash and everything else here, but we'll save that for another day. So if you want to know what your restaurant association does. Yeah. When that was coming down, I got— my phone was lighting up, as you can imagine, like a Christmas tree. And I said, okay, hang on a minute, let's get involved. So we got our national association involved. We immediately went to members of Congress and threatened some things. And guess what happened? Not too long after that, Toast rolled that back. That's what an association can do because the power in numbers. We have 585,000 people that work in this industry just in Ohio and about 15.5 million across the United States. We're the second biggest industry. So we have a voice. We can do things right now. We can't— we don't do anything illegal or anything like that, but we can really represent this industry. And that's what, you know, an association can do when these things come at us. And the company said, we probably made a mistake here.

J

**Jason Duff** 29:51

All right, at this time we're going to take a quick break to hear a word from our sponsors. Big city dining in a small town. Now that's The Syndicate. Join them for fresh steaks, pasta, or seafood for dinner, or stop in for Sunday brunch to experience one of their signature dishes such as chicken and waffles, and maybe even pair it with a mimosa flight. Located at 213 South Main Street in downtown Bellefontaine. Come check out 600 Downtown Pizzeria in downtown Bellefontaine, where they cherish the art of making the most authentic, unique, and delicious world-famous and award-winning pizzas. Their team hand spins each pizza the old-fashioned way and only uses the freshest of ingredients. Come see why they were featured on the Food Network.

J

**John Barker** 30:30

Yeah, and, uh, what are some other kind of hot topics on the legislative front, John, that are on your desk right now? I find the government's very helpful in most cases, don't you, Adam? Oh yeah, most of the time. I mean, they just, they really just want to give you money. Something you were saying?

J

**Jason Duff** 30:43

I always remember Ronald Reagan's statement that, you know, you should fear when the government starts to say they're going to help you. You know, it's never, never a good thing.

J

**John Barker** 30:50

We're here from the government, we're here to help you.

J

**Jason Duff** 30:51

Yeah, exactly.

**J****John Barker** 30:52

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So there's always something. There's a lot of regulations, obviously, in this business. And, you know, it was interesting during the pandemic how much elected officials were really stepping back and saying, we got to help these small businesses and restaurants and hotels and everybody that was really under the gun, you know, and they just, they just, their attitude changed completely. And the public was so supportive. And this takeout business is what saved us, to your point, right? All that is, you know, we're a couple years past the worst of that, and so now it's swinging the other way. We're really watching more regulations coming at us. We have one right now, for example, a potential threat in Ohio to, um, it would be a constitutional amendment to raise the minimum wage or fast-track the starting wage actually and eliminate the tip, uh, the tip wage, which would devastate, uh, our industry in many ways. And so we have a pretty big campaign that we're working on to try to educate both elected officials as well as the public on this, because this is coming— if it goes all the way through and it gets the signatures, it will go to the vote. It'll go, it'll go to the voters in November of 2024, and they'll vote on this. And since it's a constitutional amendment, we can't change it. We can't change the language and we can't separate these issues. So there's a couple groups that are backing it. You know, one is the union group, the SEIU. And then the front group is called One Fair Wage, and they purport to be really representing the industry. They do not. They are activists and they really— they're asking for things because what they're trying to do is build union membership as opposed to really thinking about— we just talked to a server half an hour ago who talked about the importance of tips because he's very good at being a server and a great, you know, bringing great hospitality to people. He said, if that happened, I'm getting out of the industry.

**J****Jason Duff** 32:37

Which already right now, we— that the industry is struggling to bring new people in, and you can see how devastating that is to, um, all the restaurants that, that currently are looking for staff and have staff.

**J****John Barker** 32:52

It's hard, it's hard to fill positions. Um, if you do have a sit-down restaurant, the average server already makes about \$27, so we are competitive. You know, we're— and you don't have to have any skills, you have to have attitude. And remember that 10% margin I was talking about, that's on tipped wage. So what is that now, John? \$6 an hour? \$5.05 an hour is what, um, we are allowed to, you know, able to pay servers that then with the tipped wage make \$27 to the server we were just talking to.

**J****Jason Duff** 33:21

Yeah, was upwards of \$50 an hour, right?

**J****John Barker** 33:24

If this passes We now have to pay them \$15 an hour, which—

**J****Jason Duff** 33:29

what does that do to our numbers? That was already—

J

**John Barker** 33:30

because you're 10%, it's going to trip— it's going to triple that portion of your labor line. So right now, if your labor line is 28-30%, which a lot of restaurants would be in that neighborhood, you know, you would be jumping up to maybe 35% on labor. So if you just go down through a profit loss statement, there's very little wiggle room. And if something goes up that much, you're— the only place you can go is either lower quality in your products or take more price, or add a surcharge, or a surcharge, yeah, in some form. And so That's all bad for the consumer. And that's the argument we're going to make. Bad for consumers, bad for the people who work in the restaurants, and of course, bad for the owners across the board. No group who really cares about the industry would want that to happen. Yeah. In D.C. and Chicago, we're seeing some of that right now and the repercussions of that. Right? Right.

J

**Jason Duff** 34:11

Great. Well, that's something we'll keep— we'll definitely keep on our radar. Yeah.

J

**John Barker** 34:15

Well, thanks for sharing some of those things that are trending.

J

**Jason Duff** 34:17

Where would you say, you know, that restaurant owners can turn to to get a pulse on these trending topics, whether it's new technology or legislation, that they can keep up to date with real authentic things that are important rather than smoke and mirrors, if you will.

J

**John Barker** 34:35

Smoke and mirrors. Now, so one of the things that we've done since I came on back with my communications background, we have really stepped up the way we communicate to people who are in this industry in Ohio. And we do partner with the National Restaurant Association. We curate materials, you know, for our members. And so we create all kinds of newsletters. So we have a newsletter that comes out every week on different topics, and if people read those, they will really know what's going on in the restaurant industry in Ohio. And of course, we have a lot of links to national— because some of our operators here in Ohio actually have multiple state operations, and so they might be interested in what's happening in Michigan or Indiana, Kentucky or Pennsylvania, not just those states. For example, Cameron Mitchell, which is a big operator, out of Columbus is in multiple states, right? So depends on, you know, the, the member of ours, what they're looking for. But we, we think we do that really well. I've had people who do have memberships with different restaurant associations, they tell us ours is the go-to. So I don't like to be totally boastful, but I have a very good staff. I think we do a good job. But we also know that there are industry publications you can kind of keep an eye on as well. Adam probably reads a few of those. Newsletters all the time, but always read the ORAs. And that is when you compare us to our peers, I think as a state organization, these guys, John and his leadership and vision is just second to none.

**J****Jason Duff** 35:52

John, many people that are listening, they might be a mayor from their town. They could be maybe they're leading up their chamber or they're another small business that when they survey their community, one of the top needs that comes on that list is we would like to see more sit-down restaurants. How, uh, what advice would you have, uh, for, for those towns, for those communities to find and identify potential restaurant operators that may want to look at their town?

**J****John Barker** 36:25

First of all, when you're an elected official, your job is to serve the public, right? And we all know that, but we see so many examples where people don't do that. They're getting into it for other reasons, or we see the shenanigans that go on in DC. At a local level, you can actually have a bigger impact, I think, right? Because if you're a mayor, you're a member of city council, you actually get to vote on things, and you know people in your community. This town is beautiful that way, right? Everybody kind of knows each other, and I think we're all pulling together. So in a town— and I get to see many of them, right? You guys are— you also— I mean, between us, we get to see a lot of Ohio. We cover all 88 counties, and we see the good, the bad, and the ugly. And my wish is that we're able to help lift communities across all 88 of these counties in Ohio. That truly is like a submission of ours to do because we know we're oftentimes that organization that has the members that can be the first fuel to ignite that turnaround, right? Or to that next step in a community's evolution. And we see it when it gets done really well. This community is a perfect example of that. I live near Plain City and Dublin, and Dublin downtown, if you looked at it 20 years ago, it was pretty sad, quite honestly. And now it is a place where people go up and see what economic development can be and what's the anchor there. Coffee shops, ice cream stores, restaurants. I mean, the places, the people, and then everything fills in around that. But you got to have those destinations. So if I'm a mayor of a small town, I'm putting on my economic development hat and I'm getting to know everybody I possibly can. I get to know my local chamber, I get to know my restaurant association, and I find people like you, maybe you, you know, and, and learn. And then just be a champion for your community and don't say no. Get that coffee shop open, get that second ice cream store, get a great local pizza operators. I love Little Caesars, I love Domino's, but I also love Vinny's Pizza, right? And Al's Pizza, because oftentimes that's the differentiator, right? It's the piece If you have friends in from out of town, that's where you go, right? We are the place in the community where people go with their friends, their family. That's where they celebrate. That's where they take their sports teams. I mean, just that's what every town—

**J****Jason Duff** 38:35

that's what it's all about right there. Well, I know the word hospitality is kind of that umbrella encompassing for the industry. What does that word mean for you as you think about the industry?

**J****John Barker** 38:47

Well, I'll let you in on a little secret. It's everything. And In fact, you're gonna see a little shifting of our name at the Ohio Restaurant Association. Adam is on the inside of all that. I can't announce the whole thing here, but you'll see us embracing a much broader hospitality. We're just welcoming everybody in this space. And it just, it starts with, if you're in the business of people coming in and giving you money and you do have a product, but the differentiator of that product is with the service that comes with it, that's hospitality. Do you smile? Do you welcome people? Do you follow up? Do you care about them? It could be things as simple as you have a loyalty program because now you really get to know them, right? And so you mentioned even going through the drive-through and they say, "Adam, the last time you were here, you had 2 Egg McMuffins." We know that.

**J****Jason Duff** 39:34

Exactly. Well, the data that we have, and I think that's maybe some advice for restaurants that are listening that maybe, You're not as comfortable with technology, but I'll share that in the town, you know, we've deployed reservation systems like OpenTable and Resy and others because the restaurants that are here are very busy and people, you know, want to respect their time. So they'll be able to reserve right through a website or through an app when their table will be available, or they'll go to a host stand and put their name in, Why that's powerful for the restaurant is we get data. We get a cell phone number, we get to track, you know, user profiles that are based on that cell phone number, and then we can see when they return to the restaurant. And the other thing is credit card data. You know, we get to see zip codes of where users are coming from, from different places. And when you get that data, it allows you, you know, to maybe drop an email campaign. It allows them to put a pixel, in, you know, their Instagram or their Facebook with Meta to understand, and, and track them and remarket, retarget to them. So I, I think it's giving— and these are technologies that are available, you know, for, for pretty, pretty accessible to independent restaurants.

**J****John Barker** 40:51

Yeah. And we've used it for guest experience. So someone's celebrating an anniversary, I mean, those notes are huge. Or, or maybe they had a bad experience one time. I mean, let's, be honest, like, not every time is 100%. I wish it could be, but you're— we're never going to be perfect.

**J****Jason Duff** 41:06

I want to make sure the next time that guest comes in, that whoever is the host, whoever is the server, whoever is the GM, they need to know what happened and they need to know the details of that. And that is the, you know, that's the power of those stuff if used properly.

**J****John Barker** 41:20

Well, because you think about in any business, you have a certain amount of marketing that goes for new acquisition of business, but then getting people to come back is actually a better ROI. So making sure that even if you did deliver a bad experience or the product wasn't right, you save that. And we have— I had data that went back 50 years at Wendy's on this, right, that we got really good at that. But everybody can get better at that. In fact, my dream is someday there's restaurants that operate and they— their marketing budget typically in a restaurant, it's around 4% is sort of the bogey that, you know, you're supposed to spend as a percent of sales. You know, could you, once you deploy the right kind of technology, get that down to 1%? If you could get it down to 1%, you're marketing directly to the the customer, and you don't have to do a whole lot of customer acquisition. You're just keeping those customers coming back. They're your ambassadors. They're talking to other people in the coming— think about your profitability if you could do that. Our new menu rollout at The Syndicate for fall is soon, and we want to do a VIP kind of invite only. So when you've got the regulars that come in here these next few weeks, is, you know, sliding that invite across the table and saying, we'd really like for you you know, when Ethan's there taking the shots of the, the menu, we'd like for you to be behind the scenes with our team and how special that will make them feel. I noticed that you won't let them leave until they post something on Instagram. Is that your new policy? That's accurate.

**J****Jason Duff** 42:38

Yeah, and they have to buy lots of drinks from the bar. Well, yeah, I love those strategies because not only are you making them feel special and it is an invite experience, but that feedback that they're going to give— I mean, We have been through a number of business openings. We've been through a number of menu reworks and relaunches, and we've never made a mistake. Right? Right. I mean, that feedback, if we get it early, we can address it and correct it. And sometimes— and I don't know about you, John, but I now, because I'm focused on these things, I almost— it's hard for me to enjoy a dinner out anywhere else because I'm looking. Yeah, you don't even go to dinner with me or even the weekends. I mean, he's just, you know, but you kind of look at all those little details and every little sauce and every little, you know, what grade of napkins that they're using to, you know, it's just all those details matter.

**J****John Barker** 43:38

It's a million touchpoints, right? Your brand is. It's every little cue. We all make mistakes. And I'll give you just one example, because 'cause Wendy's is kind of a runaway train of success, but we had our mistakes. We do all this research, and this was in the early 2000s, and it was a health craze, and everybody said, "We want fruit at Wendy's." Really? This is what all of our focus groups, all our detail, "Fruit, okay, I guess we'll put fruit in." So instead of doing just little fruit cups and making it pretty low risk, no, we went big. We had these fruit bowls, right, that would come with a little yogurt and all that, and we're like, we're gonna charge in and we're just, you know, sales are gonna go up, you know, 15% with this. And we rolled that out. Guess what happens when someone walks into a Wendy's? What do they smell?

J

**Jason Duff** 44:19

Oh, they smell burgers and bacon.

J

**John Barker** 44:21

Burgers, bacon, and fries, right? We gave away a lot of fruit bowls, let me tell you. That was a complete and utter— what year was that? Oh, it was early 2000s. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 44:33

It— and those are the things that can look great on paper, or someone else can do something and something— one, you can bring it to your market and it just, it just bonds.

J

**John Barker** 44:41

Well, I think the other thing in a small town like this though, is being able to share those successes even, you know, so whether it's 600 or Flying Pepper or Brew Fountain, you know, watching and talking and having kind of, you know, those, those partners to bounce ideas and things off. We can all learn from one another. This industry is good at that, right? We do share. We do compete a little bit. There's no question about it. We're all going after these dollars, but Go back to what Dave said. Let's make the pie bigger. Let's get more people to come here. So more people are here. Everybody can make money. And, you know, the businesses that we went in today across the board, what I saw, what really differentiated was authentic. The people, the look and feel, the, you know, the decor, the menus. I looked at each menu pretty carefully and I just— I'm looking at the ingredients and the cues and all that. And that's what makes this different.

J

**Jason Duff** 45:29

I was just going to ask you.

J

**John Barker** 45:31

Your tour takeaway.

J

**Jason Duff** 45:32

I know you've been here a few times now, but you got another chance to walk around today. So you kind of just stole my question there. But any other thoughts that you, that you see in Bellefontaine that makes the magic happen here that you think would be valuable to other communities?

**J****John Barker** 45:46

Well, I, you know, after seeing this again and doing a little deeper dive and spending the time and thinking, my brain is going a million miles a minute right now because again, I get to see these little towns all over Ohio and they're just, they're further behind. They just really are, right? They need a couple local champions. And, you know, and that could be your elected leaders. It could be your chamber. I don't know, somebody that says, I love this place. And oftentimes it's people who grew up there, right, that they have this emotional bond and they want to see it come back to what's in their mind, visionary. Like, all these little towns were booming in the '40s and '50s, quite honestly. Like, if you would look at little towns coming out of World War II, America's engine took off and Ohio really benefited from that. We had a lot of strong small towns all over the place. And we fell into disrepair really as, as you think about it, the, you know, locomotive industry and the train industry and the steel industry and the glass industry, they all went on hard times because that product all went overseas. These little towns are still sitting there with these assets which you guys have taken advantage of, these older buildings, and you breathe this life back into it. And there's no reason other towns can't do it because they're, you know, not everybody's going to live in Columbus, Ohio. Cleveland or Cincinnati. Now those towns are all doing really well, but not everybody's going to live there. Some people want to live in small towns, some people want to live in rural areas, some people want to be on a farm. We have it all in Ohio. We really do. But, you know, how do we get these small towns to have the same kind of, you know, local drive that I see here?

**J****Jason Duff** 47:11

Appreciate that. We're trying to double down on what you said earlier is how can we be our authentic self, not rip and duplicate what someone else is doing, but You know, the— where you just walked in outside, uh, there's a statue of George Bartholomew that in 1891 he mixed sand, clay, and marl and invented concrete. That's the first concrete street in America. And when people— when I brag about this, people are like, is that a thing? I'm like, yeah, we, we, Bellefontaine, we are the highest, we are the shortest, and we are the first. Ohio is relatively a flat state. But geographically, this is the peak of Ohio, 1,600 feet. The world's shortest street before you leave town, McKinley Street, is right 2 blocks down, 16 feet. You can get your selfie picture right in front of that. And then the first concrete street in America. We've got to capitalize and storytell our weird of what makes our town authentic and unique. Yeah, and I think we're working on resources here at Small Nation to share with people on that. And you can, you can hear Jason has made that our story here at Bellefontaine, but that's us embracing what makes us uniquely ourselves. And then once you kind of figure that out, restaurants are kind of like one of the first steps to, to drive this economic development. And that we've shared that in many of our episodes in our first season are interviewing, I think there's 3 or 4 different restaurant owners that share. And more to come. Yeah, that started with restaurants. They just share how they got started and it really is what John said, it is the economic development driver. Yeah. For why people convene. They get together, they share stories. It's where you celebrate family get-togethers. It's where you, you know, dream about what the future is. And I think that's the mission that we at Small Nation share, Jon, with you and the Ohio Restaurant Association is how do we encourage and keep the existing industry strong, but also give it a runway of strength for the future generations of people that have that special recipe or that great idea that they want to open up a restaurant in their town?

J**John Barker** 49:18

It's still, it's still one of the businesses that have a lower bar to entry. And so what I mean by that, if you're willing to get a little bit of a loan or maybe lease your building, lease your equipment, you can get into it relatively low cost. I mean, you're not going to open a pharmaceutical company on a couple hundred thousand dollars, right? You're going to need billions, right, to do that. So there still is this dream. It is still one of the pockets of the American dream. And if you don't even want to do that, you can just go and be a franchisee because there's hundreds and hundreds of franchise opportunities out there. And there you buy a system and then you learn and maybe say, okay, I've done that for a while. Now I want to parlay that into my own thing, right? So I do love it from that standpoint. You can tell I love this industry and doing a long time. And I do think we have so many people that start their lives, they come from other countries and land here. And this is one of the industries that they land in. They might work in it for a while. And then, you know, as we met, You know, obviously the restaurant earlier, it ends up becoming the dream and it ends up changing lives, like changes their lives, right? They move from maybe an immigrant situation with hardly anything to a middle-class life. What could be greater than that in a relatively short period of time? And then they bring so many people with them, their employees, their staff, their families, and oftentimes these small ethnic restaurants, what I find is the whole family. Is involved with it, which is fantastic, which is what happened with every ethnic generation that came into America. Yeah. So that is the American dream, right? A couple of questions as we're kind of wrapping up the episode here.

J**Jason Duff** 50:47

What is one professional development resource that was impactful for you along your professional journey?

**J****John Barker** 50:53

So professional development to me is on you, right? A lot of people think I joined a big company, they're just going to train me, they're just going to constantly, you know, bring training in and I'm just going to become brilliant. No, you actually learn 80% of what you need in your life from your peers and, you know, whoever your mentors are. You can certainly get training and you should because there's a lot of things we all need to sharpen the axe a little bit, right? And so you should do that in areas that you're weak in. So if you're going to be a manager, go get some manager training. If you need technical skills, you're going to be a health inspector, go, you know, you got to do all that. But in this industry, you're going to need, you really do need to understand people. People skills. You need to learn how to manage. It's hard and it keeps getting harder. There's so much that goes on. And, you know, make sure if you're in this industry, you have somebody that's an HR person, you know, that you know and trust so they can kind of help, you know, help you with those issues. And, uh, but professional training, you know, honestly, my mentors gave me the most valuable skills. I mentioned that Dave Thomas— do you guys know what I mean by Level 5 leadership? I was going to ask that. No, yeah, I'm not from there. So it's a, you know, it's a kind of a well-known business philosophy around levels where you kind of develop yourself over time. Level 1, or for those entry-level managers, where you have a very tech— you're really good at something technical, so you can manage that function. So you might be really good at, uh, you know, hamburgers, so you're in charge of the hamburger department, right? All the way up, Level 5 is when you have gotten to the level where you're an executive, where you're technically one of the most competent people, you know, in a certain function, but you also have all the emotional intelligence and thoughtfulness and you're humble. And I tell you, it's rare. I think of most executives that I'm around and observe and I listen to CNBC. What I see is people who are really full of themselves, you know what I mean? Almost to the point that I don't know how they manage other people. Dave Thomas had that. And as I shared with you, my first interview with him, He was like that all the time. He actually, once he got to know you, he would kind of pick on you a little bit, right? But he would also allow you to give it back to him. And that's when you knew you were in. Yeah, right. That was level 5 leadership. And, you know, when I teach my students, whether it's strategy or marketing, I talk about that all the time. I said, please aspire to that or go find a boss like that. Recruit a boss. Yeah, it's like that.

**J****Jason Duff** 53:15

Interesting. Love that.

J

**John Barker** 53:16

And then my second question is, if someone were listening today and wanted to become a member or wanted to learn more Where can they go? So we have an entire membership staff that can kind of help. And what we, what we do on our, you know, you can go to our website and get the information. So it's ohiorestaurant.org. But, you know, what we try to do is really match up what people need. So let's say if it's a vendor, like somebody that supplies the restaurant industry, we work with them too because we're trying to bring them in and give them more opportunities so that they can help our restaurant operators and their staff But as a restaurateur comes in, our membership is really scaled based on what their sales are. So we have very small restaurants that can come in, you know, for a very low, very low price relative. We actually have an ROI calculator right on our website, and our membership team can work it with you. They actually show you if you join at this amount and take advantage of— and we just start 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 things we have to offer— you get all that money back. So we want to make sure that, that joining the restaurant association has a high ROI for members so that then everything else we do for the industry is just on top, it's just icing. So all the things we do from an advocacy standpoint or promoting the— because we love the industry, we promote it like crazy. We have stuff all over Instagram and LinkedIn and we're just constantly putting information. We also promote the industry, we promote the people. We have a program called ProStart, for example, where we create the education culinary management training for high school students to learn so that they could get into the restaurant industry without having to— they could go off to culinary school, or they can go through ProStart, start at a good restaurant, and end up being an executive chef. And we have countless examples of that. Yeah, that's awesome.

J

**Jason Duff** 54:55

Thanks for sharing all that. I will link as much as I can down in the show notes as well.

J

**John Barker** 54:59

But Jason, you want to hit us with our kind of—

J

**Jason Duff** 55:01

well, John, I'll just say, uh, today I have thoroughly enjoyed hearing your story and, uh, just have a deep respect for for, um, your, your journey. I think you're in the right place, uh, and, uh, I also am excited about this next phase. Like, I think today on the episode we hear that there's a lot of innovation happening in the industry. There's some headwinds with regulation, and I know, um, it's difficult not to, to listen to the news that, uh, inflation is still very much there. So, you know, gonna be relying on you as, uh, as, as that that guide to help us get through a lot of these things. And also, I hope that a lot of people that are listening to the podcast, you know, we have a comment section and a lot of this stuff, like, you know, we follow those, those, uh, comments. And if there are questions or things that pop up, we'd be happy to, to try to field some of those. But hope that we can continue to have you back, um, as a future guest, and hopefully more exciting news and stories ahead.

 J

**John Barker** 56:01

Well, you guys wing it pretty well, so you can probably make up some good answers. I'll leave you with this. You know, there's always challenges, right, in any business, in every industry, and it goes up and down and so forth. Our industry is going to be within a whisker of \$1 trillion in sales this year across the United States. Wow. Think about that, right? And it's, you know, as we look forward, we do see growth in the next several years, even with everything that's facing us. So there's still tremendous opportunity forward. Glass is half full.

 J

**Jason Duff** 56:28

Yeah. Thank you.

 J

**John Barker** 56:29

That's a good way to end it right there. Thanks for all your leadership.

 E

**Ethan DeLeon** 56:32

Thanks for tuning in on this episode of the Small Nation Podcast.

 E

**Ethan DeLeon** 56:34

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