

CANE

WRITTEN BY
MARDEE BENNETT

DIRECTED BY
MANNY BUCKLEY



THE
ROOM



BACKSTAGE GUIDE

A publication of **COMMUNITY SERVICE** at
AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

BACKSTAGE CALLBOARD

CANE

by Mardee Bennett

Directed by Manny Buckley*

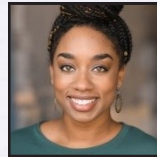
FEATURING



Brian Bradford



Lisa McConnell



Camille Robinson*



Chuck Smith*



Wandachristine*



Helen Young

Set in an upscale, Black-owned Philadelphia restaurant, *CANE* is a fresh, funny take on what it means to be of service. Written by the recipient of the 2022 Blue Ink Award, Mardee Bennett returns to American Blues for the latest reading in “The Room” series.

**Ensemble member of American Blues Theater*

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INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT **MARDEE BENNETT**

We asked playwright Mardee Bennett about *CANE* and his upcoming projects.

WHAT WAS YOUR INSPIRATION FOR WRITING *CANE*?

I recently celebrated fifteen years in the restaurant industry. What began as a “survival job” when I was a struggling actor, became a successful career.

I wrote *CANE* after moving to New Orleans to assume the position of Maître d’ at well-known, culinary destination. During my three years in Louisiana, I was fascinated by the culture. An East Coast boy at heart, living in the Gulf was like moving to another country. A beautiful, vibrant, musical country with fabulous cuisine.

CANE tells the story of wealthy, Black business owners. It also tells the story of young professionals of color. These aren’t stories I see on stage often. That was important to me — to open a curtain not many have seen behind.

The play has humor and heart. We are a hopeful people. *CANE* speaks to our triumphs as well as our tragedies.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE AUDIENCES TAKE AWAY FROM THIS PIECE?

I hope audiences connect with the sacrifices restaurant professionals make. We do our absolute best to ensure that your business dinner, anniversary dinner, or birthday brunch goes on without a hitch.

We are at your service. We’re working on Thanksgiving, Christmas. The day after our father’s funeral? We’re working. That is the sacrifice I speak of. That server across the room with your tray of martinis that took 20 minutes is a human being, and she’s doing her best.

If you haven’t cried in a walk-in refrigerator after your shift, you’re not a fine-dining restaurant professional. The sacrifice is tremendous but so are the rewards.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NEXT?

I’m working on two new plays. One is a crime drama set in the Deep South. And I’m working on a one-man musical piece. The journey continues y’all.



ABOUT THE **BLUE INK AWARD**



CANE was a finalist for the 2021 Blue Ink Award, and Mardee Bennett's *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* won the 2022 Blue Ink Award for playwriting. The nationally-renowned Blue Ink Playwriting Award was created in 2010 to support new work. Since its inception, American Blues Theater has named 13 Award winners, 129 finalists, and 203 semi-finalists. Nearly \$10,000 in cash and prizes was distributed to playwrights in 2023.

Each year American Blues Theater accepts worldwide submissions of original, unpublished full-length plays. The winning play will be selected by Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside and the theater's Ensemble. The winning playwright receives a monetary prize of \$2,500. Cash prizes are awarded to finalists and semi-finalists too. All proceeds of the administrative fee are distributed for playwrights' cash prizes.

The 2024 Blue Ink Award will begin accepting submissions on August 1, 2023.

PREVIOUS BLUE INK AWARD WINNERS

2023 – *Dinner With Friends* by Kristoffer Diaz

2022 – *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue*
by Mardee Bennett

2021 – *Refugee Rhapsody*
by Yussef El Guindi

2020 – *Recent Unsettling Events*
by Andrea Stolowitz

2019 – *Alma* by Benjamin Benne
world premiere American Blues Theater;
Center Theater Group, L.A., 2022

2018 – *Welcome to Matteson!*
by Inda Craig-Galván

2017 – *Hype Man* by Idris Goodwin
world premiere Company One,
Boston, 2018

2016 – *The Wind and the Breeze*

by Nathan Alan Davis
world premiere Cygnet Theatre,
San Diego, 2018

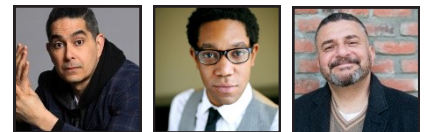
2015 – *Other Than Honorable* by Jamie Pachino
world premiere Geva Theatre Center,
New York, 2017

2014 – *Comden Mall Community Activists*
by Douglas Post

2013 – *Graveyard of Empires* by Elaine Romero
world premiere 16th Street Theater,
Chicago, 2015

2012 – *American Myth* by Christina Telesca
world premiere American Blues Theater,
Chicago, 2014

2011 – *American Home* by Stephanie Walker
world premiere, Pasadena, CA, 2017



ABOUT THE ARTISTS



MARDEE BENNETT he/him (*Playwright*) is a playwright, screenwriter, and actor based in New York. With a sharp ear for dialogue, Mardee's work explores the collective triumphs of Black people in America. His comedy *Cane* was a 2021 Blue Ink Award Finalist. *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* was a finalist for the

Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference and the Seven Devils Playwrights Conference. Other full-length titles include *Loretta*, *The Nerve*, *In the Ramble*, and *A Pleasant Place to Be*. His work has been developed at Center Stage, National Black Theatre, Signature Theatre, and Gloucester Stage Company. He will premier his one-man show *Men I've Known* in April 2023. A proud Baltimore hometown boy, he trained at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Mardee is represented by A3 Artists Agency.



MANNY BUCKLEY he/him (*Director*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. He is a Chicago-based director, actor, playwright and teaching artist. Blues credits include *Fences*, *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*, *Six Corners*, *Looking Over the President's Shoulder* (Jeff Award Nomination-

Best Solo Performance), and *Dutchman/TRANSit* (Black Theatre Alliance Award Nomination). Manny toured nationally as "Satchel Paige" in the original production of *The Satchel Paige Story*, and appeared in *The Father* (Helen Hayes Award Nomination) at Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C. He originated the role of "Carson" in *Hit the Wall*, which sold out extensions in Steppenwolf's Garage Rep. Select Chicago credits include *The Brothers Size*, *1984*, and *Of Mice and Men* (Steppenwolf); *Dorian* (House Theater); and *Love's Labor's Lost* (Chicago Shakespeare Theatre). Mr. Buckley is the recipient of a Black Theatre Alliance, and Black Excellence Award. He most recently directed *Kingdom*, an audio drama, with Broken Nose Theatre.



BRIAN BRADFORD he/him (*Jefferson*) is delighted to be working with American Blues Theater again, where he understudied & performed in *Five Presidents* and performed in *The Room* reading of *Origin Story* and in *The Ripped Festival*. Chicago theatre credits include *The Winter's Tale* (Oak Park

Festival Theatre); *Titus Andronicus* (Haven); *Hamlet* (Gift Theatre); *Fuente Ovejuna*, *The Bloodhound Law* (City Lit Theater); *Force Continuum* (Eclipse Theatre Company); *Romeo and Juliet* (Muse of Fire Theatre Company); *Estrella Cruz*, *In Love and Warcraft*, *From Every Mountainside/or does it explode*, *Emperor of the Moon* (Halcyon Theatre); *Macbeth* (Accidental Shakespeare Company); and *Today We Escape* (Tympanic Theatre Company).



LISA MCCONNELL she/her (*Ellen*) A student of Acting Studio Chicago and the world, Lisa has had the good fortune to play Lula Green in the Jeff Recommended, *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black & White*, with The Artistic Home Theater, and Dr. Martha Livingstone in *Agnes of God* with The

Aleatoric Theatre. A native New Yorker, Lisa lives in Hyde Park with her teenage son.



CAMILLE ROBINSON she/her (*Mo*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. She has been with the company since 2016, after making her debut in the critically-acclaimed production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. She has also appeared in 4 productions of Blues' smash holiday tradition, *It's a*

Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago! Recent theater credits include: *Once on This Island* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival), *Cinderella* (Paramount Theatre) and *The Color Purple* (Drury Lane Theatre). Proud member of AEA and SAG-AFTRA. Represented by Gray Talent Group. camille-robinson.com



CHUCK SMITH he/him (*Sydney*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater where he previously directed *Flyin' West*. He is a member of Goodman Theatre's Board of Trustees and is Goodman Theatre's Resident Director, as well as a resident director at the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe in

Sarasota, Florida. Goodman credits include the Chicago premieres of *Objects in the Mirror*; *Pullman Porter Blues*; *By the Way*, *Meet Vera Stark*; *Race*; *The Good Negro*; *Proof* and *The Story*; the world premieres of *By the Music of the Spheres* and *The Gift Horse*; James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*,

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

which transferred to Boston's Huntington Theatre Company, where it won the Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE) Award for Best Direction; *A Raisin in the Sun*; *Blues for an Alabama Sky*; August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*; *Ain't Misbehavin'*; the 1993 to 1995 productions of *A Christmas Carol*; *Crumbs From the Table of Joy*; *Vivisections from a Blown Mind* and *The Meeting*. He served as dramaturg for the Goodman's world-premiere production of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. He directed the New York premiere of *Knock Me a Kiss* and *The Hooch* for the New Federal Theatre and the world premiere of *Knock Me a Kiss* at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater, where his other directing credits include *Master Harold... and the Boys*, *Home, Dame Lorraine* and *Eden*, for which he received a Jeff Award nomination. Regionally, Mr. Smith directed *Death and the King's Horseman* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival), *Birdie Blue* (Seattle Repertory Theatre), *The Story* (Milwaukee Repertory Theater), *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival) and *The Last Season* (Robey Theatre Company). At Columbia College he was facilitator of the Theodore Ward Prize playwriting contest for 20 years and editor of the contest anthologies *Seven Black Plays* and *Best Black Plays*. He won a Chicago Emmy Award as associate producer/theatrical director for the NBC teleplay *Crime of Innocence* and was theatrical director for the Emmy-winning *Fast Break to Glory* and the Emmy-nominated *The Martin Luther King Suite*. He was a founding member of the Chicago Theatre Company, where he served as artistic director for four seasons and directed the Jeff-nominated *Suspenders* and the Jeff-winning musical *Po'*. His directing credits include productions at Fisk University, Roosevelt University, Eclipse Theatre, ETA, Black Ensemble Theater, Northlight Theatre, MPAACT, Congo Square Theatre Company, The New Regal Theater, Kuumba Theatre Company, Fleetwood-Jourdain Theatre, Pegasus Players, the Timber Lake Playhouse in Mt. Carroll, Illinois and the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He is a 2003 inductee into the Chicago State University Gwendolyn Brooks Center's Literary Hall of Fame and a 2001 *Chicago Tribune* Chicagoan of the Year. He is the proud recipient of the 1982 Paul Robeson Award and the 1997 Award of Merit presented by the Black Theater Alliance of Chicago.



WANDACHRISTINE she/her (*Donna*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. She has starred on many stages throughout the country in notable productions as the touring company of *Fences*, *The Vagina Monologues*, *Gee's Bend*, and *Thyestes*. For her work in *Old Settler*, she received a Joseph

Jefferson Award nomination for Supporting Actress and a Best Actress nomination for the noted Ruby Dee/Black Theater Alliance Award. For her work in American Blues Theater's production of *Beauty's Daughter*, she won the Ruby Dee/Black Theater Alliance Award for her solo performance. She's toured regionally in Danai Gurira's ("Black Panther" & "Walking Dead") production of *Familiar* as well as the San Diego's Old Globe production. Other recent productions include *A Wonder in My Soul* at Baltimore Center Stage and *Incendiary* at Goodman Theater. In film she's worked alongside Whoopie Goldberg in "Clara's Heart" and starred in the hit comedy as Mrs. Jones in "Me and Mrs. Jones" with Kym Fields. She's appeared in the television series "Chicago PD", numerous commercials, and voiced the animated characters in "The PJ's", "The Justice League", and "Scarface" the video game. She's written a fiction novel, "I Love You More...Than Shoes!" about four actresses over 50 years old still trying to make it in Hollywood; she is working on a Zoom production of the popular novel. As a playwright, she's written for American Blues Theater's *Ripped Festival* for many years.



HELEN YOUNG she/her (*Lucy*) is an actor and director. As director, recent projects include: *The Chinese Lady* (TimeLine Theatre), *Wild Boar* (Silk Road Rising), *American Hwangap* (A-Squared and Halcyon, Jeff Recommended), *Tea* (Prologue, Jeff Recommended), and *Tiny Dynamite* (Halcyon). Other

projects include: *The Audience* (TimeLine, Associate Dir.), *Great Expectations* (Silk Road Rising and Remy Bumppo, Asst Dir.), *The Hundred Flowers Project* (Silk Road Rising, Asst Dir.), *Beaten* (Artistic Home, Asst Dir.), *The Paper Dreams of Harry Chin*, *Fort Nightly* (TimeLine, Reading Dir.), *Chimerica* (TimeLine, Asst Dramaturg), *Red Flamboyant* (Silk Road Rising, Reading Dir.) Additional directing credits include work with Indie Boots (festival winner), Polarity Ensemble (festival winner), Broken Nose, Artemesia and Artistic Home. She also serves on the boards of Token Theatre and Chicago Dramatists.

GLOSSARY OF RESTAURANT LINGO

CANE is set in a successful fine-dining restaurant in Philadelphia. Below are some common restaurant industry terms and slang, in alphabetical order, that you may hear in the play (or the next time you're at a restaurant!).

86 or "Eighty-sixed": A term that means "we're out of stock" or "stop selling this!" This phrase is often used to indicate that a menu item is no longer available.

All day: The total quantity of a specific dish currently on order, e.g., "There are 5 Beef Fillets, all day," means there are presently five orders of beef fillet on the rail.

BD: Business decline. This is when restaurant traffic slows down and staff work on their side duties like cleaning, etc. These quiet times signal to management that they can start sending employees home.

BOH: An acronym for Back of House that refers to the non-client facing areas like the kitchen. BOH staff include chefs, dishwashers, line cooks, and even the accountant in the back office.

Campers: Customers who remain seated at a table for long periods, such as those who've already paid for their meal, but now choose to "camp" for a longer period.

Check Back: This refers to when a server checks on how the customer's meal went while also dropping the check at the same time, as opposed to having them be two separate events.

Chits: Order receipts detailing the a table's orders for the kitchen to prepare.

Comp: When you "comp" an item, you're giving it free of charge or compliments on the house.

Covers: How many meals are served per table.

Cut: When a server has been cut from taking more tables.

Deuce: Table of two guests.

Drop the check: Bringing the guest their bill to the table.

Dying on the pass: Food that's been on the pass for a long time and is now cold.

Dead plate: A plate of food you can't serve.

Expo: Short for expeditor, this is the person responsible for reading orders to the kitchen from the ticket, checking plating accuracy and ensuring food goes out on time. The



Expo is the line of communication between the front and back of house.

FOH: An acronym for Front of House, which refers to the front of the restaurant or the client facing areas like the bar or waiting area. Common FOH positions include servers, bartenders, barbacks, and hostesses.

In the weeds: Also known as "buried" or "slammed," this is when servers are overwhelmed and struggling to serve their guests on time.

Joiner: A customer who arrives late to a table where people are already drinking or eating.

Low boy: If someone says "Hey, it's in the low-boy," it means it's in the fridge under the counter.

GLOSSARY OF RESTAURANT LINGO



Maitre d'Hotel or Maitre d': A Maitre d'Hotel is usually a role exclusive to high end restaurants. It is the person who welcomes guests, assigns their tables, takes reservations, and just makes sure that the guests have a good time.

Mid: A work shift that starts at lunch and works through dinner; usually the first to be cut.

Mise: Short for "Mise en place," a French term that translates to "everything is in place."

On deck: The person running the pass is responsible for calling out the incoming orders or what's "on deck," so that line cooks can start making the dish.

On the fly: This is the kitchen's way of demanding immediate action, usually when it's discovered that wait staff forgot to hand over an order or the kitchen missed an item.

Pass: The long flat surface where chefs place dishes to be picked up by servers

Pick Up: When one server takes over another server's table, either to help them out or because they've been asked to provide VIP treatment for that guest.

POS: The common abbreviation for point of sale - the system in which the wait staff enters in the order and each sale is recorded.

Push it: A word used interchangeably with "sell it" that means servers really need to sell a specific dish or drink for whatever reason—it may be that certain dishes are moving slower than usual.

Rail: Where all incoming tickets are kept and managed.

The rail is usually made of metal.

Run: Transporting food to a table, e.g., "Joe, please run this food to the table."

Running the pass: Whoever is working the pass or overseeing it is "running" it. They're responsible for watching tickets, calling out orders, and checking plating accuracy before the food goes out to guests.

Scripting: Informing diners of the special and selling the special.

Shift pools: A collection or grouping of open shifts that are often available on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Sidework: The work all servers do to prepare for service and ensure everything runs without a hiccup. This includes, among other things, checking that the salt shakers are full and setting the tables.

Sommelier: An employee whose speciality is wine. Usually the one to make recommendations to customers about which wine pairs best with their dish of choice.

SOS: An abbreviation for "sauce on the side".

Sous chef: The chef who's second in charge to the executive chef. Sous chefs are more hands-on compared to executive chefs and are very involved in preparation, plating, and the daily running of the kitchen.

Split shift: When a staff member works two or more shifts in a day, usually with a small break in between.

Station: A set number of tables that a server is assigned.

Straight up: When a diner orders something exactly the way it is on the menu.

Table turn: This term is crucial for wait staff – it refers to every time a table is sat, then cleaned for a new party.

Tip pooling: Tipped employees contribute all their tips into a pool. The pooled tips are then distributed among all employees, often based on assigned percentages.

Upsell: A technique used to get customers to purchase more expensive items.

Waxing a table: You're "waxing a table" when you're giving a guest special treatment because they're a VIP.

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

The titular restaurant in *CANE* is a high pressure, high stress environment for its workers. Below is a look of some of the common stressors that lead to mental health issues in the restaurant industry, and some ways to relieve these issues.

THE HIGH-STRESS ENVIRONMENT OF THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

The restaurant industry employs 14.5 million workers, representing 10% of the entire workforce in the United States. The 2022 AmTrust Restaurant Risk Report found that 2021 had the highest number of mental stress claims on record. These claims are due in part to the pandemic's toll on the industry, but the declining mental health of restaurant workers has been a growing concern over the last several years.

Common stressors restaurant industry workers deal with include issues such as:

An Inconsistent Income

Tips are usually the main source of income for many restaurant workers. This means on a good shift, employees' hourly earnings can be much higher than the minimum wage, but on a slow day, they could wonder how they might pay all their bills that month.

Lack of Benefits

Often, restaurant owners or managers create the schedule in a manner that leaves many employees without the option of health insurance coverage or retirement savings. Without benefits, employees must pay for healthcare coverage out of pocket, which is often more costly than company-provided coverage.

Irregular Work Schedules

Working in a restaurant involves long hours and shifts that can go late into the night. Many employees want to work during the busiest times to ensure they are seated the most tables as possible to get as many tips as they can. Weekends are obviously the most coveted shifts, when the rest of the working world has time off to enjoy a meal out. Additionally, cooks and kitchen staff report in early to start food prep or stay far into the evening to clean up. These unusual hours make it challenging for restaurant employees to enjoy a "normal" life with family and friends.

High Turnover Rates

The restaurant industry is plagued with high employee turnover. And those who quit often do not provide any notice. This leads to the remaining staff needing to take on

even more shifts to cover for the employee who left, which can result in a tired worker making mistakes that could easily lead to accidents or injuries.

Overall High Stress of Job Duties

An experienced server understands that the quality of the service they provide can greatly impact their income. Servers must balance multiple tables at once, while cooks need to prepare a variety of dishes as the tickets roll in. It is a fast-paced environment and often comes with long shifts that may not allow ample time for breaks.

Add in demanding customers, and it's easy to see the toll these stressors can have on mental health.

HOW TO SUPPORT AND IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

There are measures restaurant owners and employers can take to help reduce the risk of mental health issues among their employees. One way is offering health insurance that can help alleviate the worry of encountering a large medical bill that could ruin them financially. Even better, ensure the coverage provides mental health resources so employees can access therapy services when needed.

Providing paid time off can also be a huge benefit to restaurant employees. Knowing they have the time to recover from an illness, take care of a loved one, or go on a small getaway can help alleviate a great deal of stress.

Visit Page 14 of this guide for additional mental health



SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

Drug use is prevalent in *CANE*, and a common occurrence across the restaurant industry. Below is an overview of the statistics, possible contributing factors, and treatment options for substance abuse in the restaurant industry.

In a study looking at substance use within various industries, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found the restaurant industry to be the most at risk for illicit drug use and substance use disorders and the third most at risk for heavy alcohol use. Addiction rates in restaurant workers include:

- 11.8% of food services workers reported binge drinking during the last month
- 19.1% of food services workers report using illicit drugs during the last month
- 17% of food services workers have been diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder

High levels of employee drug use and alcohol consumption in the restaurant industry can be attributed to several factors, including:

- High-stress environment
- A relatively young labor pool
- Low wages
- Irregular work schedules including late-night shifts
- Low management surveillance
- Work culture norms (end-of-shift drinks, going out after work)
- Alcohol availability in the workplace
- Peer pressure from coworkers

Substance abuse is not confined to any specific type of restaurant, and can be seen in workers of fast food, casual, and fine dining restaurants. A recent study examined substance use in Michelin-starred kitchen staff throughout Britain and Ireland, finding that alcohol and drugs are commonly used as a means of self-medication and as a coping strategy for most chefs regardless of their ranking. While alcohol is primarily used to unwind after a grueling work day and to cope with harsh working environments, drugs and other substances are mainly used to maintain or improve performance.



TREATMENT OPTIONS

There is clear data showing that substance abuse is a major issue among restaurant workers. Unfortunately, there are several circumstances impeding these workers from receiving the necessary treatment to address their problem. One such thing is the lack of health insurance provided to restaurant workers, with estimates showing only 14% of workers receive any form of benefits from their employer.

Another area that needs improvement is the support offered to workers by employers. A recent study incorporating interviews with restaurant employees found that substance abuse prevention measures were either non-existent or never seen enforced at their places of employment. It is estimated that less than ¼ of companies in the food service industry offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), the workplace-based program designed to address substance abuse among employees. This is unfortunate because workers in this industry have a need for these life-changing services, but for the most part largely cannot access them.

If you work in the restaurant industry and are struggling with the idea of seeking professional treatment for addiction, it is important to know that help is out there. Please contact an addiction specialist to discuss what options will work best for treating your condition.

THE LASTING IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting impact on the restaurant industry. The below article, originally published by CNN on February 25, 2023, looks at some of the biggest changes and challenges that the industry is still facing today.

It's never been easy to operate a restaurant, and in recent years it's been even harder.

In 2020, COVID restrictions ground the nation's bustling restaurant industry to a halt. Since then, there have been significant signs of a rebound: dining rooms have reopened and customers have returned to cafes, fine-dining establishments and fast food joints.

But there are fewer US restaurants today than in 2019. It's not clear when—if ever—they're coming back.

Last year, there were about 631,000 restaurants in the United States, according to data from Technomic, a restaurant research firm. That's roughly 72,000 fewer than in 2019, when there were 703,000 restaurants in the country.

That number could fall even further this year, to about 630,000 locations, according to Technomic, which doesn't foresee the number of restaurants in the US returning to pre-COVID levels even by 2026.

Sit-down restaurants, especially, are at a disadvantage as delivery and takeout remain popular. And with inflation still high, some potential customers are avoiding restaurants to save money. Meanwhile, restaurant operators are seeing their own costs, like rent and ingredients, rise, and say it's hard to hire staff.

With conditions so tough, some restaurant owners are advising newcomers to steer clear of the industry altogether.

If someone were to ask David Nayfeld, chef and co-owner of the San Francisco restaurants Che Fico and Che Fico Alimentari, whether to open a new restaurant right now, his answer would be no.

"I would say it is not a good time to go open a restaurant if you are not a seasoned and incredibly durable operator," he said. Especially now, when restaurant operators need experience and deep pockets in order to succeed, he added.

Even Nayfeld, himself an industry veteran who has worked at the famed Eleven Madison Park, is struggling. The

pandemic led to "a really devastating few years that we're still working our way out of," he said.

CALLING IT

Some have argued that the contraction is a painful but necessary correction.

"The narrative back pre-pandemic was that we were over-saturated ... too many restaurants chasing too few consumer dollars," said David Henkes, senior principal at Technomic.

Indeed, before the pandemic, the number of restaurants was growing between half a percent and one percent each year, he said, adding that the recent decline served to "reset" the size of the market. Without those hurdles, however, that decrease would likely have happened more slowly, he noted.

Daniel Jacobs, a chef and restaurant owner, has seen his own network of restaurants shrink over the past few years. Prior to the pandemic, he and his business partner Dan Van Rite operated three restaurants and a bakery, plus a catering operation and restaurant consulting business. Today, they are left with two Milwaukee restaurants, DanDan and EsterEv.

"Closing a restaurant is an incredibly difficult decision to make," Jacobs said. "We did our best during the pandemic to try and keep our teams together ... at some point, you just gotta call it."

The rise of takeout and delivery during the pandemic helped multiple restaurants survive the pandemic.

DanDan, a Chinese American restaurant, had offered takeout for years. The restaurant "had that customer confidence that we were going to deliver quality products," he said.

EsterEv is a tasting-menu-only restaurant within a restaurant (functionally, a dining room located inside DanDan) open only on weekends, and "definitely wouldn't have [made it] if we had to pay rent on a space," Jacobs said.

THE LASTING IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

TO STAY OR TO GO?

The trend toward delivery and takeout has stuck, with restaurants reporting higher levels of off-premise orders. According to Revenue Management Solutions, a restaurant consultancy, delivery was up 11.4% in fast food and fast casual restaurants in January compared to last year.

“We increasingly like to get our food on the go,” said David Portalatin, food service industry advisor for the NPD Group, a market research firm. “We’re still a more home-centric society.”

Plus, sit-down restaurants tend to be more expensive, which could drive cash-strapped customers away, said Portalatin. Even with rising grocery prices, eating at home is generally less expensive than dining out, and restaurants last year saw their foot traffic dip.

Full-service restaurants are also more labor intensive. That’s a problem right now, as restaurant owners report having a hard time hiring staff.

HELP WANTED

Job openings in accommodation and food services rose by 409,000 in December, the largest increase by sector for the month, the Bureau of Labor Statistics said in February.

Demand for workers marks a turnaround from early in the pandemic, when restaurants let go of millions of staffers. Some employees also left of their own volition during the pandemic, afraid of getting sick with Covid-19 or tired of dealing with grueling conditions and rude customers.

Today, some of those workers haven’t returned, leaving operators struggling to restaff.

“Fundamentally, the labor situation is one where ... there’s just not enough supply of qualified workers,” Henkes said. “And restaurants are particularly vulnerable, because it’s never been the industry of choice for a lot of people.”

Some restaurants, Henkes said, “are very cognizant that they need to improve the working experience and what they’re offering to employees,” he said. “But doing that at scale for an industry is very hard.”

And, of course, some major employers are not interested in higher wages for workers.

Chipotle, Starbucks, Chick-fil-A, McDonald’s and KFC-owner Yum Brands, for example, have each donated \$1 million to Save Local Restaurants, a coalition opposing a California law that could set minimum wage up to \$22 an hour and codify working conditions for fast-food employees in the state.



PARTNERS & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



NAMI CHICAGO

Since 1979, NAMI Chicago has fought for families and individuals impacted by mental health conditions. They promote community wellness, break down barriers to mental health care and provide support and expertise for families, professionals and individuals in Chicago and beyond.



SAMHSA

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities.



SOUTHERN SMOKE FOUNDATION

From farmers to fry cooks, servers to sommeliers, Southern Smoke takes care of our own by putting dollars directly into the pockets of food and beverage workers when it's needed most. Whether there are mental health needs or unforeseen hardships, their funds and resources help those who put food on the table.



RESTAURANT WORKERS' COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Restaurant Workers' Community Foundation envisions a hospitality industry in which employees are not costs to be minimized but essential partners in creating prosperity for all. They raise and distribute funds to grow the power of workers in public discourse and workplace policies on wages, equity and health.

ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

MISSION

American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves.

VALUES

American Blues Theater *acts* on its values –

Accountability

Courage

Teamwork

Service

ABOUT US

American Blues Theater, founded in 1985 and winner of American Theatre Wing's prestigious National Theatre Company Award, is a non-profit arts organization that produces high-quality productions with a focus on stories that are relevant, timeless, and inclusive to the American spirit.

American Blues Theater is **committed to developing new work as more than half of the productions are world and Chicago premieres**. Play development programs include the nationally-recognized Blue Ink Award, commissions, readings, and the 15th annual *Ripped Festival* of short plays.

American Blues Theater **believes in teamwork both on and off-stage**. A leader in community engagement for decades, the theater matches each play's themes with other non-profits' missions to raise awareness.

In addition to producing plays, American Blues Theater **offers a range of free services**, including continuing education programs, writing instruction and matinees for Chicago Public Schools, dramaturgical materials, and post-show discussions to widen access in the community.

American Blues Theater and its artists have earned 226 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations, 44 Black Theater Alliance Awards, and numerous industry accolades, including nomination and awards for the Pulitzer Prize, Academy Awards, Tony Awards, Golden Globes Awards, Emmy Awards, and more.

UPCOMING EVENTS AT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER



Visit AmericanBluesTheater.com to learn more.



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American Blues Theater sits on the original homelands of the Council of Three Fires (Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa). Read full land acknowledgment at americanbluestheater.com/location.