

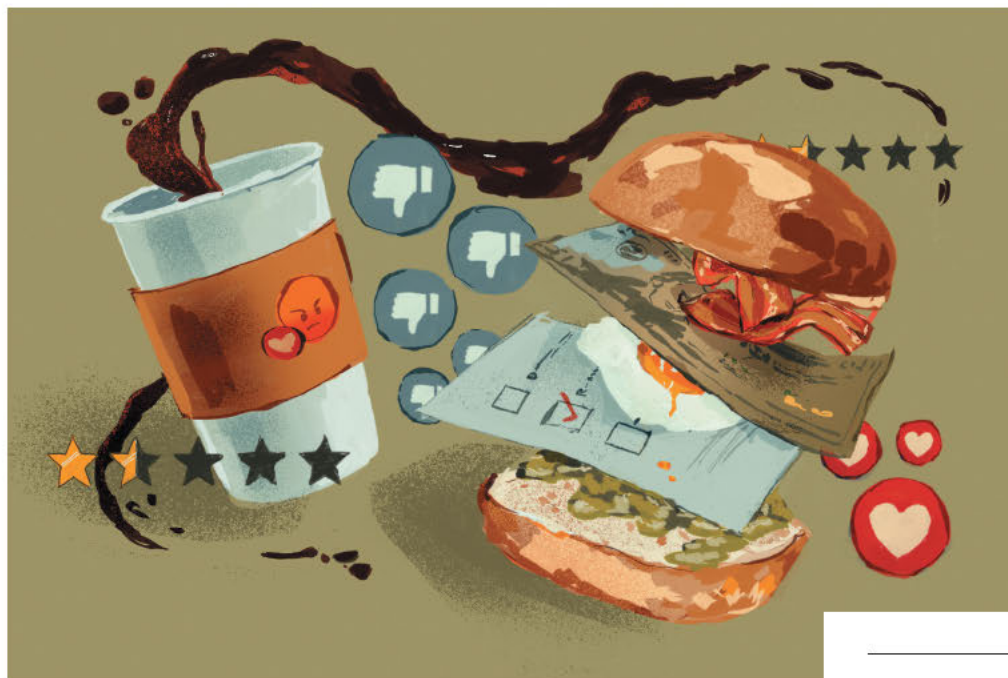


BY EILEEN MELLON

INSIDER

The Almighty Dollar

Political ideologies can shape where we spend our money — and what we eat



and opponents demonstrated outside the restaurant, Trump took to Twitter and the restaurant's Yelp page was flooded with one- and five-star reviews

In recent years, Starbucks has spoken out against Trump's immigrant executive order and committed to hiring refugees. After Keurig announced they would no longer advertise their products during Fox News' "Hannity," the company received backlash from conservatives who took to the internet showing them destroy-

To buy or not to buy? That is the question.

Every day we make purchases, from an inexpensive midday latte to a pricey three-course meal. With each decision we make with our dollars, we play a role in a larger ecosystem, and our choices about where to spend our money have a ripple effect.

With the current state of affairs — sky-high inflation, years of political unrest and an underlying, less severe but still very real pandemic — it seems consumers are flexing their buying power now more than ever.

In June, when it was revealed that James Martin, executive chair of Martin's Famous Pastry Shoppe — makers of Martin's potato rolls and bread — donated more than \$100,000 to Doug Mastriano, a controversial Republican nominee for

Pennsylvania governor who attended the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol and is a far-right supporter of former President Donald Trump, there was an instant backlash.

Food world luminaries such as "Top Chef" host Tom Collichio and author and chef J. Kenji López-Alt took to Instagram, announcing their boycotts of the company. Locally, the Church Hill eatery Cobra Burger eighty-sixed the buns from its menu.

The tango of food and politics is not a new one.

In 2018, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders was asked to leave Red Hen, a restaurant in Lexington, Virginia, because of her role in defending what the eatery's co-owner called the "inhuman and unethical" Trump administration, according to The Washington Post. In response, supporters

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ing the machines. Kellogg's experienced a similar reaction when stopping ads on the conservative Breitbart News Network, resulting in a boycott of the manufacturer. For years, some have boycotted Chick-fil-A for its owners' history of donating to charities with anti-LGBTQ stances.

At the end of June, when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, Richmond's Brewer's Cafe was thrust into the spotlight after owner Ajay Brewer posted a Facebook status that read, "Anybody else as happy as I am that they overturned *Roe*?" This sparked outrage from a >

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< THEALMIGHTY DOLLAR | CONT'D FROM P. 217

number of customers and community members. Many responded online stating they would no longer frequent the Manchester coffee shop. The RVA Big Market, where Brewer is a vendor, stated that it would continue to let him sell at the farmers market despite a number of patrons complaining online about his presence there.

Those who believe that food and politics shouldn't intersect are kidding themselves. From climate change and sustainability to health care, labor and trade, the two worlds undoubtedly overlap.

Some people may believe it's just a bun, or a cup of coffee, and they're correct — which means that choosing a substitute is a feasible option.

Others may believe that we live in a "cancel culture" that suppresses speech, or that people are being discriminated against because of their political views. But in a country where the dollar has long been our political currency, it's only natural that consumers make their voices heard with their wallets.

Many of us support local businesses, attend weekly farmers markets or frequent pop-ups and restaurants not only because of our innate curiosity about the world of food and beverage, but also because we have a connection to the people behind the businesses. We know them by name, we've seen their kids grow up. We aren't just spending money and investing in their businesses, we're investing in people.

While boycotting a big business may not have an immediate and direct effect, over time, it can. Pulling out our credit cards and tapping to pay is a form of political engagement, whether directly or inadvertently.

These moments of culinary and consumer decision-making are an opportunity to pause and to recognize the underlying meaning behind our everyday choices. As much as business owners have the right to their own opinions and political beliefs, consumers also have the right to exercise their spending power how they choose. ■

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BY EILEEN MELLON

PERSPECTIVE

‘Love, Mom’

Bagged lunches pack much more than sustenance

When my brother and I were growing up, my mom usually packed our lunches for school. Each morning, paper sacks in the fridge would be labeled “Leenie,” my family nickname that was also my grandmother’s when she was alive, or “Lucas” for my younger brother, both names scribbled in black Sharpie, which is perhaps where my adoration and strict loyalty to the markers originate.

We weren’t poor, and we weren’t well off. We toed the line — things weren’t easy, but we never went without. Lunchtime felt like a true test, as if my Yoplait yogurt or my slightly bruised banana revealed the dynamics and social status of my family or how much my parents loved me.

I struggled in school to feel like I fit in, and those moments of awkward adolescence were amplified at the lunch table. This gathering of peers offered a microscopic look at the inner workings of everyone’s home life, and judgments were made about what sorts of treats were in the sack. Revealing them felt like an intimate moment.

I had a friend, Laura, whose mom would pack elaborate lunches for her — or they seemed elaborate — from towering subs on sesame-studded hoagie rolls to chicken Caesar salad wraps or pitas stuffed with a bounty of veggies and hummus. It all seemed foreign to me, and I often felt foreign at the lunch table. I can remember the moment in middle school when I first heard the Bright Eyes lyric “I’m completely alone at a table of friends,” and feeling like my internal voice had been put into a melodic song.

That’s not to say I didn’t have friends, because I did, but those 30 minutes were an awkward time. I never had a fancy lunch pail or a cute, compartmentalized bento box with spaces for all sorts of snacks. There was nothing exciting about

my lunches, nothing that caused other kids to look over in envy or want to trade.

Other than Fridays, pizza day, my brother and I typically brought lunch to school. On those occasions, I usually paid with change, which, looking back, was probably only five quarters or a couple quarters and an assortment of dimes. But that jangle of coins, compared to a crisp dollar, felt like another opportunity for classmates to size me up.

My bag lunch was straightforward and simple. I knew what to expect. I was a faithful peanut butter and jelly sandwich gal. I preferred crunchy, and I preferred Jif. And by preferred, I mean I ate what my mom purchased. She would cut the classic sandwich in half, right down the middle, as I liked it. Yogurt. Banana. Cheese sticks. Fruit snacks. There was a rotation of accoutrements we stuck to. They felt familiar; it felt safe.

While most days my lunches followed a regular pattern, sometimes there would be a surprise inside — a fun addition, whether it was a Cosmic Brownie or a pack of Airheads or the latest candy fad at the time. I can recall how my brother and I thought that a Nestle Wonder Ball, a chocolate sphere that revealed a miniature toy or more candy inside when it was cracked open, was one of the coolest things ever.

One thing I could count on, between the wrapped sandwich and Capri Suns, were little notes from my mom. Folded sheets of ripped paper with handwritten messages in a wide, loopy cursive that usually read, “I love you with all my heart and soul.” These were words my mom used often. Sometimes there would be words of encouragement, such as “Good luck on that test,” or “You’re my shining star.”

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I remember at times being embarrassed to pull out the crinkled sheets, worried that those who caught me reading could tell how much I needed them. Those notes meant everything to me. It was a pick-me-up, an affirmation that I was indeed loved and held and heard by someone. That when I left this place that often made me feel anxious and insecure, I was going home to someone who wouldn't judge me, who loved me unconditionally and who thought I was pretty freakin' stellar.

One thing I could count on, between the wrapped sandwich and Capri Suns, were little notes from my mom. Folded sheets of ripped paper with handwritten messages.

For me and my brother, our mom has been the one constant in our lives. Looking back, I can't imagine her having to make lunches after a long day of hauling us to practices and Scout meetings or whipping up dinner.

The motivation to do one more thing for someone other than herself, not only putting together meals for each of us, but also pulling out a pen and reaffirming — in case all the other things weren't enough — her love for us. Those notes meant more than a cool lunch box or fancy munchies ever could. They were my most cherished items in the paper bag — they made me feel rich with love, and they instilled in me the power of the written word. 

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BY EILEEN MELLON

PERSPECTIVE

'Tis the Season

Reflecting on holidays spent working in the service industry

In the restaurant world, holiday time is the moment everyone is waiting for. As soon as snack-sized candy goes on sale and spooky season retires, talk of turkeys, Michael Bublé Christmas tunes and end of the year celebrations are just around the corner.

Companies begin to plan seasonal parties, families figure out where they will host out-of-town relatives, friends plot reservations for pals returning home. It's a season of imbibing and indulging — with the service industry moving full steam ahead.

I worked in restaurants throughout college and for five years post-college in establishments ranging from a family-owned Mexican eatery to a multilocation seafood outpost. For me, that time of year typically meant fielding texts or calls from my mom asking me when I was coming home, or what days I had off. And my responses typically included answers such as, "As soon as I can" or "I'll know more when the schedule drops." There were plenty of reheated Thanksgiving sides, late-night interstate drives and work celebrations in February, when the holiday hum began to slow.

One of my longest service stints was at an establishment in Short Pump Town Center. After Halloween, not only did business pick up as guests sought out seafood towers and steak on the corporate dime, but the mall became a frenzied destination for shoppers to swipe and tap the days away. Santa also held a residency there, attracting lines of often confused or crying children destined for ol' St. Nick's lap.

Every year at the beginning of November, my Honda's normal parking spot was eighty-sixed for the season, and coworkers

would arrive to pre-shift late and annoyed after battling for spaces or lapping the mall parking lot. It was known that while we could request days off around the holidays, they weren't guaranteed. And we all knew what that meant.

During those few months, I clocked in more hours, doubles, steps and time spent working alongside my coworkers than any other time of year. Working in the food and beverage industry during the festive season is like signing a blood oath of dedication, embracing the we-are-all-in-this-together camaraderie, along with every Merry Christmas and Happy Hanukkah. There is no I. If caffeine is sought for one, it must be sought for all. If you're done with end-of-shift side-work, you better polish some more silverware. When I think back on holiday festivities of the past, two memories stick out. One was at home, when I

removed a frozen pie from its pan and it melted into a messy clump resembling Gloopy from Candyland, and another was at work, when I slipped while carrying a massive tray of plates in the dish-pit during a holiday dinner. Both resulted in feelings of embarrassment and explicit language. And just as my mom reassured me that I in fact I had not ruined dessert — thank God, there was a backup pie — my coworkers reassured me that eating s--- was no big deal and to dust it off, literally.

Family is defined as a group or social unit of two or more people who are related in some way. They're people you lean on when you're feeling down even though you may sometimes disagree with them or don't see eye-to-eye. They're people you lift up without asking, a learned response that comes only after really getting to know someone. It's been five years since



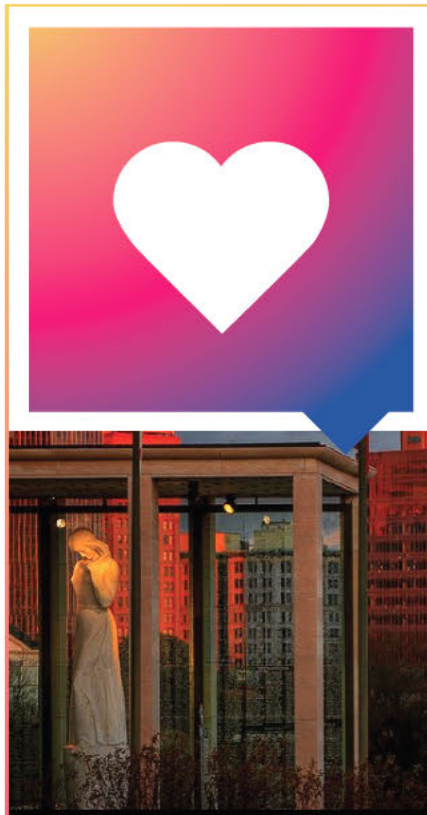
VICTORIA BORGES

These small moments of humanity, tokens of recognition and familial understanding of what I needed, were actually gifts themselves.

I've waited tables, and while the pandemic has shifted the way the service industry operates, I can say, looking back, that a restaurant family has no limits.

Maybe it's the act of showing up with a dozen other front-of-house staffers on groggy mornings that turned to late evenings meant to be spent with siblings or parents you haven't seen in six months. Sacrificing a home-cooked feast and mom's ricotta cheesecake for family meal at the chef's table while rocking a gravy-stained black button-up and my loose bun barely holding on. Leaving work 10-people deep, resembling a boy band with our matching uniforms, and giving everybody a hug goodnight before the "I'll see you in the morning" exchange and deciding who would get coffee. Establishing new traditions, like doughnuts and pastries Christmas Eve morning or pizza and beer while deliriously decompressing with coworkers following a service from hell.

Or perhaps, it's all of the above that made me recognize that the people I clocked in and out with six days a week were more than coworkers. That the warm, tired bodies I methodically moved beside were the ones who kept me anchored. From the bartender running drinks to my table when I was in the weeds to a snack from a sous chef who knew I needed sustenance, to a coworker busting out in a silly song in attempts to make me laugh when I wasn't in the mood, these small moments of humanity, tokens of recognition and familial understanding of what I needed, were actually gifts themselves. 📌



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