The recipe for pizza is simple: flour, water, yeast, salt, time, tomato, cheese and heat. But the Internet has a way of taking the simplest ingredients and making a huge mess. I learned this the hard way. I own the pizza shop Comet Ping Pong. It’s in a residential section of Northwest D.C. that feels like small-town America. On the same block as my restaurant, you’ll find a market, a beloved bookstore, a paint store, a firehouse, a gas station. We know our customers, and we know each other. Sadly, many people who don’t know me or my neighborhood cling to an absurd lie: that I and political figures including Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman, John Podesta, run a child-slavery ring out of Comet’s basement. Last month, one of those people, Edgar Maddison Welch, pleaded guilty to local and federal charges stemming from the day last year when he showed up at my pizza shop wielding an assault rifle and a .38-caliber handgun. He was following calls by conspiracy theorists for a “self-investigation” of the concocted sex ring. What he discovered was happy families eating lunch. While my brave staff swiftly evacuated customers, Welch walked through the building undeterred, shot a computer closet, then laid down his weapons and surrendered to the police in the middle of Connecticut Avenue. He will remain in prison for years. I’m often asked how this happened. It started in October when WikiLeaks released Podesta’s hacked emails. Podesta and his brother, Tony, are Comet fans, and in these emails I was invited to cook for a Clinton fundraiser. Anti-Clinton conspiracy theorists and online trolls congregating on Reddit and 4chan decided that the words “pizza” and “cheese” in these emails were code for pedophilia. They ultimately pushed the lie that my pizza restaurant was being used to abduct children and commit heinous crimes. These lies ricocheted from shadowy chat rooms to various social-media platforms, encouraged by fake news articles and deliberately amplified by provocateurs such as Alex Jones, who broadcast these smears to his audience of millions. Suddenly, the lives of everyone in Comet’s orbit were thrown into chaos. I was inundated with death threats, sometimes many a day. Comet’s Facebook and Yelp pages were flooded with obscene “reviews.” The restaurant’s phone rang off the hook, with people calling and screaming at the hosts. First, we answered only local area codes, then unplugged the phones. Online, we were labeled as criminals — or worse. They posted our pictures, links to personal social media, even our home addresses. Our community of food runners, hosts, bussers, waiters, customers, artists we display, bands that performed, my godchildren, surrounding businesses and my mother all were harassed by self-proclaimed “investigators.” After Welch surrendered to the D.C. police with a declaration that “the intel on this wasn’t 100 percent,” we thought truth would prevail. But some online trolls labeled the incident a “false flag,” insisting Welch had been hired by Clinton to distract from her crimes. A few weeks ago, when my best friend and former partner suffered a heart attack, these same trolls said it was retribution. Jones attempted to apologize with a [belated and halfhearted retraction](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/conspiracy-theorist-alex-jones-backs-off-pizzagate-claims/2017/03/24/6f0246fe-10cd-11e7-ab07-07d9f521f6b5_story.html?utm_term=.9b4ee80f1346), but the online community of “investigators” labeled Jones a shill. Unsurprisingly, Jones’s platform, InfoWars, continues to broadcast lies about me and Comet. Ten years ago, we opened Comet to be a place for people to gather, eat, drink and play. And I sometimes wondered what would happen if something bad happened to us. Where would my community be? I now know where they are. They are seating the guests, tending the bar, playing ping-pong with their families. They are eating our pizza, drinking a beer and catching up with their neighbors. They are sending notes saying, “Have a drink on me,” or “Keep your doors open, do not let fake news win.” This is our community. Hours after the gunman was arrested, they called to ask if they could come for dinner. “We’re closed,” I said. “Crime scene.” Their response? “Okay, we’ll come tomorrow.” They came out in droves when we reopened. And then, two months later, on inauguration weekend, [demonstrators came to Comet](https://www.washingtonian.com/2017/01/19/anti-gay-demonstrators-are-picketing-outside-comet-ping-pong/) with signs reading “GOT AIDS YET?” and a megaphone to call me a “faggot” and “pedophile” and our neighborhood Sodom and Gomorrah. Our community peacefully walked out of Comet to confront the protesters. And by the light of our vintage neon sign and the flashing of the arriving police cars, my staff, our neighbors, our community, pointed the restaurant’s speakers toward the hate, turned the volume as high as it would go, blasted Lady Gaga’s “[Born This Way](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw)” and danced the bigots away. Responsibility, community, love, family, truth and ping-pong. The best ingredients still make the best pizza every time.