



THE BUSINESS OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Seven local executives from the restaurant and agricultural industries discuss ongoing trends and challenges, including labor shortages, increasing business costs and stringent regulations

BY ADAM STEINHAUER, SAM BOYKIN AND SONYA SORICH

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Even as the Sacramento region's restaurant and agricultural industries continue to grow, they face challenges including escalating business costs, a shortage of skilled labor and stringent regulations. ¶ With the recent news that Michelin is expanding its California restaurant guide coverage to include Sacramento, a lineup of eclectic new restaurants are opening in the area. ¶ Yet many restaurateurs are struggling with increases in the minimum wage and finding employees in a competitive market. ¶ Meanwhile, local farmers and food distributors are struggling to find skilled labor as they contend with evolving technologies and navigating laws that make it more costly and cumbersome to do business. ¶ Against this backdrop, we assembled a panel of seven leaders from the restaurant and agricultural industries to discuss challenges and changes, at The Business of Food and Agriculture forum. Below is a transcript of our discussions, moderated by Business Journal editor Adam Steinhauer and digital editor Sonya Sorich on March 14 at the Broderick Event Center at Milagro in Carmichael. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

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ALL PHOTOS BY DENNIS MCCOY | SBJ

RESTAURANT PANEL

LEFT

Kevin Fat
chief operating officer,
Fat Family Restaurant
Group

SECOND FROM LEFT

Molly Hawks
proprietress, Hawks
Restaurant and Hawks
Provisions and Public
House

SECOND FROM RIGHT

N'Gina Guyton-Kavookjian
owner, South

Moderated by Sonya Sorich (far right)

**SORICH**

I wanted to start with an overview of the local restaurant industry. When we had this event last year, some of the common themes were minimum wage and restaurant staffing, whether that's attracting or retaining employees. I assume that those are still some of the biggest challenges that you're facing, but I'd like to hear directly from you. Let's start with you, N'Gina.

GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN

I'd have to say minimum wage doesn't affect us. We knew that it was coming, and so we just got ahead of it. I can honestly say that 100 percent of our staff is already making well above minimum wage. So, these raises in minimum wage don't really affect us. Being able to retain staff is one of those things that you worry about. We just make it attractive for people to want to stay at South.

SORICH

How is that? Just from the overall culture, or are there special perks that you're providing?

GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN

A little bit of both. One, the culture. We make sure to not participate in the stereotypical toxic-kitchen environment that I can say that I grew up in, being in the restaurant industry. The other thing that we do is provide full paid benefits for our staff. Our staff gets full medical, dental and vision insurance, that's paid for 100 percent by the company, and then we also do a simple IRA. We match that up to 3 percent. We're trying to cultivate a culture where being in the restaurant industry is actually a career. This is something you can do for your whole life.

SORICH

Molly, how about you? Did you have an adjustment when it came to minimum wage, or were you in the same boat as N'Gina, in terms of preparing ahead of time?

HAWKS

I would say that our two different restaurants, we experience it a little differently. In our Sacramento restaurant we have a

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N'GINA GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN,
owner, South restaurant

smaller staff. Most of them are ahead of the minimum wage, so we were pretty good there. But in Granite Bay, we have upwards of 45, 50 employees on the payroll, so yes, we have a lot of minimum-wage employees. It becomes a huge issue for us.

And everyone thinks with minimum wage you just have to put a little more money per payroll for your staff. But it's the payroll, it's the workers' comp insurance, and all the associated costs. The cost of all of our goods are going up as well, as a result of everyone else experiencing an increase in minimum wage. And then, combined with that, there's just a lot of overhead. You're constantly watching your costs.

SORICH

What about attracting and retaining employees? Are there different dynamics at play, in terms of both of your restaurants? Are there different challenges on that end of business?

HAWKS

We've always tried to be role models in the industry, especially for young cooks coming onboard in the kitchen. We make it our goal to mentor our cooks. Whether they move to be a cook at another restaurant or move up the ranks to become a manager at one of our restaurants, they're well-prepared. We do that by providing them chefs and sous chefs to mentor them and trying to provide the best ingredients for them to work with and great equipment to cook with.

**SORICH**

Kevin, you operate a very well-known restaurant brand in the Sacramento region. Tell me a little bit about what you've seen, in terms of the evolution of the local food scene, and challenges that are unique to the industry at this point in time.

FAT

The Sacramento food scene has just exploded, and I think that we have so many new options now. That's great for us as consumers. As an operator, it has been a little bit of a challenge, because we're all fighting for the same labor. Finding good people who want to work in this industry is very difficult. This is not an easy industry. It's physically demanding and mentally demanding. It requires a lot of skills, care and thoughtfulness, and you've got to want to serve.

SORICH

You talked about the expansion of the food scene, and there's been a lot of national recognition, like getting shoutouts on prominent websites and the expansion of the Michelin dining guide. Tell me a little bit about the implications of that for the local restaurant scene.

FAT

With Michelin expanding their coverage to Sacramento now, I think it's been great. It will highlight the talents that we have that a lot of people probably didn't know about. Hopefully it's going to bring more attention to the Sacramento dining scene. It also

brings a little more pressure, but it all depends on what you want as an owner and operator. For us, and I'm sure my colleagues here, it's what we love to do. We love to host. We love to provide good service and great food. And that's why we do it. It's not for the accolades or the recognition.

SORICH

Molly, Kevin touched on a little bit of the pressure that might come with national recognition. Do you see any other potential drawbacks or challenges that might inadvertently come with heightened national attention on the local food scene here?

HAWKS

Any time you have the potential of getting national attention, it always puts you in the spotlight. There's always a risk associated with that. We were just reading through social media, and there's already people commenting, "Sacramento paid to get Michelin here, and do they really deserve it?" So, your exposure is greater with that potential reward.

SORICH

Do you agree with that, N'Gina?

GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN

Yeah, I guess so. For us, to be honest, we don't care about Michelin itself. Like Kevin said, the reason we do what we do is for the love. We don't do it for the accolades. We're kind of like the nerdy drama kid in the corner. We're not interested in the pep rallies and the football games. We just want to do and concentrate on that. And yeah, I think it is going to bring a lot of pressure to Sacramento, but it's nothing that Sacramento can't handle. I just think there are bigger issues in the restaurant scene that deserve more focus.

SORICH

I want to move into talk of daily operations a bit. I know that some reports suggest that people are eating more meals at home, whether that's preparing their own meals or getting takeout from restaurants. That sort of brings into question the rise of third-party delivery services. I assume that's had an impact on each of your businesses. N'Gina, you want to start on this topic? I know you've been fairly vocal about this in the past.

GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN

I can't comment on those third-party services, because we get murdered every weekend with to-go orders, to the point where last Saturday, I screamed, "Don't pick up the goddamn phone." It was just too much.

SORICH

What about things like DoorDash and Postmates? Do you have any sort of formal partnerships with any of those organizations?



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KEVIN FAT,
chief operating officer, Fat Family Restaurant Group

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GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN

None. Never will. Will fight in the street about it. Just completely against them. It doesn't work for us. I just don't believe in taking such a huge cut. Our profit margins on a dish are so small to begin with, and for some of these platforms, they're taking a 20 percent cut of that dish. And then when it gets to the customer, you don't know the quality of the food when it gets there. If the quality is bad, it's us that has the repercussion.

SORICH

Molly, have you dealt with similar challenges?

HAWKS

Yeah. We haven't ventured into partnering with a third-party delivery service, simply because of the cost associated with that. We'll consider it someday, if there's a cost-effective way to do it. But we're operating on such slim margins as it is, that you can't afford to give up that extra 20 to 30 percent to a third-party delivery service. We figure the next best thing is online ordering and to make the ordering pickup process simpler. We partner with ChowNow in Sacramento to offer guests an opportunity to order from either the entire restaurant menu, or our lunch menu at Provisions, so people can just order and come in and grab something. It's kind of like an intermediary.

SORICH

Kevin, how has your group's approach to to-go orders evolved?

FAT

I feel kind of guilty, because we did partner up with one. We noticed we were getting a lot more calls through these organizations. It's still on a trial basis. We're following up to see how successful it is, but it has created a lot more business for us. But we have to monitor all our costs, and it's a pretty good chunk of a percentage. We were able to negotiate a pretty reasonable percentage, but a lot of them don't negotiate.

SORICH

I want to stay on the topic of tech a little bit, and touch on social media. Kevin, how does your group handle social media? Do you have a designated person who posts on your social media accounts? How have those responsibilities evolved, as social media has become more prominent?

FAT

We do have a full-time person handling our social media now. We have four full-service restaurants, and we have to have a full-time person. We try to plan at least six months to a year in advance, as far as figuring out what we're going to promote, and things like that.

SORICH

Molly, do you think that consumers still put a significant amount of weight in terms of what they read on social media about a restaurant brand or do you think that the



level of influence of social media reviews and that sort of thing is declining?

HAWKS

I think it can be impactful. We have accounts for the restaurants. I definitely think that as a restaurant owner it's important. I feel like it's something we need to do to get that exposure and keep our place in the marketplace. I think the positives outweigh any negative impact.

SORICH

Do you agree with that, N'Gina?

GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN

Yeah, I agree. The positives do outweigh the negatives. You're going to get these little negative sprinkles of people talking trash and tearing you apart. Yelp is a perfect example of that. But I think the reach via social media is amazing. We have people commenting about our food that don't even live in the state. It pays better than any money that we can put into marketing or advertising, and it's free, and I think for the most part 80 to 90 percent of it is honest.

SORICH

How active are you in responding to those comments? Has your stance on that evolved as far as if you saw someone write some sort of negative review either on Yelp or Facebook?

GUYTON-KAVOOKJIAN

Year one and year two was full-blown, out-of-control anger management. And I had to, pardon my French, stop that s---. I completely got off social media and now when



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MOLLY HAWKS,
proprietress, Hawks Restaurant and Hawks Provisions and Public House

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AGRICULTURE PANEL

SECOND FROM LEFT
Bill Easton
president, Terre Rouge
and Easton Wines

MIDDLE
Trish Kelly
managing director, Valley
Vision

SECOND FROM RIGHT
Joel Wilkerson
food safety manager,
Produce Express

FAR RIGHT
Thaddeus Barsotti
co-CEO, Farm Fresh To You,
CEO, Capay
Organic

Moderated by Adam Steinhauer (far left)

STEINHAUER

I'll start with Thaddeus. Generally speaking, how is business? Is it a good time to be a farmer and a food distributor?

BARSOTTI

I don't know if it's ever a good time to be a farmer. But business is good. We're dealing with a customer base that's becoming more interested in eating fresh food and knowing where their food comes from and wanting to take better care of themselves. We're dealing with an interesting time where there's a lot of cool technology that hasn't been developed yet we're able to develop ourselves, in the case of our home delivery business. And I'm also seeing a lot of cool technology on the farming side that just hasn't been available before. But now

it's reaching a level of scale where it's really affordable and we're able to implement some pretty cool changes.

STEINHAUER

Bill, as a winemaker, what's your perspective? How is business?

EASTON

I'd say it's generally good. One of the constraints on our business right now is manual labor, where we grow grapes. You can't really automate that much because we're up in the mountains, we're running equipment on very steep hillsides. From a macro standpoint, I think our politicians in this country are letting us down. It's not just the current federal administration. This is a whole systematic thing that's going on.



We need to have an efficient way of getting people who want to do agricultural work in our fields on a consistent basis. And that's been very difficult in the last five to six years. Some of those people may be people who've grown up in this country and some may be from other places in the world. I find a lot of people that were born in the United States don't want to work with their hands anymore. They want to drive a joystick.

STEINHAUER

Joel, how is the produce distribution business?

WILKERSON

It's good. Our business is contingent on Bill's business, and N'Gina's and Molly's

businesses, and so the things that affect these folks affect us directly. I like to look at things as not being about customers and vendors. We're all kind of partners in this whole thing together. When we look at it that way, I feel like we're going to have a lot more success rather than it's us against them.

The growth in the area has been extraordinarily helpful because the more people that go out to dine at restaurants, the more restaurants come into existence and the more restaurants we have an opportunity to service. Another factor I think that Thaddeus had mentioned is folks really want to eat better. And one way to do that is eating fruits and vegetables. And that's what we do. As long as that trend continues and folks are still going out to eat, it's going to look really great moving forward.

STEINHAUER

Trish, how is the industry doing at the moment?

KELLY

The numbers generally are good. The farm gate value, which are the crops that come out of the fields, that number has grown a little bit from 2016-17. There are some differences across counties and within the crops, but that looks good. The job numbers are good. We've had good growth overall in the industry from ag production and distributing to processing.

And that's good because a lot of regions have lost manufacturing, so our processing is actually improving. We do have skill gaps across the whole industry. That's going to be a challenge and I think that does constrain growth. We do have a lot of assets here. We've got UC Davis, so we see more companies moving here that are ag-tech-related or food processing because there's an ecosystem that we've got here that's creating more visibility for the community.

STEINHAUER

Where are the skill gaps you're referring to and what areas in particular?

KELLY

In the field and being able to use technology. There's a lot of technology on tractors, drones, sensory equipment and things like that, and people don't see that these things are in the industry. In the processing, we need a lot of mechanical trades, repair technicians, computer numerical controls. I know this is really geeky, but there's a whole side of technology that will really drive our industry.

STEINHAUER

Thaddeus, what's the outlook? What worries you?

BARSOTTI

First we need to recognize that things are changing really quickly in California ag. It's an undeniable fact that labor is becoming an issue, and I think every company is dealing with that in their own way. And on a large scale, we're seeing the crop selection move away from hand harvest things and towards mechanically harvest things. As

technology comes in, it's going to change how people buy food.

I think it's embarrassing that fresh produce is leaving California at a rate that's never been seen before and nobody's talking about it. And that the people that are making these rules are buying product and eating product that's not coming from the state of California. So that's something that concerns me about where this is headed.

STEINHAUER

Do you have any anecdotes from the Sacramento region of fresh produce leaving?

BARSOTTI

In Yolo County, if you drive around and you look at the acres of almond crops or orchard crops—that's a big indicator of the fresh produce and tomatoes that's leaving. Foxy Fresh Produce just ditched up to 500 acres of organic asparagus. I think they're the last large organic asparagus producer. I think now over 90 percent of the asparagus consumed in California comes from non-California places. And there are a handful of other crops where the production has been cut in half. And when

you look at the investments that California fresh ag are making, they're not being made in California, they're being made in Mexico. And that's just a reality of where this thing's headed.

STEINHAUER

Trish, has Valley Vision's research found the same thing?

KELLY

What we're trying to do is work with partners that can show farmers how, if they switched to certain other crops, can stay in business because they'll get better prices. But we're also trying to prime the pump from the market demand side and create more markets for farmers. For instance, UC Davis Health Center and Sac City Unified School District are doing more institutional procurement. If you think of this as a restaurant, Sac City Unified prepares 45,000 meals a day. They're buying more and more from growers and local distributors. If they do that, we're going to drive more demand, we're going to keep our land in production and we're going to

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FOLKS REALLY WANT TO EAT BETTER. AND ONE WAY TO DO THAT IS EATING FRUITS AND VEGETABLES. AND THAT'S WHAT WE DO. AS LONG AS THAT TREND CONTINUES AND FOLKS ARE STILL GOING OUT TO EAT, IT'S GOING TO LOOK REALLY GREAT MOVING FORWARD.”

JOEL WILKERSON,
food safety manager, Produce Express distribution service



Attendees listen to David Lichtman, publisher of the Sacramento Business Journal, at The Business of Food & Agriculture event, which was held at Broderick Event Center at Milagro in Carmichael.

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help our farmers. Those are really important trends that I think are market opportunities for us.

STEINHAUER

Joel, what's the outlook for produce distribution?

WILKERSON

Produce distribution is going to continue to do well because we are looking at different markets outside of just restaurants. When you look at hospitalities we've added, UC Davis Med Center and Sacramento State as well, it's those kinds of moves that help because they're preparing a ton of meals and they're committed to local produce and that's huge for all the area farmers. And since we hang our hat on the idea of farm-to-fork and sourcing local and sustainable, it is only helping our business to grow.

STEINHAUER

Bill, what's the outlook for the wine business?

EASTON

The whole business model of agriculture has changed. These are international corporations that own farms now, and they'll start the season in northern Mexico and grow a crop there, and then they'll move up to Camarillo and grow crop there, and then they'll move up and grow a crop in the Salinas Valley, and then they'll move up Willamette Valley and grow a crop, then they'll move to Eastern Washington and grow a crop.

I think what we should emphasize is local and small. I think we're too hung up

on technology in this country. We're too dependent on electricity. We need to get back to the basics, grow food local, distribute it, have farmers markets, have restaurants buy local produce. We need to educate the end user. People need to learn how to cook and understand the difference between mediocre and quality.

STEINHAUER

Is this happening in your view? Are we going in that direction or are we going in the opposite direction?

EASTON

I think we're going in the opposite direction. I think basically what happens in our economic system is there'll be specialty producers. There'll be niche markets going on, but what's the population of the United States now? 350 million people, something like that, and you're feeding a lot of people, right? Where's all that food going to come from? How's it going to be grown? How's it going to be done smartly?

STEINHAUER

Thaddeus, what is your view on the regulatory environment?

BARSOTTI

Speaking on behalf of California agriculture and as a whole, we're not feeling much love. I think California has this idea that if there's a problem, we'll just pass a law and we'll fix it. And when that happens, farmers are kind of the boots-on-the-ground folks who have to deal with it.

It's definitely a climate of frustration, and we're trying to do more education, but inherently it's not the strength of California agriculture to educate all of the people in the cities, and I think that farms in Cali-



fornia need to get better at that. With Farm Fresh To You, our belief is, if you really want to support local, do it. I only buy local stuff in California. Ninety to 95 percent of what our company purchases is from California. We only import bananas from Mexico and that's it. And when people sign up to something like that, then they really are able to support the laws that they say want. I think we need to stop making rules to fix our problems, because at some point it stops working and I think California is past that point.

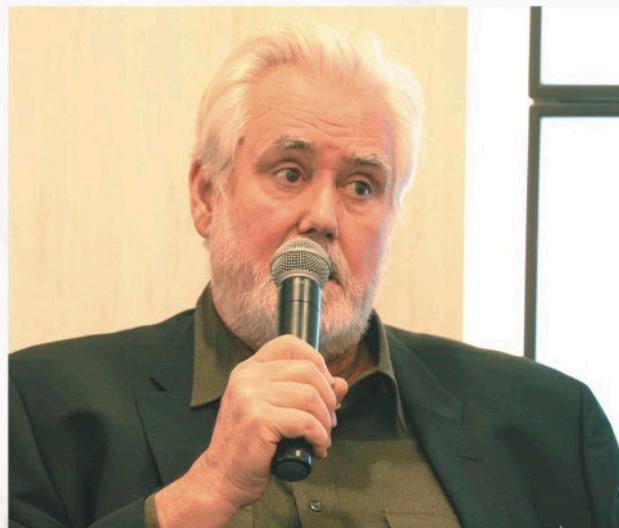
STEINHAUER

What rules in particular do you find most bothersome?

BARSOTTI

Farmers need to be trusted to do a good job. As an example, I am an organic farmer, so I maintain an organic certification, which is regulated federally. Someone comes out to my farm annually. I also apply pesticides and herbicides and fungicides, so now I have to have a separate permit monitored by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation Enforcement Branch, where I'm now keeping track of giving them the same information that I gave my federal inspector. And because I'm in the county, now I have to be registered with the county. And I want to sell at the farmers market. Now I have to do the same exact set of stuff to do business at farmers markets.

Then, because I'm in California and California doesn't believe that the organic program's good enough, I have to have a state organic registration to maintain that. And every time I plant a crop, I have to do a nitrogen plan that shows that I'm going to use as much nitrogen as I put it into the ground. There's also a sediment con-



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BILL EASTON,
president, Terre Rouge and Easton Wines

trol plan, not to mention all of the carbon compliance stuff. When you just add all that on, layer on layer, it's like each department has their own thing. My request would be to consolidate and empower people to do a good job without being bureaucrats.

STEINHAUER

Joel, what's your view of the regulatory environment in the state?

WILKERSON

The Food Safety Modernization Act, as it stands right now, seems fair. It is not without its challenges. It's not nearly as terrible as what Thaddeus just laid out, because that is an arduous task. When I go out to approve a supplier, they're already dealing with that whole piece and then I show up and go, "OK, well I'd like to approve you as a vendor partner. Where's your food safety plan?" And they go, "There's no time for that." Typically, a successful farmer is doing everything that food safety would dictate, however, they're not necessarily documenting it, which is how we know that you're doing it. I spend a fair amount of time visiting farms and doing my best to help them get on that path to make it happen.

STEINHAUER

Bill, what's your view of the regulatory environment?

EASTON

Well, we have to do all that stuff that you guys do because we're farmers as well, but we're in production too and manufacturing because we have a winery. As an example, one of the classic ways of making sure a wine barrel when it's empty is biologically sterile is to fill it with sulfur gas. We've been doing this for years. Well, since 9/11 we can't buy sulfur. I have to send one of my employees to classes about how to put sulfur gas in a barrel, and they have to be recertified every couple of years, and it's basically a class for pesticide exterminators.

The problem with a lot of laws is they have good intent, but they're not scaled for use. There's a lot of people that make laws that don't have the proper knowledge. They're advised by

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

people who do research, but they've actually never been out there, done the work and understand that probably really isn't necessary.

STEINHAUER

Trish, what's your view on the regulatory environment?

KELLY

If you can farm and produce in California, you can do it anywhere because you have figured out how to do it and you are the best at the business. We can't keep growing if we don't have farmers. The average age of a farmer is almost 60. The Center for Land-Based Learning did an apprenticeship program for new farmer training and farm managers. Trying to deal with the division of apprenticeship standards was another huge barrier. It's more onerous than the federal. We're trying to move a lot of parts of our food system, but I think telling our story and telling these stories is really important for helping us advocate for change.



“

WE'RE TRYING TO MOVE A LOT OF PARTS OF OUR FOOD SYSTEM, BUT I THINK TELLING OUR STORY AND TELLING THESE STORIES IS REALLY IMPORTANT FOR HELPING US ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE.”

TRISH KELLY,
managing director, Valley Vision

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