

# What Is the Keith Lee Effect? These Restaurants Have Seen It Up Close

From social media stardom to massive surges in business, here's how the viral food critic changed five restaurants' trajectories.



By Sam Stone  
January 19, 2024

There are food influencers and then there's Keith Lee. In less than three years, the 27-year-old former MMA fighter has risen to the top of the bustling food influencer ecosystem, amassing more than 17 million followers across TikTok and Instagram. If Lee rates a restaurant favorably, crowds descend, with lines that have been known to wrap around the block. "It definitely doubled [our business]," says Zaid Saleh, owner of the Spot Truk, a Detroit taco truck that Lee visited in September 2023. If Lee's reviews are less positive, an entire city's restaurant scene can spiral into an existential crisis.

Recently, after Lee announced that he'd be going to the Bay Area as the latest stop on a multi-city food tour he kicked off in August, the region braced for impact. Headlines heralded his arrival; restaurants prepared for the possibility of crowds and chaos that could follow. Then, just three days after posting his first review from San Francisco, Lee cut his trip to the Bay short, leaving after

a severe allergic reaction and without many good things to say: “I’ve never been big on completely tearing down anybody,” he said on TikTok, explaining that he wouldn’t be releasing most of his restaurant reviews.

It wasn’t the first time Lee had been disappointed by a city’s restaurants: His now-infamous visit to Atlanta, where he criticized restaurants’ subpar service and arbitrary rules, was the beginning of a city-wide debate. Still, the handful of restaurants Lee did post about during his trip to the Bay has seen a whirlwind of business. “It’s five o’clock,” Alysse Williams, owner of the Oakland-based Luxe Box, a restaurant Lee reviewed, told CBS. “We’re supposed to sell out at seven but we’re done.”

Sudden crowds, like the one at Luxe Box, have a name on social media: the “Keith Lee Effect.” But in an age of fleeting virality, does the Keith Lee Effect actually bring the kind of sustained customer base that permanently changes a restaurant’s fate? We spoke to restaurants Lee visited over a several-month period last year to see exactly what the Keith Lee Effect looks like over time for small business owners.

For Lee’s millions of fans, what makes him stand out among the hundreds—if not thousands—of popular influencers across Instagram and TikTok is his apparent integrity and relatability. He doesn’t pull any punches, doling out precise, decimal-pointed ratings. Like a traditional restaurant critics, Lee doesn’t accept payment for his reviews and strives to maintain his anonymity, often sending a family member to order and collect his food. It’s important, he often says in his videos, that he gets the same experience that his followers

would. “I’m just a guy who records himself eating food,” he told *Today* in an interview last year.

The restaurants he chooses to review also set Lee apart from a certain sect of hype-obsessed, flash-on-in-a-dark-restaurant food influencers. While some influencers are drawn to the glitz of well-known restaurants like Polo Bar or Carbone, Lee sifts through his comments section, DMs, and social media mentions to find restaurants that local communities love, and his reviews tend to spotlight independent restaurants owned by restaurateurs and chefs of color that have received little other media coverage. Restaurant owners know how powerful this kind of exposure can be: Many reach out to Lee to get his attention, urging their followers to tag him in comments.

From social media stardom to quadrupled order volume, here’s how Lee changed five restaurant owners’ trajectories.

*These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.*

## ***Janel Prator, Owner of The Puddery in Houston***

*The Puddery is a self-described “pudding bakery” that serves dishes like Biscoff cheesecake, an Oreo croffle (a croissant-waffle), and its popular banana pudding.*

## *What was business like before Keith Lee's review?*

*I opened up The Puddery about a year ago, initially just shipping the desserts I make out, and business was slow—maybe five to 10 customers per day on a busy weekend day. I left my job to open The Puddery, and it was so slow I wondered if I had made the right decision. There were days when I sat in the kitchen by myself, and just wondered how long I could keep this up. I had followed Keith Lee for five or six months, but I didn't start really reaching out until he announced he was coming to Houston. I was like, "Oh my God, this is my opportunity." I tagged him in posts every day, and asked my followers to tag him.*

## *What was business like after his review?*

*Keith came with his family, and the day after he posted his review, we had 130 customers. Two months later, we still have 100 customers every day. I put a pause on my shipping business because it was so busy, and I'm looking for a larger storefront to expand.*

---

***Hector Garcia, co-owner of Joy Burgers in Las Vegas***

*Joy Burgers serves loaded burgers with toppings like onion rings, chipotle dressing, bacon, and jalapeno pesto.*

## ***What was business like before Keith Lee's review?***

*My wife and I opened Joy Burgers in December 2022, and we had a difficult start. We didn't have any sales for two months, and we were paying rent out of our own pockets. When people tried our food, we got great reviews, but business stayed very slow for most of the first year. We had regulars that came every week, but not enough to sustain the business. The problem was that nobody knew about Joy Burgers.*

## ***What was business like after his review?***

*After Keith posted his video, people started reaching out from around the world. The day before, we had 24 followers on TikTok. The day after the video we had 6,000, and the day after that 120,000. The day after his video, there was a line outside before we even opened. The number of people visiting our restaurant basically tripled, and while it used to be just my wife, the chef, and I working here, I had to hire 10 employees to deal with crowds. That was a few months ago, but in the new year business has settled a little bit—I'll have to reduce staff a little bit since the numbers have leveled off.*

---

# **Chris Cascio, owner of The Meat Wagon in Las Vegas**

*The Meat Wagon is a food truck and restaurant serving burgers, sandwiches, and tacos.*

## ***What was business like before Keith Lee's review?***

*We started as a food truck in Vegas in September 2022, and in the beginning, there were days we only took in \$100—sometimes \$50, or even no money at all. I was behind on my mortgage. In the beginning, nobody knows who you are and Vegas doesn't have a really strong food truck presence. I've been in this business for 30 years, so I knew it would be slow, but I guess I figured since we built such a badass food truck it wouldn't take long for word to get around.*

## ***What was business like after his review?***

*Surprisingly, his video didn't bring in a lot of new business. I think it's because of the way he ordered his food—you have to actually watch the entire video to actually understand what happened. He asked for everything on the side. When he ate [the burger, chicken sandwich, wings, and taco], he didn't put any of the sauces on it until after he looked in the bag and was like, "Oh, here's all the stuff." Then he put it on and ate it all, and then did another*

*review. So if you just watch the first part of the video you're like, "Oh, this place sucks." I was disappointed and bummed out. I was like, "Man, what are we doing wrong?" We've built up our audience of locals by word of mouth, but the Keith Lee Effect never really happened for us.*

---

## ***Alfred Asatryan, co-owner of Easy Street Burgers in Los Angeles***

*Easy Street Burgers serves smash burgers, veggie burgers, and fries.*

### ***What was business like before Keith Lee's review?***

*We began as a pop-up food stand in 2020—this was a month before COVID. My brother and I started the concept and we really just dove in. We'd spent five or six months going back and forth testing recipes in our backyard, and we pulled the trigger in early 2020. That first month was really exciting. By the time March came around, we had to shut down because of COVID. We eventually got to reopen the food stand, and it did well. In April of 2022 we were able to open our first brick-and-mortar storefront. We were established as a food stand and people knew us, so initially business was pretty steady.*

### ***What was business like after his review?***

*Keith stopped by in October 2023. The night he posted his video people were flooding our page saying, “You guys better get some rest, because you’ve got two of the highest ratings Keith Lee’s ever given for a restaurant.” They were saying, “Get some sleep, get a new team, buckle up.” Obviously, we knew we got a massive endorsement, but we didn’t understand the extent at that moment. The next morning, there were 60 people waiting outside a half-hour before we even opened. The first month-and-a-half after Keith’s video we had two-hour waits. We’ve had to hire six or seven more people. It doubled our business, and gave us a massive boost on social media—we had 82,000 followers on Instagram, and today we have 110,000. It just catapulted the company.*

---

## ***Monique Rose Snead, owner of The Bodega on Main in Atlanta***

*The Bodega on Main is a sandwich shop modeled after an NYC bodega, serving sandwiches like a chopped cheese and a “Grown Up Grilled Cheese.”*

### ***What was business like before Keith Lee’s review?***

*After we opened in July 2022, business was steady for the first few months. I’ve owned other restaurants on the same street, and there’s a lot of foot*



*traffic there. But after that, I got pulled away to other businesses, there were some staffing issues, and I wasn't really able to be present. There wasn't a point when I thought we'd be closing in the next 90 days, but business was definitely beginning to be a concern for me.*

## ***What was business like after his review?***

*I've worked with local TV, so I knew the power that kind of promotion can have, so after Keith's video went up I started preparing. We put in an order for 300 pounds of beef to get ready for the crowds. That first day we were on a four hour wait. The first week was insane. Our sales quadrupled. After that it leveled off, but it's still very steady—I'd say sales are double what they were. More people are actually coming to the restaurant as well. Our dining room is full, when we used to see mostly takeout.*

[https://www.bonappetit.com/story/keith-lee-food-critic-restaurants?srltid=AfmBOooNL6xG8cvEDHo6\\_nLQKcmqdneyBFUtWbNy6Arm256NGbY2U5bA](https://www.bonappetit.com/story/keith-lee-food-critic-restaurants?srltid=AfmBOooNL6xG8cvEDHo6_nLQKcmqdneyBFUtWbNy6Arm256NGbY2U5bA)