

# SOMETIMES THE GOOD Die Young

Portland's Food Scene Is Getting Cutthroat. We Talked to Two People Who Didn't Make It.

BY MATTHEW KORFHAGE [mkorfhage@week.com](mailto:mkorfhage@week.com)

At least 49 restaurants have closed since the start of 2016 in Portland, according to a gravestone inscribed by a local food blog, which we double-checked as accurate. Restaurateur Kurt Huffman, who's probably opened and closed more restaurants than anyone in Portland, told Vice this year he's "nervous and panicky," and the worst is still to come.

When Gov. Kate Brown signed a bill in March raising the minimum wage to \$14.75 an hour in Portland, it was amazing news for every checkout bagger in town. When the feds said they're raising the minimum salary for full-time workers, it was a victory for the sad drones of every insurance company in America.

But the restaurants are scared shitless, and it's not hard to see why. Portland's spectacular food boom has put so many eateries on the streets that truly great restaurants are already closing because of saturation. Two of Portland's best pizzerias—Pizza Maria and P.R.E.A.M.—closed within months and blocks of each other as more and more wood-fired pizza spots opened. Smallwares, our finest Asian-fusion heir to Momofuku, is also gone.

We'll probably see more prominent closings next year—and they're probably going to hurt. They might be some of your favorite restaurants in town.

We decided to talk to people who have been there, on the front lines—two restaurateurs who had to close their dream restaurants less than two years after opening. Both were among the top 100 restaurants in town last year, and both will be missed.

How? Why?

We sat down with Ed Thanhouser of Clinton Street French bistro Renard (closed December 2015) and Sean Coyne of Neapolitan-style pizzeria Pizza Maria (closed November 2015), who now runs a brunch pop-up called Bagel Farm. They came from different backgrounds. Before opening Pizza Maria, Coyne was head baker at Grand Central Bakery and Thomas Keller's Per Se in New York, at the time considered one of the finest restaurants in the world. We offered to buy them lunch beers at Lucky Labrador, but they both declined given the early hour. (I had a Hawthorne Best Bitter.) Here's that they had to say.

## WW: How did your restaurant get started?

**Sean Coyne:** My mom was a great cook, and the way Pizza Maria came about—the name for that restaurant—was there was a woman who lived across from us when we lived in Palisades, N.Y., who was named Maria Coforti, and she was sort of my de facto nanny. So my parents would bring me over there and she would say, "What do you want?" and I'd say pizza and she'd make pizza, and I'd say pasta and she'd make pasta.

I was thinking about what to do [in Portland], and I thought, "Portland could use a wood-fired pizza place in my neighborhood." And I was wrong.

**Ed Thanhouser:** It's when I met my wife, who is a pastry chef trained in upstate New York. She just took on baking as a career. She kind of burned out as a freelancer mak-

ing people cakes. She definitely was wary; she was much more hesitant. I was very gung ho when we decided maybe we could open a restaurant. I felt like I never really got a foothold in Portland to make a long-term living. We were finding it less affordable every year. And forget about having kids—we were both living uninsured. She worked six years at this bakery in Hollywood, Fleur De Lis, and in six years, not a single raise. She had taken on many managerial duties without a manager's salary. I was like, "Just quit. Quit that and make no money doing it for yourself, instead of for somebody else."

We knew we were relatively green and this was relatively risky, but we didn't have much else with the combined skill set we had. At least at the time, we didn't see a lot of other ways we could stay in Portland.

**Coyne:** It was very similar to what Ed said. I wanted to have a foothold in Portland and create a business that would become this thriving thing that would allow me some opportunity to do some other ventures after that. I wanted something that was secure and was my own.

## Let's cut to the first day the restaurant was open. What was the feeling?

**Coyne:** Our first friends-and-family [night] was on the E. coli water day. So it was pretty much a disaster.

I also didn't have a mixer in the restaurant. The mixer that I'd ordered 18 weeks earlier hadn't showed up yet. They said it was on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic. So I was mixing dough at Roman Candle that day, and then the E. coli scare [hit]. We had to throw out everything we had washed.

It was pretty much a disaster, but people were really gracious and kind.

**Thanhouser:** We had so many cumulative disasters leading up to the opening day that all I remember is the sheer panic and the feeling of unreadiness. We had all this brand-new stuff, and the old walk-in [fridge] compressor died literally day one. And part of the reason we chose the place was because it had a working walk-in. And suddenly, I'm calling the fridge guy and it's going to cost ridiculous amounts of money, and that's after a build-out that went way over budget.

And I was also getting the first inkling that maybe my chef is not totally sane. There wasn't a great sense from the beginning. A family friend who was supposed to paint ended up totally flaking the job and being an alcoholic. I had to call him off the job and find somebody at the last minute. I really felt like, "I can't catch a break." I know it's hard. But I tried so hard to prepare, be ready. Nothing can prepare you for everything breaking, like everything breaking down and not working for you. I felt like it was this avalanche of unfortunate crap that just fell on us from day one.

When we had [former Paley's Place cook Ian Best] in the kitchen and things started to go well, I almost wished I could wipe the whole thing off the table and start there. But of course the financial burden had already been put on us and there was no way to come back from that, especially coming into the slow months.

## What was the thing you didn't expect?

**Coyne:** I underestimated how the ongoing construction on Division was going to affect our restaurant. My space was kind of awkward to find, I think. For a lot of people, it didn't stand out, it didn't have a huge graphic on it, it wasn't on a corner. I underestimated what the effect of that would be.

**Thanhouser:** We actually had people at the table be like, "This isn't anything like St. Jack at all." Well no, of course it's not. It's not St. Jack [the previous restaurant in the space]. But they came expecting St. Jack for reasons that I was surprised by and didn't understand. The building now lives under the shadow of St. Jack, because St. Jack was that epic restaurant that was so dark and mysterious and covered in candle wax and the first time anybody had stuffed goose-neck or something. That was not at all the kind of French we were after. But you can't tell people what they want.

It surprised me how deeply unpopular and scary French can be to people in Portland. It's like my second chef Ian said, "You know there's no such thing as fine dining in Portland, and all French is fine dining."

**Coyne:** When people came to our restaurant and tried our food, they were really happy. And we had this small base of fantastic customers who were really incredibly appreciative of our space, our service and our food. We just didn't have enough of them.

On the critical side, there were some critics who came in, food personalities in Portland, who'd keep saying things like, "This isn't like my favorite pizzeria in Connecticut." Like, yeah, it's not meant to be. I'm not trying to re-create some place in Connecticut with some canned sauce and with some paleo mozzarella.

Part of the problem for Pizza Maria was that I didn't have any type of a following. Being the head bread baker at Grand Central was a great job and they're awesome, but it didn't get me out in the industry a lot. I wasn't doing a lot of events. I knew a few chefs, but I didn't have this following of people who would come with me wherever I was. I think I would have a lot more success now if I were to do something else because I have that cadre of people who like what I do. I think if I had come here and worked as a sous chef somewhere or worked as a chef at some other restaurant and then decided to open my own, it probably would have been easier.

**Thanhouser:** There's a cult of personality, but for restaurants. I love the example of the restaurant across the street from us, Burrasca, which I love. Their food is fantastic. It's incredibly small portions, and you get pasta that's yay big for \$25. I was astounded that people were lining up out the door to pay for that. But this guy had a food cart where he personally was handing these dishes to people for more than a year before he opened this brick-and-mortar. And Paolo [Calamai], I talked to him a couple times. He just radiates this kind of humble authenticity.

It was really hard to stand across the street and watch the line curl around the block.

## Is it just too much competition? Do you see apocalypse on the horizon?

**Coyne:** I feel like there are definitely a lot of restaurants closing right now. I feel like there are also a tremendous number opening. If you were to look at the Eater tally of what's closed and what's opened since June, my guess is it's probably more opened than closed. But it's definitely hard. There seems to be a model that works well in Portland of counter service. That's not something I like or appreciate. It's not something I'd want to do, but I can see why it works. But to me, that's not a night out. To go out with your partner and spend 50 bucks and pour your own water, bus your own table and stand around with your food until a table opens up and clear it out yourself afterward—for 50 or 60 bucks, it's like, "Wait, why am I doing this?" I feel like I'm one of the only people that feels that way.

**Thanhouser:** The traditional Portlander lives on very little money. If they're like me, they live on not enough to eat a really great, nice meal very often—not enough to sustain this many nice restaurants. Now that is changing

**"WE KEPT SAYING TO EACH OTHER THROUGH THE PROCESS, 'GOONIES NEVER SAY DIE!'"**

—Ed Thanhouser



RESTAURANTS REVISITED: Ed Thanhouser (left) of Renard and Sean Coyne of Pizza Maria.

as wealthier people move here. And maybe they're willing to pay more.

I've heard that Kurt Huffman interview where he calls it a restaurant apocalypse. I think that's a little grandiose, maybe exaggerated. It's not going to be an apocalypse. But there's a big question in the air in terms of the financial realities of restaurants. You're going to see double-digit-percent price increases on menus when you're paying a \$15-an-hour minimum wage.

It's never been harder to do a restaurant, especially in a town like Portland. The accountant who was just filing my taxes for this horrible loss of a year said, "Man, I looked at your pictures on Eater. It looked like a really nice place." And he does a lot of accounts for a lot of restaurants. These are not bad restaurants. In any normal world, these places put out a good product, have good service. You should have loyal customers. There's something that is not quite right.

### What's the moment you knew you couldn't go on?

**Coyne:** Oh, for me that's easy. I was either trying to sell part of the restaurant and get some of my investors bought out with a new investor, [or] to get a loan for my landlord, or to see if the landlord would be interested in buying out one or more of my investors. And they came back and said no. They couldn't do it. They weren't going to buy us out. They said they could give me a loan, but it would take a month or so to get that worked out. And I had just begun that process too late. At that moment, I just realized that we had to close.

We were payroll to payroll so easily the last eight months, and that made it really difficult. If no one was going to come through with a solid lifeline, I just couldn't go on.

We were just scrabbling back to the same place. We couldn't get ahead, could never really catch up. It was really difficult. It's too bad that Johanna [Ware]'s not here, because I thought what she wrote on her Facebook page when she closed Smallwares was just exactly how I felt: It's not a difficult decision to make to close the restaurant. It's really easy. You see the numbers in front of you. What's difficult is that you've put a lot of time in, people have invested money in you and your concept. And then you have all these fantastic people who work with you, and that was my immediate concern. I just wanted everybody to get a job.

**Thanhouser:** It was a really clear moment. The costs for the first few months were so astronomically more than we

had anticipated that the whole thing felt like a race to catch up with break-even as soon as humanly possible—because my brother and business partner was funneling little micro-loans to keep us going payday to payday. There was this huge gap where we were losing so much money. The profit losses were terrible. And they shrank.... But it got to a point where this family friend who was also doing some of our bookkeeping and accounting for us once a week, she came upstairs from the office and was like, "You just don't have the sales. Your sales aren't getting any better month over month. This is what you're going to owe in payroll next quarter." And it was like a number I could not even believe, like \$17,000.

The hardest thing actually was that conversation I had with my brother after that. I was here in Portland working seven days a week, 10 to 11 hours a day, even on the one day that we were closed. And he was in D.C., and he was like, "Why can't you make it work? I know you can make this work." And we kept saying to each other through the process, "Goonies never say die!"

I felt terrible, but the hole would have just gotten bigger. We were already in so deep. It was a pretty obvious decision. There was never any surprise.

The staff were kind of all on eggshells in November because they knew it had slowed down after the summer. You could just see it. There were nights where I was working both the bar and the floor and closing off half of the restaurant. Everybody knows.

The hardest thing for me was that it was almost like looking at the end of the tunnel—if we'd just stop losing money, I could keep this thing going, right? And we would lose less money every month until we kind hit this ceiling and I was like, "I just need it to go a little bit further." And we couldn't make it.

### How did it feel to announce the closing?

**Coyne:** I told our manager first. I just called her up and said, "We have to close." She's like, "Well, maybe..." And I was like, "No. It's just not worth it. It's too hard. It's too much work. We're just not going to make it."

Could we have been open another two weeks? Yes. But at that point, I just wanted to stop that bleeding. And telling all the staff was really difficult, but at the same time they were all so wonderful and appreciative of the time they'd spent at the restaurant that that felt really good. And while the restaurant failed in a financial sense, it was successful in a lot

of other ways that are really important to me.

There were a couple young kids who were like, "This is bullshit." I'm like, "Oh, God. When you go home tonight, tell your mom and dad." They're kids.

All the adults, all the professionals were very understanding and really supportive of me personally. There was a lot of like, "It's OK, Sean. We're going to be all right. Don't worry about any of us."

**Thanhouser:** My staff was way more together than I was when we made the announcement. We had this farewell party where it was like, "Drink as much of the booze as you can because there's still more coming and we have to get rid of it." So we had this party after hours to say goodbye, and they were all so supportive, and actually I think it was harder for me and Molly.

The product we ended up putting out was so good and the space was so beautiful. We had to remind ourselves of the things we had done that were really good, and that the fact that it didn't make money couldn't wipe that away.

### Would you ever eat at the place that replaced yours?

**Coyne:** Um, I peeked in. My dad came to visit this summer so I just sort of peeked in with him to take a look. I don't know that I'll go and eat there. It's nothing against [Stella Taco]. But just having done so much work in that space and having spent so much time there, it's nice to take a break from it.

**Thanhouser:** I can't do it. I drove by like a creeper. When I saw Jacqueline open, I was driving by and I circled the block and I drove by again and I'm just so awful. I look inside and they've got a big picture of Bill Murray on the wall. That makes sense because they named it after the sub from the movie. We had a big picture of Bill Murray at the end of our bar just because we love Bill Murray. And my wood panels in the middle of my bar, they're right there. My shelves are still there. The butcher block that I remembered picking out and I helped treat and sand is still on the coffee side. My weird globe lights that I hung, those are still there. I can't go in. If they had like gutted the place and started over, then I could go in there and check it out. But they just replaced the wallpaper. It's too hard. "The space is still there! It's outlived me!" **WJW**

*Bennett Campbell Ferguson contributed to this story.*