

St. Louis

Bulrush’s Rob Connoley On Restaurant Capitalism With A Purpose



By Katie Lockhart

Rob Connoley is owner and chef at *Bulrush* in his hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, where he serves locally sourced and researched 19th-century Ozark cuisine using modern techniques. He previously owned the Curious Kumquat, a gourmet market and restaurant in the remote mountains of New Mexico. Before running a kitchen, he spent nearly two decades working for nonprofit organizations supporting marginalized communities. An expert forager, he’s author of *Acorns & Cattails: A Modern Foraging Cookbook of Forest, Farm & Field*.

Stuff doesn’t make me happy. Experiences make me happy, and the relationships I’ve formed over the years make me happy. So when I run my business, it’s the same thing. I’ve said many times, I wish I could live in a world where I could just have a restaurant and not have to charge anything.

The concept of “capitalism with a purpose” is very solid in my ethos, and it’s the idea that I don’t need to make millions of dollars and have an extravagant lifestyle. I need enough to be comfortable, and to survive, and to have my business and my employees survive and do well. But I want to do that in a way that doesn’t case harm to the world. And more importantly, in a way that can create something positive in the world.

Being a gay chef and having run an LGBTQ+ youth center in the past, that was where the majority of my energies would go—working to improve things for LGBTQ+ people. Now my perspective is there’s a new generation of activists, a new generation of energy that can handle that fight, and that there’s another fight that has risen in importance to me—the importance of local, in the Michael Pollan-esque type of way. For me, here in St. Louis right now, that includes looking at the African-American farmers that are having a resurgence in north St. Louis, and seeing how I can support them.

It’s crystal clear to me right now, with COVID, that all these years of working on local issues, building local economies, supporting local farmers, all that stuff—this is crucial work.

When COVID first was kicking in for the US, there were big gaps in the produce section at the grocery store. And what was really fascinating being here in St. Louis is the people saying, “Oh, my god, there’s no food on the shelves!” Those of us who already had established relationships with farmers, but also understood how food is distributed from the farm to the consumer—we saw restaurants step up, and we saw some intermediaries step up to give an outlet for the farmers to bring the fruit, and to allow the consumers to have access to it, which they had otherwise lost. So that was really encouraging. It was the idea of having

an understanding of your local business systems and how to support them as they shift and support consumers, as those consumers seek out the necessary things they need to survive.

When I first moved back to town almost four years ago, I immediately connected with these two millennial farmers, Eric and Crystal Stevens. They are just compadres, they are very similar-minded to me, and so I went to visit them in November. As they were touring me around the farm, I saw their compost bin, and it was mounded up with squash. And I said, “What are you doing with all this squash in your compost?” He said, “People aren’t buying them. We’re done. The season’s over, and they won’t store any longer. There’s other stuff in there. That’s all blemished vegetables, blemished fruit and stuff that people wouldn’t buy at a farmers market.”

I said, “Eric, don’t do that. I mean, if you needed to create compost for your farm, that’s cool. But understand that as a chef, that has value to me because I’m going to process it anyway.”

I don’t need a beautiful tomato. I need a tasty, well-raised tomato. And I think that really encapsulates it because, yes, it was about sourcing for me, but here’s a farmer who is throwing away money. He didn’t need to do that. He could have sold me every single drop of produce in that compost bin and made the money because I know he struggles. Every season since, I’ve watched him struggle to survive, and he doesn’t need to.

So, I buy stuff. But that’s a very short-term response. Long term, there are people in the region working on food distribution networks. This is more tied to food apartheid areas. It’s tied to the African-American farmer community and trying to develop that community. So working through them, the question is, how can we have a system, an organization where farmers like Eric don’t put produce in the bin, but take it to the distributor who can get it to consumers or restaurants? Trying to create those system changes is really important.

I did nonprofit management for years. When I opened my last restaurant, that was when I transitioned from running a meth treatment program to a restaurant that had a gourmet grocery. My spouse and I were very clear when we opened—we’re not to sell our soul to run this business, because we’re never going to make that much money anyway.

Why would we give up everything that we believe and have done for so many years just to sell a loaf of bread? We were very clear that we were there to create community. We didn’t know what that meant. But we knew that it meant something to do with giving the people in a very remote town in New Mexico—giving them a place where they could go and celebrate together or communicate together around food. Food to us is not just sustenance. It’s about celebration, it’s about traditions, it’s about history, it’s about so many things.

Every penny that we put into what we would consider advertising was not going to go to advertising, but it was going to go to an organization. We gave so much to whatever organization we thought was forward-thinking in the community—agricultural organizations, Slow Food, LGBTQ organizations in town, access to healthcare for the uninsured, and NPR in the area.



Rob Connoley at Bulrush restaurant. Photo: Courtesy Bulrush.

In St. Louis, we don’t do any ads. The money goes to events. Even now, I’ve got two events coming up. One is with a dance company that we’re supporting because I know they’re struggling. There’s another organization called **Perennial St. Louis**. They do community outreach and education around repurposing items. We always give cash, and in this case, they want us to do a meal that fits their work. We’re doing a brunch, including cocktails that are all forage-focused.

If it’s available locally, we get it. If it’s not available locally, what’s the closest source we can get? For example, we can’t get rye flour. That’s more north. So that comes from a farm out in Rockford, Illinois. That’s way too many food miles for me. But to use rye, I have to go that far. Why do

we use rye? Because we see it in our research, and everything we do is based on historical research from the 19th century.

We do pretty good with sugar. Because I can use honey, we can tap our own maple trees, and we get sorghum. We’ve played with salt. I know all sorts of salinated hot springs, but the energy consumed to get that boiled down into usable salt goes against the whole ethos. What’s the point? Fat would be so easy if I could just use lard. But too many people don’t do pork, like vegetarians and vegans.

And since the pandemic—it pains me greatly, but the inclusive tip stopped. I hate that we stopped it. The only reason we had to stop it isn’t because of philosophy or finance, or even employee will. It’s because, at one point, we did an adjustment where we went to family meal kits and smaller items. We’ve always been a tasting menu place. Even with a tasting menu, we did tax and tip included in our pricing for the drinks, for the bar food, for everything. Now I’m selling a \$15 piece of chicken, and at a time when people are really struggling with their own finances, does this make sense? It made sense before when I was giving you service. It doesn’t make sense when I’m putting a bag on a table outside my door. If you want to tip me, great. But I feel like I’m ripping you off now.

When we get back to in-house dining, which is coming with the winter, I will go back to including tip in the price because it provides stability of income to my employees. To drive the reality of that home, my dishwasher was a 30-hour-a-week dishwasher. I paid him \$14.25 an hour or something like that. His percentage on the tip pool—divvied out by percentage of responsibility— had him on track to make \$47,000 last year as a part-time dishwasher. This is what’s important about tax and tip included. This is what’s important about the disparity in front of house and back of house pay.

We live in fear. We’re always in fear that we’re not going to have enough money or enough resources. As a business owner, what if I do have enough? Even with COVID and sales down 80 percent, I have enough right now. If my employees have enough, what can they become in their lives?

I’ve never fired someone because they were bad. No one comes to work and says, “I’m gonna suck today.” It’s a bad fit. They don’t have the skills. You weren’t a good leader. There are a million reasons why. My job in those instances is to support them, to coach them, to figure out what is best for them.

What can I do that helps you figure out how to make your life as fulfilling and wholesome as possible? I want to make sure my employees are taken care of because it’s an investment in them. And that’s an investment in the community.

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