

# Working in the **FAST LANE**

## Addressing alcohol and drug use in the restaurant industry

by Mary Lou Santovec

The late celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain ripped the curtain off of the restaurant industry in his first book, *Kitchen Confidential*. His anecdotes revealed a culture where employees excelled at living and working in the fast lane—working hard but partying harder with booze, pot and hard drugs.

Shane Allen, the general manager and executive chef at Samba Brazilian Grill, admitted that the lifestyle Bourdain wrote about was part of the reason why he got into the industry. “I could sleep in and stay up late,” he said. It didn’t hurt that the industry “has a party man/party woman mentality.” Allen, who currently manages a crew of 55 at the Madison fine dining restaurant, was once a willing participant in the behavior that seems to have become an epidemic in the industry. Allen no longer partakes in that scene and now works to instill a new culture of health and wellness to his staff at Samba. Leading by example, he has shown that you can thrive in this industry after recovery.

### Strong cultural approval

Well-known for its long hours, high stress and pressure to succeed coupled with, at many venues, the easy accessibility of alcohol and even drugs, the industry is careening toward a crisis. Restaurant employees often form a tight bond after hours. Camaraderie, coupled with the presence of free or discounted “shift drinks” (which some owners consider a tradition or believe will improve employee retention) and few social activities available after dark, encourages employees to rely on alcohol—or worse—to unwind.

In Wisconsin, the link between stress relief and alcohol is embedded in the culture “so gathering around the bar for an after work drink seems okay,” said David Salm, owner of

Al Corso, a fine dining restaurant located in the Manitowoc County town of Collins. “It’s a team-building atmosphere, but the wrong way,” he said. Celebrity chef role models make it all seem glamorous without acknowledging the consequences. “The industry as a whole doesn’t seem to address it,” said Salm. “It’s in the closet.”

Many restaurant employees become “functional alcoholics,” who can hold a job but they need alcohol in order to do so. For others, heavy drinking is career and even life threatening. Alcohol abuse and drug use likely fueled many of the incidents driving the industry’s problematic #MeToo moments.

But many in the industry refuse to admit there’s a problem, said Heidi Smith, owner of the Chicago-based Integrative Wellness Studio. Smith, a certified corporate wellness specialist,

integrative health coach and certified meeting professional, hosted the Balancing Act space at the National Restaurant Association show in Chicago recently. Conference goers repeatedly told her “No one wants to admit it goes on in our business.”

Kat Kinsman, a food writer whose credits include CNN Eatocracy and Tasting Table, is behind the Chefs with Issues blog (chefswithissues.com). She’s also the author of *Hi, Anxiety: Life with a Bad Case of Nerves*. Kinsman, who started the blog in part to cope with her anxiety, frequently receives abusive messages about the blog’s frank emphasis on substance abuse and recovery.

Mental health issues like Kinsman’s anxiety or physical and emotional trauma—like car accidents or witnessing a crime—go hand in hand with substance issues, said Dr. Dana Marlowe, medical director of the Herrington Recovery Center at Rogers Hospital in Oconomowoc. Marlowe, a board certified psychiatrist who also did a fellowship in

addiction psychiatry, said it’s difficult to determine which came first, saying “It’s a chicken or egg situation.” Marlowe noted that there’s also a “genetic component” to addiction.

While alcohol was Allen’s biggest issue, he admitted he was no stranger to illegal drugs. “I started doing drugs at 13,” he said. Marijuana was first, followed by Ecstasy, mushrooms and other hallucinogens. “Whatever I liked, I did in excess,” he said. “The industry enables you to be that way.”

For Allen, his usage wasn’t about the drugs themselves, it was about the addiction. “I only ended up quitting alcohol and drugs because of boredom,” he said. “I steadily started choosing what I was going to do.” He became more proactive about his life in general, after quitting drugs and alcohol he also eliminated cigarettes and excessive soda consumption. Allen was one of the fortunate ones. At Rogers, Marlowe sees many patients whose problems require detoxing before treatment for the underlying problem can even begin.

A 2015 study from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reported that the foodservice and hospitality industry has the highest rates of substance use disorders and third-highest rates of heavy-alcohol use of all employment sectors. It also found that the restaurant industry has the highest use of illegal drugs.

While alcohol is legal and socially acceptable, illegal drugs (and even some of those prescribed for legitimate reasons) leave operators questioning what to do. At one time, people who used drugs were considered weak. But now statistics show that 75 percent of substance abusers are actually employed and many at high levels, said Carrie Leishman, president and CEO of the Delaware Restaurant Association who just finished developing an online course to help restaurants create policies and procedures regarding opioids in the workplace. She noted that drugs cost restaurants employing 25 employees about \$20,000 a year.

*continued on page 20*



**CRAVEABLE RAVEABLE**  
**CREATEABLE**

**CHICKEN**  
**LET'S BUILD YOUR IDEAL ^ BURGER.**

Ask for Brakebush product code 5702

Chicken is America’s favorite protein - with ‘chicken burger’ menu mentions rising rapidly. To maximize your burger section, start with our all natural, fully cooked Flame-Grilled Chicken Burger and create a craveable, raveable burger. From BBQ to Greek, or simple to signature, this chicken burger does it all.

Find chicken burger ideas at [brakebush.com/chicken-burger](http://brakebush.com/chicken-burger)



**Brakebush**  
Proud to be U.S. Family Owned and Operated  
Since 1925

**800-933-2121**

Substance abuse doesn't only affect the bottom line. It also impacts human lives. "We're wasting beautiful talent," she said. "I believe we have a responsibility to develop our employees. Restaurants care for the community, businesses and employees, but are ill equipped to handle it."

## Second chances

Wisconsin operators have encountered employees showing up for work high on

everything from marijuana to opioids and methamphetamine. Some arrive not having taken prescriptions for legitimate mental health issues.

Things like a sudden change in someone's personality or work ethic should raise concern, said Marlowe. A change in personality from bubbly to slow or fatigued or from quiet to the life of the party "should raise a red flag that something is wrong with the person." Other warning signs include changes in a

person's work routine or work ethic and the disappearance of accountability.

How did we get here? The answer lies partially in demographics, said Leishman. The industry employs a young demographic and that demographic is the same for drug use. However, Marlowe noted that the patients she treats run the gamut of ages. "No age range or demographic is not at-risk right now," she said.

Demographics aside, the industry also

## Getting Help for Yourself and Offering Help to Others

When Chefs with Issues and The Heirloom Foundation conducted a survey of culinary workers, 94% of respondents reported having current or past mental health issues. The top three reported issues were depression, anxiety and substance abuse (with 73% reporting suffering from multiple mental health conditions). Only 2% of respondents felt they could speak openly at work about these issues, which underscores the need to destigmatize mental health issues among restaurant employees.

Admitting a need for help shouldn't be perceived as a sign of weakness.

If you are in need of assistance to deal with mental health and substance abuse issues or have employees who do, here is a quick overview of some organizations that can provide support.

### Resources

#### Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

**Administration (SAMHSA)** – This agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities.

Website: [samhsa.gov](http://samhsa.gov)

Helpline website: [samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](http://samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)

National Helpline: 800-662-4357

Also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service, this SAMHSA Helpline provides 24-hour free and confidential treatment referral and information about mental and/or substance use disorders, prevention, and recovery in English and Spanish.

**The U.S. Bartender's Guild** – This group empowers bartenders to take charge of their careers and work with partners to promote career advancement through peer-to-peer learning, expert instruction, service projects and competition. A main focus is mental health and substance abuse.

Website: [usbFOUNDATION.org/social-responsibility](http://usbFOUNDATION.org/social-responsibility)

**The Heirloom Foundation** – The Foundation addresses suicide, substance abuse and mental health in the food and beverage industry. In particular, the group brings together culinary

professionals to increase awareness about the high-stakes, high-pressure lifestyles that many experience.

Website: [theheirloomfoundation.org](http://theheirloomfoundation.org)

**Chefs with Issues** – Founder Kat Kinsman invites people involved in the industry (not just chefs) to share their stories and resources for dealing with the particular pressures of restaurant life, so that other people may feel less alone.

Website: [chefswithissues.com](http://chefswithissues.com)

**Mental Health America** – Because good mental health is fundamental to the health and well-being of every person and of the nation as a whole, the mission of this national organization is to help all people to understand how to protect and improve their mental health and know when to seek help for themselves or someone close to them. Their Wisconsin specific website lists resources by county.

Website: [mhawisconsin.org](http://mhawisconsin.org)

**National Alliance on Mental Illness** – The nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.

Website: [nami.org](http://nami.org)

#### Offering support to employees

You may also want to consider creating an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at your workplace. Employee assistance programs can help employees with personal problems that affect their job performance. EAPs can identify and address a wide range of health, financial and social issues, including mental and/or substance use disorders. Some EAPs concentrate primarily on alcohol, prescription drug and other drug issues. Traditionally, larger companies were more apt to offer this type of benefit, but now that the restaurant industry is facing workforce challenges and increasing issues with substance abuse among employees, this may help provide the support your employees need to get (and remain) healthy. To learn more about offering an EAP and the types of options you have, visit SAMSHA's website.

Website: [samhsa.gov/workplace/toolkit/provide-support](http://samhsa.gov/workplace/toolkit/provide-support)

employs a large number of individuals who don't do well in more restrictive work environments or who gravitate to the industry because of its low barriers to employment or reputation of offering second chances. And with some 844,000 unfilled positions in the industry according to the U.S. Labor Department, the labor shortage is to the point that some operators have to take a chance on workers they would not normally employ.

One Wisconsin operator who wants to remain anonymous spoke about two former employees. One had used methamphetamine and "her attitude when she was on and off drugs was night and day," he said. "When she was on drugs, she was a vicious, mean person." Off drugs, he said, she could do the work of two or three people.

Following a series of incidents, the employee was fired. She retaliated using Facebook to badmouth both the restaurant and its owner, threatening to sue, lying that the restaurant had cockroaches and calling the owner names. The unfounded complaints necessitated a call to a pest control company to get a clean report to prove the allegation was false.

Because the restaurant was a franchise of a larger chain, the owner also called the corporate office which stepped in to help, telling the former employee that if she didn't stop posting negative comments about the restaurant, it might take legal action. Oddly, the former employee is still a customer of the restaurant.

The second employee was involved in a drug bust in a neighboring county and was jailed under the Huber Law but tried to circumvent both probation and restaurant rules.

Mark Gold, the owner of Pizza Shuttle in Milwaukee, has been working in the industry for some 40 years, starting when he was 14. Acknowledging

*continued on page 22*



## Find the Right Menu of Accounting Services For Your Business

When it comes to math, you know how many ounces are in a pour, how many cups go into the recipe, and how to calculate a great tip. As a restaurant, bar owner or GM you have to be on your game when it comes to numbers. But not just food inventory and table reservations - To be truly successful, you need to understand the financials behind your business.

[www.ewhsba.com](http://www.ewhsba.com)

 ewh  
small business accounting

Learn more about how EWH can help your business by attending our FREE Business Essentials workshop!

Waukesha/Brookfield • West Bend • Madison • Onalaska



that his business is a “microcosm” of society, he reflected that in the past the use of hard drugs in (and outside) the workplace was rarely seen, but, “Now it’s changed.”

Gold is more than willing to take a chance on former addicts who voluntarily go into rehab. “People who have been on drugs are way better workers than people would think,” he said. “They adapt quickly and work hard.” He avoids those who are in court appointed rehab because they are not serious about getting better.

Gold also intentionally hires felons. “I will gladly hire a person who made one mistake,” he said. But if their criminal record includes more than one violation, or if the violation may make them dangerous to their customers or employees, it would make him more cautious. While Gold is willing to give them a chance, he’s also pragmatic about the risks. He will put an employee on a cash register with videotape backup and give them one chance. “If money is missing, I know they’re back to doing drugs,” he said.

### Changing the culture

Because of the industry’s reputation, changing the culture is akin to turning a battleship around. But Salm is adamant about the necessity of doing so. “It starts with the owners,” he said, and “the culture that we bring toward the staff.” Al Corso employees won’t find easy access to alcohol and the after-work

invitations to imbibe at the restaurant. “I tell them that if you want to drink, go somewhere else,” he said.

“Most independent restaurants are the weakest at human resources,” says Leishman, “because they have no dedicated and educational resources.” The course that the National Restaurant Association will soon roll out is geared toward managers and those in professional human resources roles. Future courses, already in the works, will target youth workers and ProStart® students with onboarding information.

Leishman is also partnering with the University of Delaware to develop the first course in the country dedicated to human resources for restaurant managers. The seven-week online course consists of four modules. Helping members with their human resources challenges is a priority for Leishman.

“We have to address the culture change,” said Leishman. “Restaurants have to look at who they are and who they want to be,” she added. It’s difficult as the economy grows to undertake a cultural shift to be more professional and increase awareness.

### Making healthy choices

With no activities available or places open late after work, especially in a rural area, what’s available for an employee to do? How do they deal with the stress? “When burning the candles at both ends, it’s easier to gravitate to drugs rather than healthy food and exercise,” said Smith. Industry employees “need to choose healthier lifestyles to maintain the pace. Your body only can take so much before it says it’s done.”

There are groups specifically for industry workers. Chefs with Issues lists resources around the country to help as well as provides a space for those who want to share mental health issues or tips for staying substance free. At Seattle’s Canlis, a fine dining restaurant, laser tag or Ping-Pong occasionally replace the after shift drinks just to blow off some steam.

Allen, who as a former substance abuser admitted that he’s pretty lenient with workers and supports them in their goal to kick the habit. But he has no tolerance for misbehavior on the job. “I tell them that whatever you do outside of work is your business,” he said. “But if I see you doing it on work time, I call the police.”

In the end, remember that any type of addiction is not a failure of human will, but a disease of the brain. Research has confirmed that certain substances hijack specific parts of the brain that control decision making and behavior. While many of your

**“We have to figure out a way to give people the knowledge and tools to be healthier so that they don’t continue to make the wrong choices.”**

—Heidi Smith  
Integrative Wellness Studio



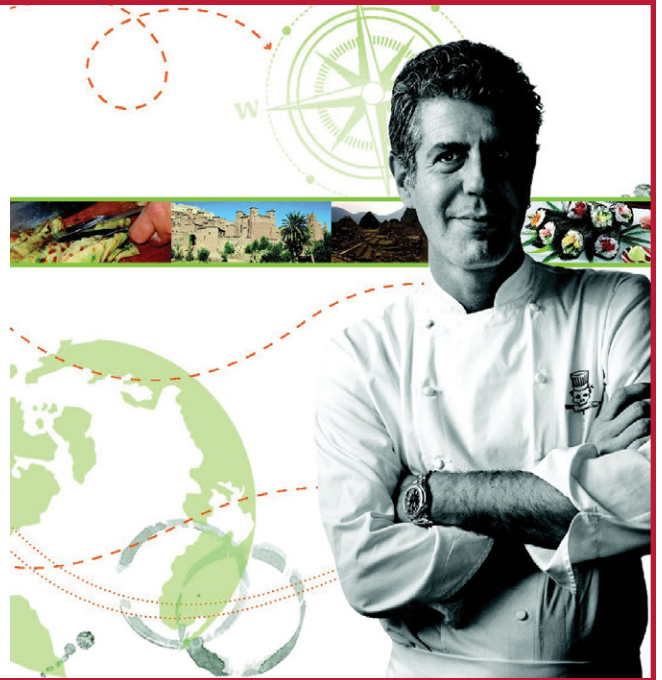
## The Prevalence of Suicide Among High Profile Chefs

Always open about his former addiction to heroin and candid about his battles with depression, Anthony Bourdain's death by suicide in early June has been a catalyst for important conversations about mental health and substance abuse issues in the restaurant industry.

Sadly, Bourdain's suicide is the latest in a troubling trend of high-profile chefs taking their own lives.

During a session, "Restaurant Industry and Mental Health" during the National Restaurant Association Show, Heidi Smith of Chicago's Integrative Wellness Studio, shared a PowerPoint presentation addressing the growing rate of suicides in the industry and explored some of the factors that may contribute to this. Chefs profiled included Benoît Violier, the acclaimed executive chef at Switzerland's three Michelin starred restaurant, Restaurant de l'Hôtel de Ville, Homaro Cantu, Daniel Nilsson and Bernard Loiseau—all renowned chefs who have died by suicide.

If you, or anyone you know is experiencing suicidal ideation contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text "home" to the Crisis Text Line 741741



employees would be willing to give up alcohol and controlled substances, they often can't—their brains won't let them. This is why so many relapse. Going cold turkey generally isn't the answer for this

group. They need specific therapies that will help overcome the brain circuitry that leads to addiction. Some 15 to 20 percent of people have a biological propensity to addiction.

"We have to figure out a way to give people the knowledge and tools to be healthier so that they don't continue to make the wrong choices," said Smith. **WR**

## INTRODUCING



## For All of Your Front of the House Needs

Newly Renovated Showroom featuring the latest trends in china, glassware, flatware, serving solutions & more!



Complete Kitchen Design



New & Used Food Service Equipment



Project Management



Smallwares



Delivery



Tabletop



The premier foodservice equipment and supply dealer in Wisconsin since 1929.

(414) 562-0220  
2007 N. King Drive (3rd Street)  
Milwaukee, WI 53212  
[feinbrothers.com](http://feinbrothers.com)