

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand, coming to you from the basement of the world headquarters of premium beef. Somewhere north of Amish Country in south of Cleveland in Northeast Ohio, we have a special episode. Today, actually doing something that we've not done before, and that is an episode centering around a topic that does not directly correlate to cuisine or meat science or things like that. That said, I have two special guests that I want to roll out. And know if you are an avid listener, does not Chef Tony Biggs, and does not Meat Scientist Diana Clark. With me in studio, across, we have this really long table here in our production studio at Certified Angus Beef.

Bryan Schaaf:

So, coming to me across the production table in our audio studio, she is a proud graduate of Ohio University. If you are a sports fan, I'm sorry, I have it on the record that she was not the person in the Bobcat costume who beat up Brutus the Buckeye a couple of years ago. But she did not disapprove of that either, for the record. By title, she is the digital marketing manager for Certified Angus Beef, unofficially. She's our tech-savvy resident millennial that I get to pester with all my digital queries. Although she will even admit that TikTok is confusing. Coming to us from across the table, a person whose family hails from the blue half of Liverpool. Come on you toughies, welcome to the podcast, Paige Clayton. How're you doing?

Paige Clayton:

Wow. What an intro.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. I stayed up all night drinking coffee, writing that.

Paige Clayton:

I bet you did. I don't even have anything to come back with that.

Bryan Schaaf:

Right. Generally, I leave a wake of awkward silence when I speak. So, it's a blessing and a curse.

Paige Clayton:

You succeeded.

Bryan Schaaf:

Our next guest, coming to us from his friendly home confines in Jersey, but jeez, not of the Jersey Shore. He's more like the Metro New York City kind of Jersey. And it's too early in the season to have the Jersey tan. He's a senior marketing branding and digital specialist with years of experience in digital marketing and business development, specializing in hospitality marketing, content, and local SEO, which I've learned does not stand for soft eggs to order. In addition, he's an expert burger taster and has written six recipes for restaurant marketing success, which is an ebook, detailing best practices for restaurant marketing online. He eats, he writes, he has a beard, and he is my kindred spirit and a brother from another mother. Please welcome to the podcast, David Rev Ciancio. How're you doing, Sir?

Rev Ciancio:

I'm excited to be here. Thank you for having me. By the way, I didn't know Liverpool had different colors. That's news to me.

Bryan Schaaf:

Right. There's the red half and they never walk alone, but then there's the blue half, and... What do they say in the soccer world? Actually, Adam Richmond and I were having this conversation about... because he's a big Tottenham Spurs supporter.

Rev Ciancio:

So, this is a sports thing.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Definitely.

Rev Ciancio:

Ask me who my favorite football team is.

Bryan Schaaf:

Who's your favorite football team?

Rev Ciancio:

The New York Yankees. Now, ask me who my favorite baseball team is.

Bryan Schaaf:

And your favorite baseball team?

Rev Ciancio:

I am a Yankees fan, every day of the year unless they are playing the Detroit Tigers. That's my way of saying that this is my wife's house, and she's a Yankee's fan.

Bryan Schaaf:

You know what? Fair enough. And I got a special place in my heart for the Motor City Kitties. Lord rest their soul of old Michigan and Trumbull Tiger Stadium. We can get into that on another day. Before we get into the nuts and bolts of what we want to talk about today, first, and this is the question that... I've known you for several years now. I have never asked you the question; Where does the name Rev come from?

Rev Ciancio:

You seriously don't know this?

Bryan Schaaf:

I have no idea.

Rev Ciancio:

That's awesome. So, most people think that Rev is my nickname. And at this point, it officially is, but I'm a Reverend. I am Reverend David J. Ciancio. I was ordained on January 22nd of 1997.

Bryan Schaaf:

No kidding.

Rev Ciancio:

Yeah. It was the first internet meme I ever thought was cool. Like, "Oh you could sign up to be a Reverend online. Cool. I'll do that. It'll be really funny." And I started citing my emails, Rev David Ciancio, and I got my checks changed, and I even had it put on my credit cards. And people thought it was my nickname. They didn't think it was a title. They just thought, "Oh that's Rev." And so, I went with it.

Bryan Schaaf:

You got to roll with it. So, do you do weddings?

Rev Ciancio:

I've done 17 weddings.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's so amazing. Right, Paige, keep this man in mind, you may need him some time, right?

Paige Clayton:

My boyfriend does not need any more pressure. God bless that man.

Bryan Schaaf:

That said, let's go ahead and dive in. So, as we look across the restaurant industry, by now, we are a year-plus into COVID, things are different. For a year, we've been talking about; what is the new normal, what does that look like? I don't know that we still have any idea what new normal is, but the reality is, the restaurant industry has waxed and waned through COVID, with restrictions coming on, with restrictions going off. Most have had to reduce their staff size in some way, shape, or form. And then a lot of those cases, one of the people who is not there anymore, is the person who was running the social media accounts for restaurants.

Bryan Schaaf:

And when I like to think of chefs, a lot of chefs are... they're like me; we're in our mid-thirties to mid-fifties, we are Gen Xers. We're that generation that grew up before social media, or really, internet was really a thing in vogue. I remember my biggest achievement was daily changing my AIM instant messenger away message when I was in college. But as social media evolves, as things continue to pop-up, this is a bit of a problem for folks like myself. You guys are here because this is what you do for a living. Rev, before we tear into this, talk to us about what you see, regarding this in the restaurant landscape. You're obviously just outside of New York City, you guys are ground zero for... really one of the areas that's been the hardest hit from a restaurant standpoint.

Rev Ciancio:

So, that was an amazing set-up here.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yes.

Rev Ciancio:

Okay. So, I am not really interested in the new normal. Normal, to me, is boring. Normal, to me, is old. Normal is not setting yourself above. I am interested in the new better. And if we're going to have a conversation, I want to talk about the new better. How's that sound?

Bryan Schaaf:

That's nice. I feel like I should change my entire intro. But first, give us a little background; how did you get to where you are now, that you can now be of this mindset of, "We need to shape and rethink what we're doing, moving forward"?

Rev Ciancio:

So, for those of you who don't know me, I used to own a bar in New York City. So, I know exactly how hard it is to run an operator location-based hospitality business. And truthfully, we sucked. We sucked hard. We owned that bar for six years, and we are ridiculously popular. We were top whisky bar in New York City on Foursquare for three years. We hit every single award. Place is packed all the time. We're just bad at operations, and we had a bad partnership, but we were really good at marketing. And what I learned in the six years doing there, thought my a lifetime... put me in a position where I am now. And that if you do the same thing as everybody else, you're going to have the same or worse results as everybody else.

Rev Ciancio:

And what I learned from there is, you know what? It's really not that hard to be better. It's really not. And it's really not that hard to extend the same focus that you put on your hospitality and service, onto your business and your marketing. And I'm going to give you an example. You're ready for this? So, I like to tell people that I don't wear judgy-pants. I wear judgy-pants. We all wear judgy-pants. Everybody have spare judgy-pants in their wallet. We got judgy-pants, right?

Bryan Schaaf:

I'll be honest, I only wear pants half the time in general.

Rev Ciancio:

God bless. So, if I walk into a steak house. I walk into that steak house, and they have a beautifully decorated façade, and I walk in, and there's red velvet, and I'm making this up, mahogany, I don't know. But it's beautiful. It's clear that somebody spent some time to make sure that the moment I walk in, I'm wowed. And I sit down at the table, and I get brought a leather-bound menu, and I open up and there's eight billion pages of wines that I couldn't even possibly ever think to know anything about, other than I like Chianti. And I'm blown away by all these things, and I'm like, "This is going to be an amazing experience." Here's the moment it falls apart; I look at their beer list, and they have Bud, Stella, and Coors. And I'm like, "Wait a minute. You spent all this time to have this ornate room, and you've

curated, you ave Certified Angus Beef, USDA, Prime, wagyu, this, that, the other thing, [inaudible 00:09:37] laser your name into...

Rev Ciancio:

All these attention in the details, and then where did it slip off the plate when, here's some crappy beers. I guarantee that if I then go look at their website, and I look at their social media and their lack of sending email to their customers, that the buck stopped at operations, that the buck stopped at; how do I operate. And that is the mistake that many restaurants make. They don't apply the same mindset that they did to their operations, to their entire business which includes marketing and social media. And I guess where I'm going here is, don't let the buck stop your attention to every single piece of your business. The service that you're going to provide on-premise, the service that you're going to put in your wine list, the amount of attention you're going to pay to your menu, take that same level of energy and apply it to your entire business.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Well said. Paige, how about for you? In your role, you're really fairly, certainly more recent college graduate than myself. The past year, at Certified Angus Beef, where we're fortunate to be employed here, we always say, "The beef is a great thing," but when you work with Certified Angus Beef, it's all the other services that we provide as well. So, we'll do a menu design, we have lots of different marketing services, things like that. Social media help is one of those things that, obviously, it's one of the more recent things that we've been delving into, but when you look at how restaurants have communicated with us in terms of needing assistance on social media, what has that been like for you in the past year? I'm oblivious to all those stuff, as you all know. So, please give us an update on that.

Paige Clayton:

Some restaurants want really specific help. They want to know; how do I communicate my specials, how do I communicate that I'm open, how do I communicate that I've had to shut down because of COVID without saying I've had to shut down because of COVID? Some want their really nitty-gritty help, some are flying by the seat of their pants and have never used social media before, but because they don't have that word of mouth of all the customers coming in and talking to each other and doing that old-school tell-your-friend business, they need social media, more than ever, honestly, just as like a bulletin newsletter, giant flashing neon sign that says, "Hey this is our current status, this is what we're currently serving. Help, because we don't know how long it's going to be before we get shut down again."

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Well said. Rev, one thing that Paige has mentioned, and that you have mentioned as well, was that idea of how you reach out to your customers; emails, marketing pieces like that. I'm probably not the demographic of customer, although I like to eat a lot, obviously.

Rev Ciancio:

Me too.

Bryan Schaaf:

But I don't tend to open emails like that, but your research, your experience says otherwise about most folks, correct?

Rev Ciancio:

Well, don't take this the wrong way, Bryan, but you're not every customer.

Bryan Schaaf:

My mother says I'm special though.

Rev Ciancio:

Mine too. It's amazing. Mums are great. But here's the problem that a lot of restaurateurs get into the mindset of; Well, that's not appealing to me, so why would I want to do it? Okay. And that's the wrong mindset to have, because, there are people who do read emails, and there are people who want restaurants to text them, and there are people that like social media. So, you can't put yourself in the scenario. What you can do is put your values into the scenario; "Well, if I'm going to email somebody, I'm going to make sure it has X value to it, or it's going to represent my brain in a certain way." Even if I don't read emails, people do. Let me give you an example.

Rev Ciancio:

I have a customer for a location place, it's a sit-down restaurant, they primarily do burgers and stuff. From January 18th to March 4th, that's about six weeks, I'm bath with math, they generated \$21,000 in revenue by sending an automated email. I'm going to repeat that. In six weeks, they generated \$21,000 in revenue by sending an automated email. The first time somebody had a transaction with that restaurant, they got a email that said, "Hey, thanks for ordering from the restaurant. Here's who we are" It had four sentences. I know I'm on screen giving you the big four [inaudible 00:14:03], but one, two, three, four. Four sentences, one email, \$21,000. So, whether you think you're the person that reads email from restaurants or not, it doesn't matter because it drives revenue, and that's what's important.

Bryan Schaaf:

So, if you could... Help us lift the lid a little bit on what that looks like. Because I can craft an email with four sentences in, and nobody's going to read it, and probably, maybe my mother. But what is that magic ingredient that a lot of people seem to be missing? It's that marketing magic, it's that piece that catches them. What is the difference that makes something like that work versus everything else?

Rev Ciancio:

Three questions; who are you, what do you do, and why do you do it? If you can answer those three questions, it will inform a significant portion of your content. Who are you, what do you do, and why do you do it? Okay. You have permission to market to your guests. They already love you. They've already had an experience that made them want to eat there again, or follow you, or sign up for an email. They've given you permission to send your message. So, if you can always be answering those questions; who are you, what do you do, and why do you do it? And make sure that whatever you send them is valuable, the rest is super easy. I tell restaurant operators all the time; can you write three sentences? Yeah. Okay. Then content should not be a problem.

Bryan Schaaf:

Fair enough. Well, and to your point, if it's more than three sentences, I'm probably not reading it.

Rev Ciancio:

Most people are not reading it.

Bryan Schaaf:

If it's not coming in a hand-drawn cartoon format, I'm generally out. Let's get into social media specifically. Paige, if you're a restaurant, and you are a cynical Gen Xer, which a lot of really famous chefs are. I spend my time in the kitchen, I deal with staffing issues, social media is annoying. It's the last thing, I don't want to have to do this, but you have to. So, give us some real talk about; if you are running a restaurant, and you are tasked with running that social channel, what are the steps that you need to take, what are the platforms you need to be on, what should you post, when should you post, can you give us the layer of that land?

Paige Clayton:

Yeah. Absolutely. The first answer is; it all depends. And I know it's not a cookie-cutter answer that everybody wants, but if you're a steakhouse, your main menu item is your steak. That's what you are known for. That needs to be the pinnacle of your social media content. If you're a burger joint, same thing. But honestly, it's so much simpler than people realize that it is. If any chef looked at their menu when they have a minute, and they say, "Okay, I serve a burger, I serve a porterhouse, I serve a strip, I've got some chicken, I've got some fish." Okay. You know you're working with proteins. People want to see really crafty creative plates, and most of that happens in the kitchen anyway. The one thing I've learned throughout my role at Certified Angus Beef is that the kitchen is one of the best places to get social content for food because that's where the food is made.

Paige Clayton:

So, if you can get a chef wrapped around the idea of, "Hey, what you're taking pictures of on your personal phone, give that to me, send that your social media specialist." If I could tell you the number of times I've seen Tony Biggs' phone, and just taken it off of him, and dumped all the photos that he has into my Dropbox, I'd be a millionaire. Because, he's already doing that behind the scenes. Chefs are already taking photos of their work because they're proud of their work. Work with what you already have, don't reinvent the wheel. If you're a steakhouse and you're taking pictures of 47 different strip steaks every day, post about strip steaks. You don't need to create something that's harder than what already exists. As for platform, it depends.

Bryan Schaaf:

But not my space, correct?

Paige Clayton:

No. God, no way. I'll tell you; one of my colleagues and I, gosh last fall, fall before, went to New York City and did a total food-eating tour, solely based off of Instagram. We typed in #nyceats, and came up with 10 restaurants. That's what we did the whole weekend. And that's all we did. That's all we want to do. But somebody like my dad, not going to look on Instagram for what he wants to eat. He might look on Facebook, he might see the what to do in [Whistler 00:18:38] page, talking about how Broken Rocks has a strip steak special that night, and he might say, "Hey, I want to go to dinner here." And my and dad will go out to dinner. So, I wouldn't think so much about the platform, don't think that hard. Use what you have already in your back pocket, everything else will keep going.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Well said. Any thoughts on... So, my background, pre-Certified Angus Beef, actually, funny enough, I had nothing to do with meat. I have a journalism background, and I remember, back in the newspaper days, they would not run a photo unless there were people in it, because, old-school print media, faces mean it's got a human element to it. The pages that I'm most drawn to are the places where I can associate a person with that restaurant. It makes me feel a little more comfortable, a little more warm and fussy. Again, am I representative of what other people are feeling as well, or is that just me being a weirdo?

Paige Clayton:

I think it's divided. With the younger audience, we want to see food, we want to see artsiness, we want to see steaks on a plate. With the older audience, they want to feel more akin to the atmosphere, they want to feel like it's approachable. They don't want to see a fancy steak on a plate that doesn't make any sense, that they then can't recreate in their own homes. They want something that makes them feel welcome and physically drawn to the table. So, I think it depends on the audience that you are working with, but we always go with the hands in photos rule around here. If you can put hands in a photo, do it. Sometimes, if you can put a person in the photo, it might take away more than you think it's going to add, if that makes sense.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. Rev, what are your thoughts on... From an experience that these specific types of posts... And honestly, you've talked about email already, but the specific types of outreach that get the best return for your time, what is it that works? What should people be hedging towards? Paige just talked about the idea of hands in photos, although I actually was just working on my little moped yesterday, and my hands are not that attractive right now. But what are those things that really suck people in?

Paige Clayton:

Calls to action. One hundred percent, the thing that is missing from content put out there by restaurants and independent operators, is calls to action. And so, what do I mean by that? If you don't put at the end of your post about steak, "Click the link in our bio now to make a reservation, or place an order, or sign up for our email blaster, download our app," or whatever it is the thing that you want to do, how can you expect somebody to take the action. You have to help them complete the journey. So, if you're like, "Hey, here's our new bone-in ribeye that we cooked medium-rare, and it's seared" And I just made myself hungry, and whatever, if you don't then follow that with "Click the link in our bio now to do this thing," or if it's on Facebook, including the link to take the next action, how can you expect people to take the action.

Paige Clayton:

And so, what I often see most restaurants do... And look, hands, people, food, whatever, I can make arguments why you should do either or, but you got to complete the journey; tell people to do the thing. If you've ever watched a commercial where they don't say, "Go to your nearest Taco Bell, call us now, buy this from the store, this is available at that grocery store," it works. Help people complete the journey. Use a call to action.

Bryan Schaaf:

All right. Well, regarding Taco Bell, I've never got that message. For me, it's just instinctive. I'm like the salmon swimming upstream. It's like, "Beef chalupas are back on the menu." I'm just going to make my

way down there. I will bet, if you are listening to this podcast, we invite you to stick around, joining us a little later on to talk about the other piece that we haven't really gotten into, and that is photography. Specifically, photography with your iPhone. Our pal, Ben Hon, who's actually just across Manhattan from wherever he's at right now. Ben is in Brooklyn but Ben runs Stuff Ben Eats on the Instagram, boatload of followers, but if you check it out, you'll notice the pictures that he put up are real stinking impressive. We've been able to, hopefully, give you some guidance in here, as the what to post. And we'll get into the how-to in terms of photography here in a little bit.

Bryan Schaaf:

But before we let the good Reverend go, we need to dive into the man himself, not just what he does, but who he is. And who he is, I like to explain it like this; when I think of burgers, I like to think of the four horsemen of burgers, the Mount Rushmore of burgers. I like to think, of course, of our pal George Motz who literally wrote the book on burgers, Hamburger America, and hosts the Burger Scholar on First We Feast. I like to think of our... Man, all of you guys are close except for one; Nick Solares on the lower East side, who, of course, is with Meat Life Media. And I also like to think of our pal out in Los Angeles who now runs Amboy Quality Meats and Delicious Burgers, Alvin Cailan, the host of the Burger Show. And the fourth, we'll call him the Abraham Lincoln of the Mount Rushmore of Burgers, is you, David Rev Ciancio. Talk to us about burgers. I think you are as addicted as I am if not even more so.

Rev Ciancio:

Yes. By the way, you could come onto any show I ever do again and intro me that way. Thank you.

Bryan Schaaf:

You got it, man.

Rev Ciancio:

I think Alvin George and Nick, I pray to their pedestal a little bit, but God bless. Thank you. Just if I can make myself feel like I'm worthy of that, I did write one of the world's top three hamburger blogs for a long time, and I am the founder of the forum of New York City Burger week, so I guess I get a... Also, if you Google expert burger taster, I should be the top 11 results, so there you go.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's impressive. I'd love you to have that put on my business card.

Rev Ciancio:

You know what? I got rid of business cards. I'm not doing business cards anymore.

Bryan Schaaf:

Really?

Rev Ciancio:

No. No more business cards.

Bryan Schaaf:

Tattoo QR code?

Rev Ciancio:

No.

Bryan Schaaf:

What replaces business cards?

Rev Ciancio:

Now, I know we're on a podcast so people can't see us talking on video, but I hand out fidget spinners with my screen name.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's amazing.

Rev Ciancio:

That's it. When I go visit restaurants, I go to people's meetings, I give them a fidget spinner with my screen name, which is @revciancio. Anyway, we're talking about burgers. What do you want to talk about burgers? Because that's a black hole for me. We get sucked in. How about this; what is the one thing that every single person out there does wrong with their burger? You want to talk about that?

Bryan Schaaf:

Yes.

Rev Ciancio:

Okay. So, here's the mistake every single person out there makes with their burger; they put cheese on the top. Why should your cheese go on the bottom? There are two very important reasons why your cheese should go on the bottom. Number one; unless you are lactose intolerant or just don't like cheese. Does anybody ever order a hamburger with cheese? And the answer is no. Why? Because we like the flavor, so you should put it closer to your tongue. Number one. Number two, and more importantly, why does cheese go on bottom? Because it protects bun integrity. All that delicious marbleization that is creating all those wonderful juices that make it so buttery and delicious to eat, when they seep out of the paddy and go into the bun, they ruin the bun. If you put cheese underneath the paddy, it creates a seal and it keeps the juices in, and you will maintain, not only bun integrity, but you will have to wash your shirts less.

Bryan Schaaf:

Well stated. He's not only a burger expert taster, but he's also a laundry expert, which, by the way, since this an audio medium, I will point out the fact that Rev is wearing a slayer t-shirt.

Rev Ciancio:

It's not t-shirt. This is a slayer Hawaiian shirt, or some people say an aloha shirt.

Bryan Schaaf:

All right. One last question before we roll. Burgers are something that... they're a bit like children. You can't pick a favorite. Maybe you can, I don't know.

Rev Ciancio:

Thank you.

Bryan Schaaf:

But let's talk nationwide, we have the liberty to veer off the path of what is sort of all things Certified Angus Beef here. I think Tony and I actually gave a 20-minute soliloquy about Chick-fil-A, a couple of episodes ago. But in terms of national chase, burgers that people can get anywhere, do you have some favorites?

Rev Ciancio:

So, you're right. I typically don't play favorites, and I cringe when somebody says, "What's your favorite burger?" I'm like, "How can you like food this much and pick one. That's not a thing." It's like the same thing, "What pizza do you like?" Goes like, "All of them." So, some chains that people can get anywhere, that I would eat that. I do love Five Guys. I think Five Guys has a superior experience. I just love the simplicity of it. And it's the same everywhere. I also like their hot dogs. I really do. I think Smashburger as well, you go to Smashburger, you know you're getting quality. I like that. And I make no bones about it; I freaking like White Castle. I absolutely love White Castle. In fact, again, for those who are on screen, here is a White Castle candle on my desk that smells like sliders. I absolutely love White Castle.

Bryan Schaaf:

Glorious.

Rev Ciancio:

There's a couple, but honestly, I just love burgers. Whataburger is awesome. There are regional burgers all over this earth that people talk about, "When I go to LA, the first thing I do is go to In-N-Out." I'm like, "I don't. I go to Del Taco," but there are those burgers everywhere, that the minute I get off a plane, I'm like, "I can't wait to go." Like Tasty Burger in Boston. Oh My God. You guys have been to Tasty Burger?

Bryan Schaaf:

I have not done Tasty Burger.

Paige Clayton:

I have. It was remarkable.

Rev Ciancio:

Oh my God. Preach.

Paige Clayton:

Amazing.

Bryan Schaaf:

It's not just a clever name.

Paige Clayton:

No, it's-

Rev Ciancio:

It's the real deal.

Paige Clayton:

It's the real deal.

Rev Ciancio:

Or Pincho Factory in Miami. I get off a plane in Fort Lauderdale or [inaudible 00:28:38], and I'm like, "Take me to a Pincho now."

Bryan Schaaf:

The one that actually... so, two things; one, I actually... it was a perfect storm of travel. I left San Francisco and flew to Amarillo, Texas. And so, in a 24-hour period, I was able to have... actually, it was more like a 12-hour period, I was able to have In-N-Out, and as soon as you get out of the Rick Husband Airport in Amarillo, Texas, there's the Whataburger beacon that's shining 24 hours. So, I got to have the Whataburger, back-to-back.

Rev Ciancio:

I have eaten at that exact Whataburger.

Bryan Schaaf:

It's delicious. The one, and this where I'm like... Again, I'm not a paid spokesperson by any stretch, have you heard Culver's?

Rev Ciancio:

Of course. I'm from Michigan. I know what a cheese curd is. Come one.

Paige Clayton:

I have never had Culver's, and I've been searching for one. Every single time I go on a road trip, I try and have it, and it doesn't work out.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. It's a perfect smash. So smash that it's crispy on the outside.

Rev Ciancio:

I'm a fan. I think if I had a... And again, I don't play favorites, but I'll tell you what I think is really special about Whataburger, that I can't believe other people have not adopted, is Hatch Green Chiles. Why is this not on everybody's menu, 24/7?

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. I feel like that's the Whataburger pro tip right there. Alvin is known for telling you how to order your burger when you got to In-N-Out, right? I feel like you are spot on with Whataburger; go in, get it, and thank us later, right?

Rev Ciancio:

Hatch Green Chiles, heck yeah.

Bryan Schaaf:

Delicious. On that note, we are going to pause here on the Meat Speak Podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand. Paige is going to stick around, she's going to be at the other end. Don't worry, I know it's still COVID. We are from a safe socially-distant six feet. We are going to let the Rev get on about his business. You know what? Before we go, give us one more tag; where could people find you?

Rev Ciancio:

So, the easiest way to find me is my screen name, it's the same on every single platform out there. It's @revciancio. Most people are like, "I don't know how to spell that." I don't understand. I also run the world's largest french fry-themed Instagram account, it's called Fun With Fries. So, if you like fries, go there, and you could find @revciancio in the bio. So, there you go.

Bryan Schaaf:

Glorious. So, thank you for taking time to join us. We are going to be back here at the moment, with Ben Hon from Stuff Ben Eats to teach you how to take the best pictures with your phone. All things social media, here on the Meat Speak Podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand.

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak Podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand, talking all things social media today. If you are a Gen Xer chef who shakes his fist at social media, but you have to embrace it anyway, hopefully, we have piqued your interest. And our next guest will give you a little bit more fodder to take the best photos that you can. He has successfully merged his love of food, hospitality, and photography, into a successful venture on the Instagram. Having grown up in his mother's restaurant, working various jobs before entering in a career in finance, his interest in food never waned.

Bryan Schaaf:

And then in 2016, he launched Stuff Ben Eats, which bloomed to almost 60,000 followers ever since. I totally looked that up before. I'm like, "[inaudible 00:32:08] what you are right now" So, if you were wondering, you're at 60K, almost. He's also a Zagat top 100 food Instagrammer, and a Google Pixel ambassador. I have no idea what that means but you could tell us in a minute. And just to be clear, he has been doing it for the gram, long before it was cool. Welcome to the podcast, Ben Hon. How're you doing, my friend?

Ben Hon:

Great. Thank you so much, brother. Appreciate it. Happy to be on.

Bryan Schaaf:

It's so good to see your face. So, you are in Brooklyn, right?

Ben Hon:

Am in Brooklyn, New York.

Bryan Schaaf:

Are you a Brooklyn boy from birth?

Ben Hon:

No. I was born in Jersey, actually, but I moved to Brooklyn in 2007. So, I guess I can consider myself a Brooklynite now.

Bryan Schaaf:

Right on. It's funny; a lot of folks that we talk to on this podcast, all happen to reside in New York City metro area. There's a lot happening there. But we wanted to talk to you. I've known you for a long time. You have a couple different things going on, but one of that best... I think I met you a couple of years ago, because, we had a mutual pal, Jean-Paul Bourgeois at Blue Smoke in New York City, and you came to this dinner and were taking crazy awesome photos. Paige, you got to see this guy. He just rolls back into the kitchen like NBD and snapping pictures. I mean, he just owns the place. Tell us about how you go from kid working in a restaurant... I totally stalked you and found out about the finance thing. How did that lead into Stuff Ben Eats?

Ben Hon:

Oh Men, well, coming from a restaurant family, I worked in restaurants, pretty much my entire life, or at least half my life. I'm the only child, so whenever my parents went to work, they would essentially take me to the restaurant. There was no babysitter. My babysitters were chefs and servers. When I was old enough to walk and talk, they put me to work. And it's like there's no child labor laws back then. So, they just, "Do this, answer the phone, pack this take out." So, I've been in that environment, all the way from elementary school through high school, even college. After school, I would go back into the restaurant and work, essentially, the night shift. So, I guess that's where my passion for the hospitality industry came from, and where my love and appreciation for food also came from.

Ben Hon:

So, after doing that till I was in my 20s, I was like, "I'm done with this, men." I'm exhausted, I'm burnt out, and went to Rockers for finance. It seemed like the cool thing to do back then, and everyone was doing it and seemed like a pretty decent future. So, I study finance, graduated business school, and then worked in some pretty big banks, I guess, like Ernst & Young and Morgan Stanley, UBS. I did that for 14 years. So, left in 2014. But I guess during that time, when I was in finance, I started making some money, and was able to eat at nicer restaurants, and got really, really into food. I started following chefs and all the restaurant openings and stuff like that. Really into the scene and on top of it. And then at that time, when I missed the industry, I was thinking about either becoming a chef or a restaurant owner, but one, I didn't want to work those kind of hours. And two is I didn't have the finances to actually own a restaurant. So, those dreams washed away pretty quickly.

Ben Hon:

But I always had an interest in photography. And every time I would always eat something, I would always take a quick photo on my phone. I mean, this is going back to the old flip phone days, just dating myself. I just take a picture for my memories, but I never did anything with it. Just kept it on my phone or my hard drive. And then, fast-forward to the end of 2014, I had a little opportunity to have a little pop-up dessert shop with my ex, and she was a pastry chef, so it was just the two of us in this tiny little shop in the West Village in New York. And had it for about four or five months. And that's where I learned the power of social media and photography. We had a customer who came in every day. She's a really talented artist, did a lot of watercolor. And we're like, "Hey, we have this really blank white wall up here, and we'd love to have some of your artwork up on there." And she's like, "Really?" And she put a water art, and then the next day, she put it on Instagram.

Ben Hon:

And we didn't know she did this, but the next day, there was about 80 to 100 people that came in and started ordering everything. And we're like, "What's going on here?" It's a tiny little 12-seat shop, mind you, and packed. We were just like, "What is happening here?" And realized it was the power of social media. And she didn't have a lot of followers, but her followers were all quality followers that were artists, musicians, photographers, all creatives, super, super talented, and great eye. And they're taking these photos and posting them on Instagram. And I'm seeing these pictures like, "I'm in this place every day, I don't even see that corner or that shot." Wow, so that really opened my eyes to photography. I met some really talented photographers, and then that's when my ex had suggested that I start an account. I had all these food photos just sitting on my hard drive. So, I did that.

Ben Hon:

But to be quite honest, jokingly, she's like, "You should call (beep) Ben Eats." You can bleep that out. Sorry. I don't know if it's a PG channel or not. So, that always stuck with me, and I was like, "Obviously, I can't call it that." So, I would just change it to Stuff Ben Eats. So, that was the creation of the account. And then when I started posting, I didn't know what I was doing. I was just posting a photo, using the Instagram filters, and saying, "Breakfast." That was my caption. And then when I started learning the power of hashtags and geotags, and all that stuff from friends, that's when things started to happen, and then started getting followers and people liking my photos out of the blue.

Ben Hon:

And then it became this big wave of followers. And the big break for me, I would say, is probably 2017, when I had about 8,000 followers. Refinery29 had reached out and said, "Hey, we'd love to feature you as one of our top food Instagrams to follow in New York City. And I was like, "What? You're sure you got the right person?" And they were like, "Yeah. We love your photos and we'd love to feature you." And I was like number, I think, 11 or 12 on the list at the time. It was a fresh new list. And that opened up a lot of opportunities. So, started to go on and on, but that's basically how Stuff Ben Eats came about.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's amazing. And so, literally, I mean, you are the guy who... I always like to think of it; people see amazing dishes, creative dishes, inspiring dishes through your lens. So, as you were taking pictures, we'll get into the how-to. But as you're taking these pictures, realizing that you are creating what is going to be representative of that chef, of that restaurant, do you feel a bit of pressure to make sure... I got to make sure that this thing looks as good as possible?

Ben Hon:

Yeah. Every time. That's exactly how I feel. I feel super stressed, and put a lot of pressure on myself. Because I really do appreciate every time a chef invites me into their restaurant, and I do consider it to be a job first, not like a free invite or free food. My job is to, like you said, represent them in the best way possible. So, to me, it's work first. I try to get the best shots for each dish, I want to try to feature every dish in my posts or stories.

Ben Hon:

Early on, I would go to a restaurant, take a picture of, let's say six or seven dishes, and I will space them out because I didn't have that kind of content. But now, I'm eating out probably twice a day, so I'll feature a carousel or a slide show of 10 photos from that restaurant. Sometimes, I wouldn't even have enough space. But yeah, again, I want to do the best for those guys, and represent them, best way I can, because, I know how hard it is to have a restaurant. This is pre-COVID, and I just really appreciate being invited in, so I do want to do the best job for them.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. So, before we proceed into the nuts and bolts, Paige, you live in this environment all the time. When you talk about taking pictures, and we'll just jump ahead and assume you've got a picture you want to use, what is the balance that if you were a chef managing this account, I guess, what's the cadence that you need? I mean, because certainly, I tend to notice, and [Greg 00:41:30] and I find that the older I get the more I realize that I'm actually kind of a weirdo. So, I get turned off when I see a glut of photos always posted because I become immune to it. But then if you don't post hardly ever, then I forget about you. What's something to keep in mind as these chefs are managing these accounts?

Paige Clayton:

Yeah. You're absolutely right. There's definitely a sweet spot. We've found that when you first start a channel, it's very wild west, you don't really know what's going to go over well with your audience, you don't know what they're going to find important, what they're going to find necessary or what they're going to find annoying, to be honest. In that beginning stage, it's really important to listen to your audience first, because, frankly, it doesn't matter what you want to share, it matters what the audience wants to know. So, listening to your audience, if you're into stats, check your engagement, check your reach. If you're in the very basics, look at your likes and comments. If you're getting 200 likes and 40 comments versus 10 likes, 3 comments, easy math. So, look more at what your audience wants, not necessarily what you want to say.

Bryan Schaaf:

And see, that hurts my heart right there because I want to do what I want to do.

Paige Clayton:

Not all about you.

Bryan Schaaf:

This is why I'm not a successful social media person. Ben, agree? I mean are these sort of the same ideas that you give guidance on? I mean do you see a lot of the same things?

Ben Hon:

I do. I think you can go either way. You do definitely have to pay attention to your audience, there are some people that... Some restaurant accounts I look at, and all they post is flyers, and that's not really going to do anything, but that's their approach like you said. But there are sometimes where I think that there should be a voice to the chef and to the restaurant. And sometimes, it's nice to see that personal side as well. So, it's a delicate balance for sure.

Bryan Schaaf:

And I've seen your operation when you roll in. You've got proper cameras, you've got phones, obviously, we've mentioned earlier, the whole Google Pixel ambassador, which I always thought that was the glasses that you wear.

Ben Hon:

No. That's [inaudible 00:43:53].

Bryan Schaaf:

My bad. All right. I have no idea. Let's talk about the how-tos. So, years ago, we had this... Oh Lord, I didn't even want to say it. It was like a \$1000 Nikon, and it became the camera that when we wanted to get a good photo, that's the one we used. And all of a sudden, the last five years or so, we noticed that the iPhone in my pocket is capturing better images than this proper camera. So, really, as long as you have a phone, you can be successful with this right?

Ben Hon:

Agreed. A thousand percent. Phones nowadays are so advanced that they do sometimes take better pictures than the fancy cameras. And you definitely don't need a fancy DSLR or any of these cameras for sure, thousands of dollars. My friend and I had this contest, this little fun thing that we do. So, we're both Google Pixel ambassadors, and what that means is, Google Pixel is the flagship phone for Google, and such a competitor of the iPhone, but just for full transparency, I do own both phones; one is a work phone, one is a personal phone. But the Pixel is a wonderful phone, it takes amazing photos. And he uses Leica Q, which is a really fancy camera as well, about a couple thousand dollars. And when he takes his photos, sometimes he'll mix up the Google Pixel photos and the Leica photos, and we'll play a game, we'll be like, "Pixel or Leica?" And sometimes, I'll get it wrong. I'm like, "That's a pixel?" He's like, "Yeah." It's all about composition, lighting, and editing. If you can get those three things, you can use anything, to be quite honest.

Bryan Schaaf:

So, let's turn the page. If you could walk us through that. I've said, and on some of your sessions before, I know, and if you are tuning in, I will say, I have been at sessions with chefs who hang on every word that Ben is saying. So, I mean if I haven't said it already, man, thank you so much for taking time.

Ben Hon:

Thank you.

Bryan Schaaf:

This is a guy to learn from. I mean walk us through those three steps to basically guarantee, "This is the best setting, regardless of what phone is in my pocket, that's going to work for me."

Ben Hon:

Sure. I mean when I go into a setting, the first thing I look for is lighting. Obviously, daylight is the best. Natural light is your best source of light. If you can do it by window, that's great. If you can't, which is a lot of the times, a lot of shots are in their kitchen or in the dining room where it's dark, I would advise getting a small little portable light to have on the side. You can get it for like 33 bucks on Amazon. But lighting is your most important thing because there's a lot of time when chefs or anybody will take pictures in the dark or by candle, and it just looks warm and orange and super dark, and it's not very appealing. So, lighting, first of all. Second of all, I would say, composition. Meaning, compose your shot. Make sure there's not a lot of stuff in there where you might want to just cram everything into the shot, but doesn't make sense. Where do your eyes go when you look at the photo?

Ben Hon:

If you have 10 dishes in there, I'm looking, my eyes are all over the place. But if you stylize it in a way where your eyes go to immediately. Let's say there's a center dish where it's a little bit bigger than the rest, but then in the middle or something, and then your eyes can drift around it. But have some intention to your photo and your composition. And then lastly, it's editing. You got to make it look appealing and make sure it's bright, make sure all the colors are right. A lot of times, there's issues with tint, meaning it's either too purple or too green, so you want to fix that and make sure the colors are right. And then once you have that... The thing that I ask myself at the end when I post a photo is, "Do I want to eat that? Does it look appealing?" Sometimes it's delicious but it looks like crap. Maybe I might put that at the end of the slideshow, but yeah. Seriously, that's the question you have to ask yourself, "Does it look appealing to you?"

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. Well, and I mean let's be real. I remember, in its hay day, Lord rest its soul, The Greenhouse Tavern in Cleveland, Jonathon Sawyer would always say, "We specialize in making delicious brown food." It may not be visually stimulating but it's good, and I'm not skinny today as a result of that. If you guys could each of you jump in on filters. This is something that I have a love... I'm not sure if I should love this relationship with. Filters have a way of filtering things, I suppose, and sometimes, I notice it feels like people get so reliant on Instagram filters and things like that, that it almost ruins what started out as a really good picture. I guess what are your thoughts on the use of filters?

Paige Clayton:

I think filters can be useful if they're used the right way. They shouldn't make or break the image, they should only be an enhancement to it. If you can't show the story and show the photo the way that you want to without a filter, like Ben said, you need to work on your composition, you need to work on your lighting, you need to change things around, because, it shouldn't be something that you lean really heavily on. One tip that Ben actually thought me when I was super young, fresh out of college, and showing this really awesome photographer, all the photos I could take at Certified Angus Beef, clean your screen, clean your phone.

Paige Clayton:

Especially if you're using an iPhone or a Pixel, whatever it may be, that mobile device that you rely so heavily on, has been in your pocket all day. It's been in your thumb all day. It's been in your car all day. Clean your screen with a napkin, with the back of your shirt, just simple, and that sets a stage for a good photo before you even take it. That leaves editing and filtering to the experts, but you've already set your stage for a good photo.

Ben Hon:

You'd be surprised at how many fingerprints smudges are in there. And I remember when I first met Paige, we were at the restaurant, and then she took a photo, and I saw the photo, I immediately looked at it, and I was like, "Your lens is dirty."

Paige Clayton:

I was so embarrassed.

Ben Hon:

I cleaned it for her, and I said, "Here, take a shot now." And it was literally already 10 times better, right?

Paige Clayton:

A game-changer.

Ben Hon:

Yeah. It really is. That's the first thing I always do. Automatically, I wipe the lens with my shirt or whatever, a lens cleaner, prior to taking photos, and you'd be surprised. Like I said, the cameras are so high-tech these days on the phone, and they do a great job of capturing all the photos, and actually making the right adjustments for the coloring sometimes.

Bryan Schaaf:

Interesting. This is, I guess, one more question. Because I mean, as you all know, I'm pretty clueless on a lot of these things. I have a case for my iPhone, it's an 11 something, something, and over the camera was a little plastic see-through piece, and I noticed that it didn't take very good pictures. So, I knocked it out, and then it takes very crisp photos. I mean, is this something that you've come across that, be weary of the case that you've put on your phone as well because that's another layer that you have to take a picture through.

Ben Hon:

Yeah. Totally. That little plastic window gets super dirty, and not just on the outside but on the inside as well. So, I definitely recommend not using those and having the... because the lens is already protected from the cases, so I think it's fine. You really don't need that little plastic piece. It's going to mess up your photos.

Bryan Schaaf:

Well, good. I didn't lose any sleep knocking that thing. It was fun, actually. One last question before we wrap... because we are approaching the witching hour. And I'll throw this out to both of you guys. What are the biggest mistakes that you see people making? As people who actively are viewing, especially

posts coming from restaurants. The photography mistakes that you look at, and you're like, "I should talk to them."

Ben Hon:

One is shadows. A lot of people don't realize that the light source is behind, and they're taking a photo, and their arm and their phone is in the photo. The shadows are really bad, and I'm like, "Literally, the light source is behind you. Come on, man." So, that's one that I see a lot. And two is, again, as you're taking it under those really warm lights, so the whole picture looks very orange, move it around, take it to some other light source. Even if it's under a bathroom light. If it's warm, white, and keeps the colors true, then take your photo there. So, I would say the lighting and the shadows is most important for shots. Because all the times in the restaurants, they have those nice lights actually, that do... there's nice white lights that make the food look nice. So, find your angle, whether it's overhead or 45 degrees or even down low, in line with the food, find your angle and make sure there's not a lot of stuff in the background as well; no distractions that distract from the main subject of the photo. It's my tips.

Paige Clayton:

Yeah. I agree. The two, I would say, from the restaurant side of things, what I've seen, social media posts, overcropping. A lot of people like to crop out what's in the back of the photo because they think they're not composing it correctly when they shoot it. So, I would say, take cropping with a grain of salt. You want to show the whole image and the whole picture. Additionally, I see a lot of graphic images, a lot of menus, a lot of split screens, a lot of logos. Just keep in mind that if a picture is worth a thousand words, I would probably say, one on social media is worth a million. So, let the picture talk for itself.

Ben Hon:

Yeah. And lastly, have a clean feed. A lot of Instagrams nowadays are essentially the online menu for restaurants, and also, the website, because, people will come to the page and they'll look for, "What's their status? Are they open? What are their hours or whatever?" Have that in your bio or your profile. And again, most importantly, have nice pictures of your dishes, because, I go to a restaurant and I will go to their Instagram right away and say, "Hey, let's see what they got." And I'll order off of that. So, make your feed beautiful and representative of your food.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Well said. By the way, if a picture is worth a thousand, Instagram is worth a million. I mean, that's profound, Paige Clayton.

Paige Clayton:

I stand by it.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's got to be your next tattoo.

Paige Clayton:

Don't tell my mum.

Bryan Schaaf:

On that note, we do have to land this plane here. So, if this is your first time tuning into the Meat Speak Podcast, know that you can find this across all of your major podcasting platforms; Google Play, Apple, Spotify, or simply by visiting certifiedangusbeef.com/podcast. That's my favorite because it's got me, Tony, and Diana Clark staring back at you with our photo there. My mother also approves that. That said, please check out all of the previous episodes. I think this is episode 16 of season 2. There's a whole season one there also to be devoured.

Bryan Schaaf:

Ben Hon, Stuff Ben Eats, on the Instagram, currently, he's at 60,000 followers. I think by the time this is... We're going to push you over to a billion. Let's set the bar high. Man, thank you so much for taking time to join us and for giving your tips for the best photos for chefs running the social media accounts. Also, a big shout out, although he was a little earlier in the segment, thanks to our pal, Rev Ciancio, the man who's wearing a slayer shirt, I'll tell you that one, when we interviewed him. Just a fascinating guy in terms of digital marketing, and the man knows a thing or two about burgers.

Ben Hon:

He knows a lot. Great guy.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's right. Also, Paige Clayton, digital marketing specialist for the Certified Angus Beef Brand, and the person who has to put up with all of my stupid Gen X social media questions. Thank you all for joining us on the Meat Speak Podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand.