

The Restaurant Business Is the Romance Business

No, not that kind of romance. This kind:

a quality or feeling of mystery, excitement, and remoteness from everyday life.

Restaurants are in an industry with low margins and lots of competition. They can't afford to just fight other restaurants on the basis of food quality or price. The smart ones know they have to compete on the quality of experience.

In the past year, I've been to many a restaurant that has transported me far from my everyday life. I've been to a Day of the Dead festival at *The El Felix* in Alpharetta, GA. I've been to a prohibition-era speakeasy in Atlanta at *The Red Phone Booth*. I've been to a Montana honky-tonk at *Ted's Montana Grill*. Even at many chain restaurants, I'm impressed by the focus on decor that sets a mood and place. **These restaurants have given me fundamentally romantic experiences.**

My recent dining memories have borne out that great restaurant "romance" is the result as much of imagination as of hard work. The imagination of the restaurant creates an experience that activates my own imagination. And because my mind is fully engaged, I get an intangible value from my environment that makes my food and drink *more* than just food and drink.

And that, of course, makes me willing to pay more for that food and drink. Ka-ching. *Cash register sound*

I claimed in my title that restaurants are in the romance business. But the reality is that romance is only a gateway. **All businesses are in the business of providing meaning.** Pixar tells stories. Blue Bell Ice Cream sells nostalgia and feelings of home. Fedex sells the experience of giving and receiving gifts from afar. Home Depot sells the experience of building your first home.

All of our purchases (when the business frames them right) are soaked with meaning. We humans are at our best when every interaction we have puts us closer in touch with meaningfulness. We're more open, more generous, and more creative. That is something business owners and their customers should both strive for. That is a spirit that creates commerce which isn't drudgery, and spending which isn't grudging.