

Against the Grain

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Op Ed- Headwaters – Food, Money, and Stability

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Headwaters — Food, Money, and Stability

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“Listen, and take my advice. Don’t overlook the money part of it. I’ve been poor and I’ve been rich. Rich is better!” — Beatrice Kaufman

Column Editor’s Note: This essay is an updated, revised, and expanded version of a post published on “**The Geysers**,” an e-newsletter written by the author and available at <https://thegeyser.substack.com>. — KA

One of my guilty pleasures is watching **Chef Robert Irvine’s** “Restaurant: Impossible.” After a hiatus, it’s back this year, with three episodes each Saturday night — a “behind the scenes” rehash of a prior episode, a new episode, and a “revisit” years after the previous makeover to see how things are faring.

The premise of the show has **Irvine** and his crew visiting failing restaurants. Over two days and with a budget of \$10,000, they revamp them, solve management issues, address staff shortcomings, and fix the menu and kitchen.

Very often, the distress of facing a business that is not viable has created discord, depression, and desperation for the owners. The downward spiral is what **Irvine** is there to stop and reverse. His approach is classic “tough love” with a heaping helping of training, education, and inspiration. In most cases, there are excellent people trapped in circumstances that have gotten beyond their abilities to handle.

While the show is certainly not to everyone’s taste, what **Irvine** demonstrates are two important business fundamentals — positioning and execution. These two aspects of business are core to any initiative.

Positioning has to do with how a business exists relative to its customers and what it provides them. Execution has to do with how well it does these things.

The payoff moment of each episode is seeing how the business has done after an **Irvine** rehab. You are told how the business grew, revenues improved, etc. Because not everything works out, sometimes the needle doesn’t move much — but it usually does. The “re-visits” have been especially encouraging. Surely

hand-picked, some failing restaurants have turned into multi-million-dollar successes. It’s especially heartening to see entire families thriving once again after struggling, their lives dominated by the worries of foreclosure and failure. With these no longer hovering over their relationships and health, new people emerge — marriages are filled with warmth again, parents and children can enjoy one another once more, and work and life mesh in greater harmony.

The essential and unashamed motivator for **Irvine** is — wait for it — money. In **Irvine’s** book, if the restaurants don’t make money, they shouldn’t exist. The ability to make a profit is, to him, a virtue born of discipline and service. That is, the discipline to position and execute well, which manifests as service to customers. Service means giving people something unique they want, like, and respect.

To put his approach to profitability into action, **Irvine** takes novice restaurateurs through the simple “thirds” of a restaurant business — food costs = 1/3, overhead and profit = 1/3, and staff and salaries = 1/3. These are guidelines, not hard-and-fast rules. Slip below these, and trouble is brewing, while really successful restaurants can price items so that profits increase without sacrificing food quality or staff longevity and happiness.

What makes all this so poignant to me? We’re living within a business culture (scholarly communications) that is often squeamish about profit or revenues or success — where profit margins are shamed and businesses are punished for doing what businesses are meant to do, which is to make money. **Irvine’s** show

puts a human face on how a struggling business shatters lives, and how a thriving business gives people power, confidence, stability, and self-respect.

Good salaries, good benefits, stability, and growth make for happy, proud, confident people who can help others realize the same benefits. In our world, we have institutions with billions in the bank arguing over contracts

with publishers whose only sin has been running their businesses well, atop a general demonization of profit. We also have a broader social order that for the last 40 years has delivered more benefits to the top 1% than to the bottom 90% in aggregate gains, despite incredible increases in productivity. Watching “the little guys and gals” running restaurants go from rags to riches shows how a more equitable society could only be good for the people in it.

So, it’s reassuring for me to see a sensible person like **Irvine** come in, give no-nonsense advice like, “You’re in business to make money,” and see someone help people struggling to make ends meet find their way to success. The happiness beaming from people who have found their way to prosperity? That’s far better than piles of money locked away in investment funds, stock portfolios, retirement accounts, and so forth.

We spend so much time fretting about money that I think we forget it’s supposed to liberate and empower us, not ensnare us or be hoarded. To that point, I’ll end with this quote about money from **Yuval Noah Harari**, author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*:

... money is ... the apogee of human tolerance. Money is more open-minded than language, state laws, cultural codes, religious beliefs, and social habits. Money is the only trust system created by humans that can bridge almost any cultural gap, and that does not discriminate on the basis of religion, gender, race, age, or sexual orientation. Thanks to money, even people who don’t know each other and don’t trust each other can nevertheless cooperate effectively. 🍀

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