Embracing Fear Fueled this Michelin-Rated Chef's Comeback

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The darkest moment in Josh Kopel's career was also the brightest.

"For me, the lowest point in my career was the highest point — when I took out that $50,000 cash advance that required no personal guarantee to turn my business around," the podcast host and Michelin-rated restaurateur shares. "I was all out of f**** to give. I just didn't care anymore."

We often mark our lives by our achievements. But sometimes, we have to pay attention to those moments when things seem really bad in order to grow.

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When times are tough, a leader needs to dig in and find a solution. This is how to reach the next level, and it's precisely what drove Kopel to improve his situation. "I was almost exclusively motivated by fear for most of my career," he admits.

Although Kopel was once led by fear — fear of failure, fear of letting his family down, fear of losing it all — now there's a different, more enriching feeling that drives him: vulnerability.

Going through difficult times can help people understand each other better. “For me, if I become a better coach, a better consultant or a better media personality, it’s rooted in empathy; it’s rooted in vulnerability,” he tells Shawn Walchef on the *Restaurant Influencers* podcast series.

These days, as host of the popular Yelp for Restaurants podcast *FULL COMP*, Kopel has had a chance to be vulnerable with millions of people thanks to the global reach of digital media. He has asked hard questions and shared his battle scars through more than 400 episodes.

His goal, as always, is to elevate the restaurant industry.

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Restaurants and media

Kopel spent more than two decades in the business of restaurants, operating venues that ranged from bars to fine-dining establishments.

Some were quick successes, like his New Orleans-inspired bar, Five0Four. The place, which he called “an anecdote to loneliness,” generated $1.4 million in its first year from a 900-square-foot location.

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Not all of his concepts went as smoothly as that one.

Despite outward signs of success, Kopel often felt isolated and overwhelmed by the pressures of ownership. He realized he wasn’t as alone as he thought. Other restaurant owners struggled just as badly.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, he sold his last restaurant.

“It’s not like I was out of a job,” he says. “It was like it was out of an industry.”

The fork in the road had arrived. And just in time, an unexpected opportunity arose.

A long-time connection, a Yelp executive, suggested that Kopel consider media production. In just a few weeks, the *FULL COMP* podcast was born. The series became not just a platform for sharing stories but a tool for personal growth and industry transformation.

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“The podcast gives context,” Kopel says. “It’s about building connections and learning from others.”

Kopel’s willingness to embrace vulnerability has been a cornerstone of his success. At a keynote for Yelp at the National Restaurant Association show, he shared raw, personal stories about his struggles. He caveated his success by showing it was, as he says, “born out of failure.”

This approach has also shaped his podcast interviews. Like any good leader, Kopel leads by not hiding his own scars. His transparency creates a space where guests feel comfortable sharing deeper insights.

“You build trust through vulnerability,” he explains. He uses this strategy in his coaching work, and honesty and empathy drive his relationships with his clients.

He knows that restaurants of all types suffer the same issues, like profitability, labor, and cash flow. He believes restaurateurs can solve them by simplifying and honing in on just the most revenue-producing elements on the front end.

Revenue, awareness and frequency of customer visits hinge on the same thing that makes for the best coaching interactions

and podcast interviews: one-on-one relationships. Then it’s just an issue of scale.

Kopel’s love for restaurants has only increased as his influence grows through his podcast and other media. He is consistent and tenacious about creating meaningful change in this industry. Through his podcast and coaching programs, he’s empowering restaurateurs to simplify, prioritize and thrive.

“Being comfortable is boring,” he says. “The magic happens when you get uncomfortable and move forward.”

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About *Restaurant Influencers*

Restaurant Influencers is brought to you by Toast, the powerful restaurant point-of-sale and management system that helps restaurants improve operations, increase sales and create a better guest experience.

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