



2026 NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION SHOW

Michelle Korsmo Keynote: "America's Leaders Are Made in Restaurants"

May 17, 2026

Good afternoon! It's good to be here with you in Chicago to talk about the National Restaurant Association's work as an indispensable partner to the restaurant industry.

For 250 years, restaurants have been places where people are served, communities take shape, and America's strongest leadership skills are formed. And today, led by the National Restaurant Association, the industry is doubling down on its role as a catalyst for leadership by shaping the people who are leading our nation's workforce today and for generations to come.

As America celebrates its semiquincentennial anniversary, we have a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the role restaurants have played in shaping who we are as a nation, as well as our leaders. For generations, restaurants have served as inclusive gathering places, welcoming people from every background to a shared table to exchange ideas, debate, and challenge the status quo.

In America's earliest days, our founders gathered in taverns across the thirteen colonies to voice their discontent with the British Crown and to imagine a new form of self-government. These individual gatherings were organic and lacked a centralized organization, but they were bound by a common thread of belief in the inherent rights of individuals, and they were brought together by conviction, conversation, and community. These conversations often found their home in taverns...the colonial version of restaurants.

Establishments where these early revolutionary gatherings happened included:

- The Green Dragon on Union Street in Boston's North End, where the likes of Paul Revere and John Hancock gathered as part of the Sons of Liberty
- And Fraunces Tavern in New York City, where George Washington met for a farewell dinner with his officers at the end of the Revolutionary War

This thematic role of restaurants as a center for civic debate and engagement with some of our most recognized leaders runs throughout America's history into more modern times.

- We have Paschal's in Atlanta, often called the "unofficial headquarters of the Civil Rights movement," where leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis met.

- And in Washington, D.C., Ben's Chili Bowl, founded in 1958 by Ben and Virginia Ali, became a gathering place for civil rights leaders along U Street.

When riots erupted in D.C. following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ben's stayed open with special permission during a curfew, feeding anyone who came through the door and providing stability in a period of upheaval.

Today, restaurants are a center of American kitchen table politics – a place where leaders and citizens come together to discuss the issues that matter to our lives. You would be hard pressed to find an American politician from any political party who hasn't made a campaign stop at their local dining establishment.

America's leaders have been made in restaurants because our industry is a space that fosters human connection around a shared table. This is foundational to what restaurants are as a cornerstone for our communities and our nation. But restaurants as a place to convene leaders is only half of their leadership story.

While restaurants have long shaped leaders who gather here, the industry's greatest and most lasting leadership impact has happened inside the industry – among the people who work here.

Several characteristics come to mind when we think of great leaders. They include:

- Vision—the ability to see what's possible
- Grit and resilience—the capacity to endure and recover
- Calm under pressure
- Ownership and accountability
- Interpersonal skills—the ability to bring people together

These fundamental leadership skills are all continually being built by the 15.7 million people who currently work in our industry, from the dining room to the kitchen, and everywhere in between.

These skills aren't gained by sitting in a corner office or through earning a particular degree. They are developed on the job, through long shifts, fast decisions, changing team dynamics, and the constant discipline of serving others.

Leadership takes root in restaurants because the industry is built on people and service. That focus is what brings guests back, even when their budgets are tight.

And we see the results.

In fact, more than half of consumers in our *State of the Restaurant Industry* report say restaurants are essential to their lifestyle.

We've established restaurants as an incubator for leadership skills because of their focus on people and service. But let's talk about what that means for the millions of people who got their start working here.

Restaurants are America's training ground for work and leadership. No other industry has had as much influence over leadership skill development in the wider workforce than restaurants. That's because as America's second largest private sector employer, restaurants employ 10% of the U.S. workforce.

More importantly, 2 out of every 3 adults have worked in restaurants at some point in their lives, which means more people have worked in restaurants than any other industry in America. For nearly half of Americans, a restaurant gave them their first job. It's where they learned how to work with others, how to lead under pressure, and how to take responsibility for outcomes.

For many, restaurants are where leadership and entrepreneurship intersect for the first time in a work environment where they learn not just how to work, but how to lead something of their own whether that's a table, a kitchen, or an entire restaurant team.

And with a focus on hospitality and service, restaurants build durable, transferable skills that will support them wherever they work later in their life. In fact, 63% of people who have worked in a restaurant say that it was highly beneficial for their skill development. The skills they cite like teamwork, flexibility, and resilience are the durable soft skills of successful leaders.

Recent discussion on my LinkedIn page highlighted this role that restaurant skills played in future job success. Multiple commenters highlighted teamwork, preparation, flexibility, and a sense of grit as takeaways from their restaurant work experience. And many are now in the hiring seat outside the restaurant industry say they look for restaurant experience on every resume they review.

It's clear that restaurants are an incubator for leadership skills early in the work journey of millions of people. But for many, this leadership experience doesn't end with a first job; it powers a career.

While our industry is the first stop in the career journey of most Americans, I want to emphasize that it remains a place where millions of people choose to build lifelong careers. This is because it offers clear paths from entry-level roles to leadership and long-term success. The restaurant industry has more than 20,000 unique career pathways spread across more than 70 vocations.

And our industry offers true upward mobility regardless of background. In fact, 8 in 10 restaurant owners and 9 in 10 managers started in entry-level roles. Restaurants also lead in promoting diverse leadership. Our industry employs more female manager and more minority managers than any other sector in the economy.

These leaders reflect the communities they serve and the opportunities they create for everyone who works there. Restaurant leadership is practical, inclusive, and grounded in the realities of serving people and communities. In the future, these qualities will matter more than ever before.

As we look ahead to the next 250 years, America's leaders will be defined by a few enduring traits

- A people-first mindset
- The ability to innovate and adapt
- Resilience
- Teamwork and collaboration

Technology and AI will continue to transform how work gets done. But technology will never be able to replicate person-to-person leadership skills that drive the human connection that happens in restaurants.

So, let's talk about what comes next and how the National Restaurant Association is partnering with the industry to intentionally shape future-ready leaders for now and the future.

First, we're prioritizing the development of restaurant managers to be tomorrow's industry leaders. These are the frontline individuals who shape culture, performance, and people every day. They mean the difference between people who stay to grow in our industry and those who leave to go elsewhere.

These individuals also represent the next generation of owners, operators, and c-suite leaders that we need to steer our industry in the years ahead. We are investing in their growth, credentials, and long-term success.

Second, as technology reshapes the workplace, we are equipping managers with digital and technology literacy that enhances—not replaces—the human-centered experience restaurants will continue to carry out in the years ahead. As the indispensable partner for the restaurant industry, we believe investing in leadership is one of the most important things we can do to safeguard our industry's future—and its foundational role in America. And you can be part of it.

For those of you in this room, my message is simple: join us in building the industry's future-ready leaders.

You're here because you care about the restaurant industry...and many of you lead restaurant teams of your own. Start by thinking of leadership development as non-negotiable in your teams.

If you're an owner or operator, this starts with your managers. Have regular conversations with them about the skills that they need to grow and the skills that they can foster in their teams to guarantee your business success. Help them to understand that our industry needs their talents and skills to succeed in the future.

If you're someone on the frontlines, know that this leadership discussion is also for you. Our industry needs future leaders who are invested in people from the people they lead to the people they serve.

And finally, partner with the National Restaurant Association as we work together to strengthen leadership across the industry. Together, we will ensure that America's leaders continue to be made in restaurants for generations to come.

Leadership built through service doesn't stop in our industry. It shows up wherever leaders are called to perform, persevere, and grow.

Leadership built through service is important to carry us through the next 250 years.

Thank you.