

A Dallas Restaurant Defended Its \$70 Entrée. Experts Say That Was Its Second Mistake

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As diners are increasingly selective about where they spend their dollars, industry experts say restaurant owners should embrace a different approach.

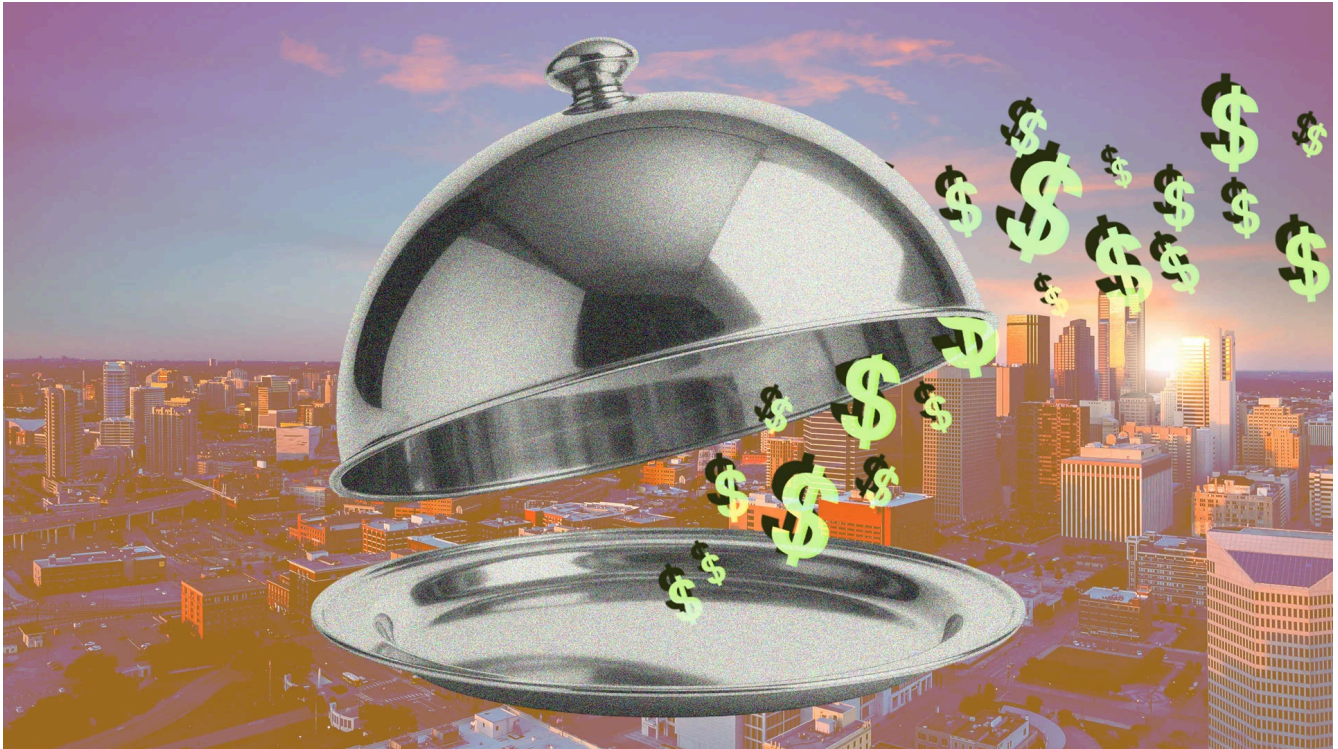


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When a video that questioned the prices at a small Dallas restaurant went viral, the business didn't stay quiet. It pushed back.

The controversy comes as restaurants contend with higher costs for food, labor, and other fixed expenses, while diners, facing their own higher expenses, become more selective about eating out.

It began when [Dallas media personality Roni Proter posted a video](#) questioning the prices she found at a small restaurant in Old East Dallas. Although she did not identify the business, she described a two-scallop dish for roughly \$30 and an entrée priced at more than \$70.

Critically acclaimed restaurant Olōyō responded to Proter's post, defending its pricing by pointing to the quality and sourcing of its ingredients and its support of local farmers. The comment was later deleted, but not before it drew considerably more attention to the restaurant.

Evaluating the response

Some experts say the bigger mistake may have been the restaurant's response. Usha Haley, the W. Frank Barton Distinguished Chair in International Business at Wichita State University, told Inc. that posting a defense online and then taking it down only makes matters worse.

Deletion reads as a loss of nerve, she said, and leaves everyone else to narrate what happened. "My advice is don't litigate the number," Haley said. "If you respond at all, do it in your own channels with the farmers' names, the sourcing rationale and the menu, and let word of mouth carry it."

Karla Marie "Karlita" Cochran, founder of Spotlight Strategy Group, a PR and crisis communications boutique in New Orleans, agreed with Haley.

"A restaurant's instinct is to defend its honor, and I understand that, because this is personal work," Cochran said. "But the moment you argue with a critic online, you turn a single post into a public fight and you amplify the exact story you wanted to quiet down."

The interaction has since raised a question among diners: What does value really mean when you eat out?

Cochran said value has never been solely about the number on the menu. Instead, it's about whether an experience felt important. "In New Orleans, we learned that a long time ago," she said. "People will happily pay more when they understand the story behind the plate and feel taken care of from the moment they walk in. If a restaurant has to defend its prices, the guest doesn't feel that story at the table."

"Ingredients decided what diners ordered, but the story decided whether they returned and the value they placed on that dining experience," Haley added. A higher price may be more acceptable when diners have already heard the story that explains it, she noted.

Nataly Kelly, chief [marketing](#) officer at Zappi, added that brands offering something beyond the product, such as a fandom moment or a social-media-worthy occasion, often matter more than the food itself.

Sometimes, however, a story may not be enough.

Ryan Volberg, CEO and founder of Guestologie, a guest intelligence platform used by multi-location chains across North America, said restaurants make a fundamental mistake when they assume rising costs automatically justify rising prices in the minds of guests.

“Your food costs, rent, and labor expenses explain why you need to charge more,” Volberg said. “They don’t explain why a customer should be willing to pay more.”

The opportunity, Volberg said, is to stop competing solely on what’s on the plate and start competing on how guests feel in the restaurant. When a guest is recognized by name and their preferences are remembered, the relationship becomes about something more powerful than price.