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LIFE

# Mark Estee beat the odds to become Reno's restaurant king. Now he's ready to beat cancer





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On a Wednesday in mid-February, restaurateur Mark Estee sits at a table toward the back of his latest buy, Great Basin Brewery in Sparks.

Estee's hair is shaved down to the skin and, pulling down the neck of his collarless blue shirt, he points to a slight lump in his upper chest. It's a subcutaneous port for chemotherapy to treat the Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis he received in 2021 amid the Great Basin acquisition, one of the biggest deals of his career.

He's coaching his eager fiancée, Kimberly Bodenstein, who's working on a laptop, in the ways of the restaurant business. The two mix business with affection, reviewing spreadsheets and sneaking kisses at noon in the sun-drenched corner of the brewpub, which is buzzing with the sounds of lunch service and day drinkers chatting at the bar.

At 52, Estee has slowed down — as much as he can. But the entrepreneur is still the fast talker whose wide, toothy smile and Boston accent betrays the charisma at the core of the food empire he's built over the last two decades.

Financial disaster, cancer, a TV show, hot new restaurants and a gossipy love life are just some of the things that have marked Estee's bumpy ride to the top of Reno's food scene, a place where he is rivaled by few and envied by many.

## **Where it began**

Estee was born and raised in Somerville, Massachusetts, a city bordering Boston to the northwest. As a child, he didn't have any profound food experiences that would capture his imagination and catapult him toward the restaurant industry. He just liked to eat.

"My dad was a great cook, but I don't have any stories of, you know, making pasta with my grandmother," Estee said. "I just like to eat, so I like to cook. It became kinda fun."

He played college football after graduating from high school in 1988. In his third year, Estee transferred to Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, to attend the school's culinary program. In his own telling, Estee had long thought about enrolling in cooking school but delayed it because a career in the restaurant industry wasn't popular among college students at the time.

"It wasn't what people did during those days," Estee said. "But I kind of knew once I started working as a dishwasher that I was in the right spot."

After graduating from Johnson & Wales, Estee spent the early '90s working at the Hyatt hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, before moving to Incline Village at age 25 to work at the Lake Tahoe Hyatt. After a brief stint at a San Francisco restaurant, Estee moved back to the Tahoe area to work at the Lahontan Golf Club in Truckee. At 31, Estee embarked on an entrepreneurial career with his first restaurant, Moody's, in Truckee.

From there, Estee rapidly grew his restaurant portfolio: Campo, Overland Restaurant and Pub, The Union, Chez Louie, Reno Provisions and Liberty Food and Wine Exchange to name some of the eateries he started in the area.

## Early struggles

But it wasn't a ride straight to the top.

Estee flirted with bankruptcy in the mid-2010s. He owed thousands to creditors, forcing him to sell assets and juggle finances to settle debts. At the beginning of his entrepreneurship, Estee largely ran the operation by himself, without the help or expertise of managers and finance professionals.

"At one point, there was a chance I was going to go fully bankrupt everywhere," Estee told the RGJ in 2015.

"I love to say I didn't know what I didn't know. So I learned the hard way."

Financial struggles collided with a public relations crisis in 2015 when Estee's Reno Provisions, a sprawling combination eatery, grocery and demonstration kitchen that had cost \$1.2 million to open only a year before, was identified by the Washoe County Health District as the source of an E. coli-contaminated dessert that sickened nearly two dozen people.

It was a pivotal time in Estee's career, one of those make-or-break moments characteristic of success or typical of failure.

Estee's trump card, as it has often been, was leveraging personal connections.

At the end of a calamitous 2015, Estee sold his first Reno restaurant, Campo, to Sanjay Lillaney, a businessman who had met Estee years before at a charity event that Estee catered. Though Campo's sales were down 15%, Lillaney told the RGJ he paid "over market," around \$1 million, for the restaurant. Lillaney believed in the eatery's concept and in Estee, who stayed on for a period as executive chef.

Around the same time, Estee shuttered the public-serving ground floor of Provisions while continuing to run the catering business from the basement. The downsizing allowed Estee to refocus his portfolio and, in June 2016, he opened Liberty Food & Wine Exchange in the former Provisions space.

"We reinvented ourselves as Liberty," Estee said, adding that it was at this point that he finally hired a chief financial officer, Tanya McCaffrey.

"She came in and performed triage on us and cleaned everything up," Estee said. "And quietly, I

spent two years without doing much or saying much."

## **Bouncing back**

Estee debuted in the short-lived TV series "Undercover Chef" in summer 2020. In the hidden-camera reality program, Estee traveled across the country to unveil the dirty secrets of struggling restaurants and help the businesses recover.

But the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Estee's own eateries quickly overshadowed the show. After the cameras had stopped rolling, the undercover chef found himself at the center of an unwanted episode where he now had to solve his own problems. And they weren't anything like those at Fatty Patty's or NautiFish.

Estee's company, Local Food Group, laid off around 220 people during the pandemic. The roughly \$375,000 in Paycheck Protection Program loans that the company received only helped retain 45 employees, data shows.

"That was brutal," Estee said. "Ten of us managers went around with our computers and made sure everyone got signed up for benefits."

Estee partnered with United Way of Northern Nevada and the Sierra to start a local branch of Delivery with Dignity, a program that launched in Reno in May 2020 to deliver meals to vulnerable residents while keeping restaurant staff employed.

"We've always been really community-minded," Estee said. "We knew we wanted to reopen as soon as we possibly could when it was safe to do so."

Still, while other restaurants shuttered, Estee's Local Food Group continued to expand. In the latter half of 2021, Local Food Group opened Pizzeria Lupo and acquired Nevada's oldest operating brewery, Great Basin Brewery.

"It was really helpful to be able to pay people, to keep the doors open, and to keep paying landlords," Estee said. "I like to say, 'Keep feeding the beast.'"

Navigating COVID-19 required restaurants to reevaluate their approach to doing business, both in the short term and in a post-pandemic world. Political debates surrounding mask and vaccine mandates ensnared some businesses, pitting owners against their customers. Criticism and frustration abounded with signs appearing in restaurant windows blaming government aid for staffing shortages. Estee avoided it all.



"You rely a lot on people to tell you the truth," Estee said. "We've been doing this for a fair amount of time, so customers aren't afraid to tell us what they think because usually we'll listen."

"But we don't tell them to go screw, there's a lot of people who do that."

## **A cancer scare and new love**

Two seminal, non-restaurant-related events happened to Estee during the COVID-19 pandemic. He discovered new love – and that new love helped him discover the cause of his swollen lymph nodes.

Estee in spring 2020 began a Facebook correspondence with Kimberly Bodenstein, a graduate student studying for a degree in business administration at the University of Nevada, Reno.

The chats started as small talk, sharing common interests and passions, before leading to an in-person meeting a month later. Estee still remembers the date: May 2, 2020.

The topic of marriage was broached on the second date, Estee says. Both are divorced and have six kids between them — Bodenstein, 39, has four; Estee has

two — and the pair claimed to each other that remarriage was out of the question.

Two days later, however, the couple admitted that they had both lied about their feelings. Now, Estee and Bodenstein plan to marry in August 2023.

"This will be the last time for both of us," Estee said.

The relationship brought more than new love and wedding plans. It was Bodenstein last year who urged Estee to consult a doctor about the strange lump that had appeared on his neck.

"Typical guy thing, I was like, no, it's fine. It's just this fatty thing there," Estee said, "Doesn't matter, I see guys with big things in their neck all the time."

But the restaurateur eventually capitulated. He visited a specialist who performed a needle biopsy on the lump and diagnosed it as classical Hodgkin's lymphoma.

"Which is kind of cool because there's 18 types ... and we have the classic," Estee said.

At the time of the RGJ's interview in February, Estee was about to finish his first round of six chemotherapy treatments, delivered in five-hour

sessions via the subcutaneous port installed near his collarbone. The aggressive treatment strategy, typical of Hodgkin's cases, has left Estee feeling like he's "wrapped in plastic" with low energy and strength levels.

One wouldn't know it. For lunch at Great Basin, Estee eats a large salad topped with a grilled chicken breast, interrupted by this or that friend or employee coming by to deliver a bit of news or to banter.

Estee, like many successful people, seems to speak of things mainly in positive terms. As with his business failures, he avoids dwelling on or complaining about his illness – at least in public. It's the sort of thing that, to an interlocutor, seems slightly annoying at first but eventually leads to wonder about what exactly that elusive ingredient in success is.

"The restaurant industry has a certain fascination, right. People love eating, drinking, partying. People love the romanticization," Estee said. "But a lot of it is pure heart. Day after day. The hand-to-hand combat, the one-on-one, the guerilla marketing, the getting-out-in-the-community."

"It is really fun. It's probably why so many restaurants open and close, or so many places start and don't make it. Because it is so romanticized.

Sometimes people don't have a clue what the hell is going on."

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