

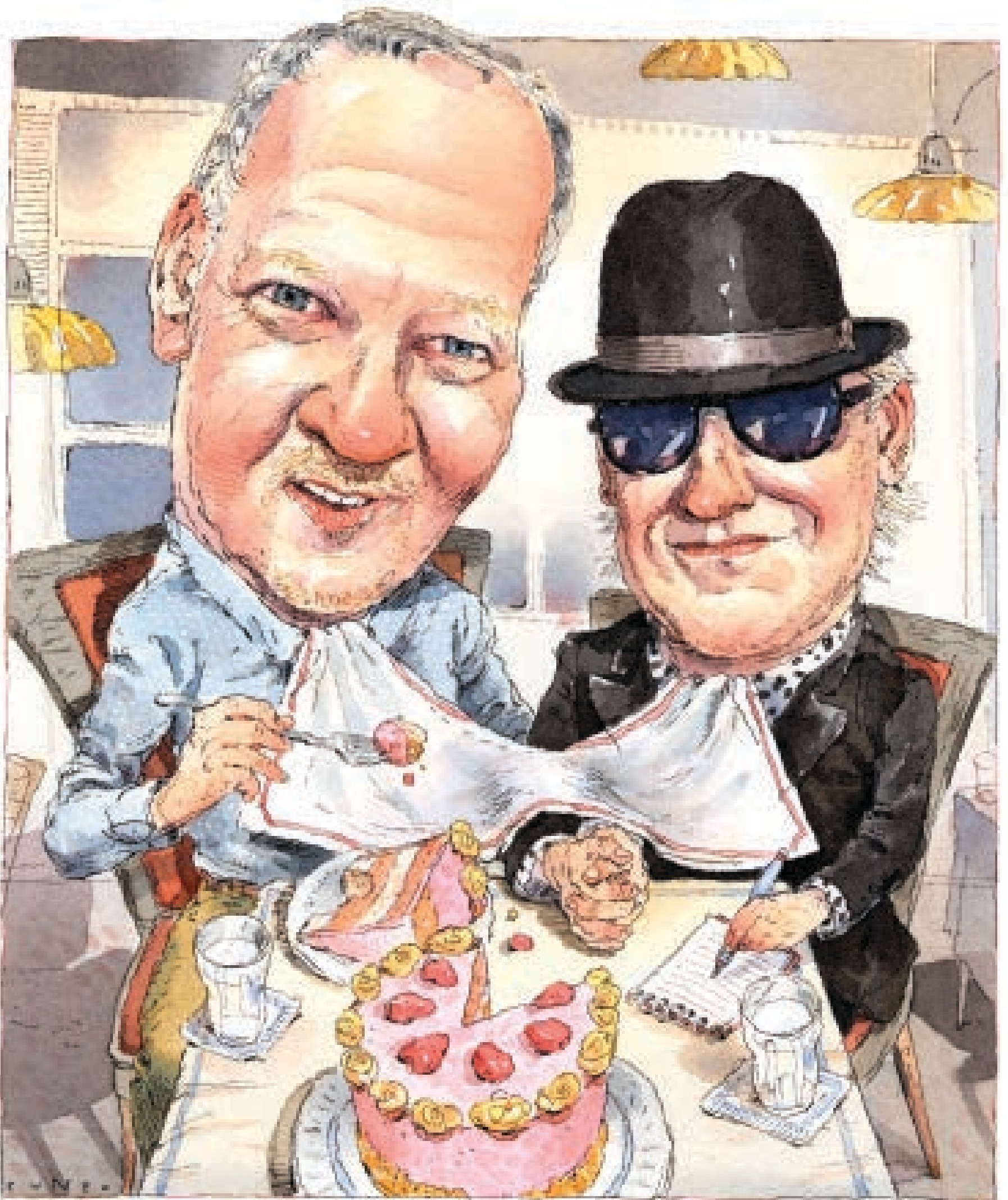
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ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN CUNEO

SAN FRANCISCO'S CHEFS ARE USED TO LIVING AT THE MERCY OF RESTAURANT CRITIC MICHAEL BAUER. BUT MUST THEY ALSO BOW TO HIS BOYFRIEND, MICHAEL MURPHY?

BY REBECCA FLINT MARX

# TROUBLE WITH THE MICHAELS



# DRUGS, GUNS, URANIUM ORE:

**YOU CAN BUY** anything on the Internet. But if you're looking to buy a memory, particularly a memory involving famous people or their autographed paraphernalia, then you'd do well to shop with IfOnly. The four-year-old San Francisco company is, to borrow the words of its founder and CEO, Trevor Traina, a "magical emporium for experiences." If you've ever wanted to spend \$9,000 on a four-day heliskiing trip through British Columbia with Robert F. Kennedy Jr., or \$2,900 for a personalized Father's Day video message from Mike Tyson, or \$2,500 for an acoustic guitar signed by Bob Weir and RatDog, then IfOnly has you covered.

Backed by some \$25 million in venture capital from such A-list Silicon Valley investors as Marissa Mayer, Marc Benioff, Yuri Milner, and the Winklevoss twins, IfOnly has become a vast clearinghouse for access: to celebrities, to private helicopter rides, to \$8,000-per-person "dynamic hip-hop orchestra concerts at your home or office." Although at least 10 percent of the proceeds from most experiences are donated to charity, the overall effect is a bit like Make-A-Wish for rich people: If you can dream it—and pay for it—IfOnly will make it happen.

Given the decadent tastes of most IfOnly customers, it comes as no surprise that the company has a robust arm devoted to culinary experiences. Scroll through the list of "luminaries," as they're called on the site, and you'll see a who's who of the Bay Area restaurant industry staring back at you. There's Mourad Lahlou, offering a home cooking lesson and dinner at Aziza for \$875 a head. Here's Michael Mina, hawking a \$70 autographed recipe card, and there are Nicole Krasinski and Stuart Brioza of State Bird Provisions, selling a "bespoke" \$1,000-per-person dinner at your home. Not long ago, a modest outlay of \$35 could buy you "the ultimate social media status symbol": a Twitter follow from Michael Chiarello. For \$250, you could upgrade to a direct message.

This past January, IfOnly rolled out another singular culinary experience: the opportunity to go on a review dinner with Michael Bauer, restaurant critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Dining with him is an experience akin to hanging out with the world's biggest rockstar," the site gushed. "You will be lavished with kindness and treated like a royal as Michael is respected, beloved, and sometimes feared in some circles." The experience, which cost \$2,000, did not include food or drink, but they did toss in an autographed copy of Bauer's *Top 100 Bay Area Restaurants*.

The dinner's appearance on the IfOnly site was somewhat breathtaking, and not just because of the price or the hyperbole larding its description. Here was the city's most influential restaurant critic, one who has spent almost three decades earnestly proclaiming his anonymity, allowing a digital concierge company

to flaunt (and profit from) the special treatment he enjoys. Ken Frank, the chef-owner of Napa's Michelin-starred La Toque (which received a three-star rave from Bauer in 2008), puts it more bluntly: "I thought, What the fuck? No way. It had so many colors of wrong on it."

To some inside the insular and gossipy San Francisco food world, the deal reeked of arrogance. For others, it simply confirmed their long-standing suspicion that doing business with IfOnly's culinary branch means doing business, albeit indirectly, with Michael Bauer. It's a suspicion borne of a very simple fact: The person IfOnly pays to convince chefs and restaurant owners to offer their goods and services through the site is none other than Bauer's longtime boyfriend, Michael Murphy.

When I became *San Francisco's* food editor two years ago, having spent the past dozen years as a writer in New York City, I had no idea who Murphy was. It didn't take long to find out: As Bauer's boyfriend of 25 years, he is as much a fixture of San Francisco's restaurant scene as the critic himself. "It's kind of like Billary," says one

icle—that denying one Michael would alienate the other. "So I was like, 'Oh shit, we have to do this,'" he says.

**LET'S PAUSE FOR** a second to consider the somewhat surreal nature of the aforementioned situation. Michael Murphy is not a powerful politician. He is not a movie star or a basketball player whose patronage can give cachet to a fledgling business. He is not even a restaurant critic. And yet the apprehension and kowtowing that attend him have become a near-universal reflex within the Bay Area restaurant community. Try naming the significant other of any other restaurant critic, anywhere—wait, why would you? But in San Francisco, "restaurants don't just hang a picture of Bauer for their staff; they hang a picture of Murphy," says Richie Nakano, one of very few chefs willing to go on the record for this story—and, not coincidentally, someone whose well-publicized Twitter rants against Bauer have left him with nothing to lose.

This fear, of course, has little to do with Murphy and everything to do with his relationship

La Toque's Frank. "There's the *Chronicle* and everything else."

Of course people in the restaurant industry are going to complain about a critic, particularly one who, come September, will have been on the job for a whopping 30 years. But grouching about his boyfriend? Not so much. Unless, of course, he's a boyfriend like Murphy. Long before he was hired to contract with IfOnly, Murphy (who declined repeated interview requests for this story) had built a reputation for himself in the restaurant scene. A former realtor with Zephyr Real Estate (his license expired in 2013), Murphy has long worked to establish himself as a social connector. "He loves hobnobbing with chefs," says an industry vet who has had numerous meals with both Murphy and Bauer. When he dines alone, she adds, "chefs fawn all over him—there's a codependent relationship going on." Tall, silver-haired, and outgoing, he physically looms over Bauer—and, unlike his partner, makes little pretense of keeping a low profile. "He's a more difficult diner," says one restaurant general manager who has dealt with both men on multiple occasions. "You have to send the right person to the table, and you're expected to know what he wants without it being requested, whether that's ice preference or spoon size. When we have friends opening restaurants and Murphy is coming in, I'm like, 'Make sure there's a tablespoon for him at dessert.'" The upshot, adds one industry insider, is that "at the end of the day it's a bigger offense to offend Michael Murphy than Michael Bauer. That's what's so frustrating: It's not one person you have to watch out for, it's two." Even before Bauer reviews a restaurant, Murphy has been known to make his presence felt by asking for a private tour of the space, according to one publicist who has fielded such a request.

For the past several years, Murphy has reinforced his status within the food scene—and then some—as the host of the Rosé Bowl, a party held at the James Beard Awards in New York and Chicago. Frequently thrown at Jonathan Waxman's Manhattan restaurant Barbuto, it's a private event to which Murphy initially invited a handful of top San Francisco chefs. "He always wants it to be super insidery," says a publicist who has been directly involved with the event. "He's very exclusive about who is allowed in and who is not." Bauer attends, though photos of him are reportedly verboten. And if you look at the pictures from past parties on the website for OpenTable, which has sponsored the Rosé Bowl, you will indeed see a discerning sample of Bay Area chefs and restaurant owners: A very partial list includes Daniel Patterson, Mourad Lahlou, Stuart Brioza, Nicole Krasinski, Christopher Kostow, Charles Phan, Anna Weinberg, Thomas McNaughton, and Aaron London.

Murphy's public Instagram feed is likewise a testament to his chef **CONTINUED ON PAGE 96** ➡

**"IT'S A BIGGER OFFENSE TO OFFEND MICHAEL MURPHY THAN MICHAEL BAUER... IT'S NOT ONE PERSON YOU HAVE TO WATCH OUT FOR, IT'S TWO."**

acquaintance of both men. Like the Clintons, "they're a machine, and they've always been a machine." And that, according to a majority of the nearly 30 chefs, restaurateurs, publicists, and other industry members interviewed for this story, is why Murphy's role at IfOnly presents an inherent conflict. When Michael Bauer's life partner approaches you with a business opportunity, it becomes an offer you can't refuse.

"It almost sounded like the Mafia," says one person Murphy approached to work with IfOnly. "The tone was that it would be good for you to do this because of his close relationship with Bauer." (Fearing reprisal from Bauer and Murphy for his comments, this person, and many others I spoke to, preferred to remain anonymous.) He was particularly worried, he adds, that declining to participate would affect his chances of getting future coverage in the *Chron-*

to arguably the most powerful man in San Francisco food. You can make fun of his writing or his taste, but the reality is that Michael Bauer still matters. A good review in his twice-weekly *Chronicle* column can lead to months of sold-out reservations and will in turn be read by editors at national food magazines who will then fly in their writers to try the restaurant, leading to more exposure, more business, and more national attention. A bad review, meanwhile, can exacerbate the already incredible difficulty of running a restaurant here, tipping a struggling business's precariously balanced scales and hastening its demise. (And, at least until he voluntarily stepped down this spring, Bauer's influence was further amplified by his position as a member and erstwhile chairman of the James Beard Restaurant Awards Committee.) Bauer is "the biggest game in town, period," says

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connections: Michael and Lindsay Tusk, Alice Waters, Gary Danko, Cecilia Chiang, Nancy Oakes, Thomas Keller, Richard Reddington, Shelley Lindgren, and Tyler Florence all show up there. And recently, someone sent me another photo: Murphy and Bauer at a screening of the Bradley Cooper movie *Burnt*, sharing a bag of popcorn with chef Dominique Crenn. What's striking about these photos is not just how out in the open everyone is, but also how many of those pictured happen to have restaurants on Bauer's annual Top 100 list.

You could argue that it's all coincidence, and you could argue that Murphy can hang out with whomever he wants—even if it means that while “Bauer has done everything in his power to be secretive,” as a longtime acquaintance of the couple insists, “Murphy is out there kind of bagging it.”

One rumor that has stubbornly clung to Murphy is that he has invested in some of the restaurants Bauer reviews. I have found no evidence to support this. But I have found—as anyone can—photos on Murphy's Instagram feed that suggest a kind of emotional investment in the restaurants he loves. In one, he's standing next to James Nicholas, a co-owner, with his wife, Anna Weinberg, of the Big Night Restaurant Group. Nicholas and Weinberg's young son, Leo, sits between the two men. “Between Godfather and Father,” Murphy's caption reads. He's not overstating his significance here: Nicholas confirmed to me that Murphy is indeed one of his son's godfathers. All of Big Night's restaurants—the Cavalier, Marlowe, Park Tavern, and Leo's Oyster Bar—have gotten three-star reviews from Bauer; three are in the Top 100. Again, you could look at this as coincidence, and to be fair, Weinberg is an excellent restaurateur (*San Francisco's* critic, Josh Sens, also awarded Leo's Oyster Bar three stars in July). But as one publicist asks, “How do you not give your family three stars?”

**ALL OF THIS** feeds into the problem many chefs have with Murphy's work at IfOnly: His proximity to power means that even an ostensibly innocent request to do business with a chef or restaurateur comes burdened with expectations. In his role as a paid consultant at IfOnly, Murphy sources and curates culinary products and services; his duties include approaching chefs and their publicists about collaborations and curating things like gift baskets stocked with goods from across the globe. “People have felt pressured to be part of IfOnly,” says one restaurant publicist who has corresponded with Murphy about possible partnerships with the company. “[The idea] that it would benefit their relationships was sort of the subtext.”

The widespread perception that Murphy influences Bauer doesn't help: La Toque's Frank, who has worked with IfOnly, cheerfully admits that he signed on in part because he thought it would help him reach the critic. “My friends said the way to get to Bauer is through Michael Murphy,” he says. “So when my PR company said I should do IfOnly, I said, ‘Why not?’” Bauer has reviewed La Toque only once in its 18 years in business, and it has never been in the Top 100. Frank hoped that joining the website would change that by causing Bauer “to maybe get to know me.” Though it hasn't, Frank doesn't regret his involvement: It's allowed him to donate much of the proceeds from his \$1,800 “Sous Chef for a Day at La Toque” experience to his favorite cause, Planned Parenthood. “That's a lot of counseling,” he says.

Even chefs who don't have hopes or resentments tied up with either Murphy or Bauer have expressed reservations about IfOnly. One chef whom Murphy approached about signing on remembers that she checked out the website, but “the moment I saw you could buy a sit-down with Michael Bauer, I was like, ‘I'm not interested,’” she says. “I have no personal issues with them; I'm just not down with the nepotism.”

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industry veterans I've spoken with claim that another part of the problem is Murphy's outsize personality; while Bauer is relatively shy and affable in public, Murphy is "the pit bull, the enforcer," known to lash out publicly at those who have criticized Bauer. In 2013, after then-*Eater SF* editor Allie Pape wrote a post on the site mentioning that Fog City Diner owner Bruce Hill had had to turn down a request to cook dinner for Kanye West and Kim Kardashian because he was expecting Bauer at the restaurant, Murphy took to Twitter to slam "resident 'idiot editor' Allie Papp-smear." (The tweet was subsequently deleted, but it can still be found online.) Pape had never met Murphy before, aside from shaking his hand at an event, so she was "surprised and hurt" by the tweet, she says over email. When he was a sous chef at Nopa, Nakano did a podcast in which he mentioned a Bauer review—it was an innocuous comment, he claims. Shortly after, Nakano says, he learned that Murphy had twice approached Nopa co-owners Laurence and Allyson Jossel about him, telling Laurence that Nakano was a "punk" who should "clean up his act." (Laurence Jossel declined to comment.)

Is all of the above childish and petty? Of course. But it underscores the widely held perception that Murphy lacks a certain live-and-let-live attitude, and that he's quick to seek vengeance when he feels Bauer has been wronged. During my interviews for this story, I heard him referred to variously as "Voldemort," "the Godfather," and "Keyser Söze." There's a lack of subtlety to this name-calling, to say the least, but it hints, perhaps, at a more nuanced truth. "Bauer lives in a very scared place; people have trashed his car" after bad reviews, says an old friend of the critic. "In some ways, Murphy became a shield for him, like, 'Hey, don't look at him, look at me.'"

It's a dynamic that plays out as part of what one general manager calls "this delicate game"—one in which everyone, she says, "knows

they have to bend over backwards to score a good Bauer review. The people who have good relationships with Bauer try very hard to hide it. And IfOnly does put chefs in a position where they think they can't say no."

**WHEN I PUT** all of this to Trevor Traina over coffee one afternoon, he looks positively dismayed. A self-described "starry-eyed optimist," IfOnly's founder and chief evangelist is maybe the most earnest serial entrepreneur in San Francisco, which is really saying something. During our interview, he describes his recent IfOnly experience feeding the giraffes at the San Francisco Zoo with what I can only describe as total, unironic wonder, and he gets a little choked up when he recalls the story of a man who bought an autographed guitar on IfOnly for his bipolar son, causing the son to smile for the first time in months. When his publicist relayed the gist of my story to him, "I was really troubled," Traina says. "We pride ourselves on being the most talent-friendly platform out there; whether it's Diane von Furstenberg or Joe Montana, we never force them to do anything." Not one of the chefs involved with IfOnly, he adds, "has ever come to me and said, 'I felt badgered or browbeaten,' or 'I'm reluctant to be part of your program.'"

I ask him if he thought there was any potential conflict of interest when he hired Murphy to work for IfOnly. "First of all, I didn't know Michael very well when we brought him on as a consultant," he says—it was Traina's wife, Alexis Swanson, who first suggested him for the job. "My feeling was that Michael Bauer is the person who does the reviews, and Michael Murphy probably is the person who, just by virtue of being with Michael, has access to these people, and that he could use this access to do something really positive." All of IfOnly's consultants, he adds, are chosen for the same reason—access—though most of them, one imagines, aren't literally in bed with someone tasked with reviewing the businesses of the peo- CONTINUED ON PAGE 100 ➡

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ple whose services IfOnly employs. Still, Traina clearly feels bad about the optics. “I know it’s complicated and you want to protect people,” he tells me. “But if you talk to [your sources] and subtly convey that, hey, if you feel any dissatisfaction, I bet Trevor would love to hear from you...” He trails off. “My desire is to make people happy. I don’t want the bad karma of making anyone feel like they got badgered. That would be abominable.”

For his part, Bauer maintains that he and Murphy keep their careers separate. “When [Murphy] took the job, I understood there could be an appearance of conflict, so I did what I could to minimize it,” Bauer tells me over email. “I have not logged onto the IfOnly website in two years. I don’t know what chefs are on the site.” The nature of his job, he adds, means that “everything I write is open to criticism and scrutiny. Any disgruntled chef can, and will, put everything under a microscope to try to prove bias. To survive I have to have a thick skin and to be able to justify what I’ve written. I can do that with a clear conscience. It can be lonely and uncomfortable at times, but I always strive to be honest and fair.”

And to be fair to both Michaels and the companies that employ them, plenty of chefs and owners attest to being perfectly satisfied with their IfOnly experiences. David Lynch, a wine consultant and the former owner of the Mission wine bar St. Vincent, says he felt “no pressure whatsoever” when Murphy approached him to participate: “I was flattered they thought of me, and happy to have another avenue to promote my place and myself.” Through the website, he’s done things like lead a wine trip to Italy, and he’s been able to donate money to La Cocina, the nonprofit kitchen incubator. “They’ve sent me a number of thank-you letters,” Lynch says.

Stuart Brioza echoes Lynch’s sentiments. Though the co-owner of State Bird Provisions and the Progress admits that he can “definitely see feeling that pressure [to

sign on] due to Michael Murphy and Michael Bauer, I also felt like if we didn’t do it, it would have been OK, too.” For Brioza, part of the draw of hosting private diners through IfOnly was that it would allow him and Nicole Krassinski, his wife and the restaurants’ co-owner, to think about branching out into catering and to build a personal connection to their guests in a way they hadn’t been able to since State Bird’s early days. “You get diners for life and create this neat relationship,” he says. The charitable angle was another lure: IfOnly requires far less output of time, money, and labor than the traditional charity tasting events, and also allows chefs to pick their cause—and get paid for their work. “If you do three or four [IfOnly events] in a year, that really does amount to something,” Brioza says.

IfOnly’s charitable component also appealed to SPQR chef Matthew Accarrino; he’s done a number of events with the company and has also curated a gift basket featuring some of his favorite products. “It was this opportunity to wrap up everything that was unique to me and my perspective,” he says. “I don’t know how else I would have done that.” The chef has known Murphy as a customer for a long time and doesn’t see a conflict. “When I’m speaking with Michael Murphy, I’m not speaking with Michael Bauer,” he explains. “So if I’m getting asked to do something and I want to do it, then I’ll do it. I just don’t cross the two together.”

**AND SO HERE** is what it all comes down to: There are individuals within the San Francisco restaurant community who feel pressured and manipulated by Michael Murphy and his connection to the most powerful restaurant critic in town, and there are individuals who don’t. But I think that in the end, this isn’t a story about whether IfOnly and Murphy are forces for good or evil, or even about whether anyone cares that Michael Bauer is at this point as anonymous to chefs and restaurant owners as a queen bee is to her drones. CONTINUED ON PAGE 102 ➡

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What this is really about is a city whose impact on the nation's—and arguably the world's—culinary culture stands in direct contradiction to its innate provinciality. San Francisco is a village, one that's full of chefs who have spent their entire career under a single critic and have been conditioned to please him and to not, with very few exceptions, ask any questions. It's a place where you can go to a party at the home of that critic, look around at all of the chefs in attendance, and realize, as one past attendee of one Bauer-Murphy soiree did, that “if you dropped a bomb on the house right now, the food scene would be done.”

Many of the people I interviewed for this story raised the comparison with New York: This would never fly at the *New York Times*, they said—can you imagine any of the paper's all-powerful restaurant or theater critics getting away with such clear, and long-standing, conflicts of interest? Current *Times* food critic Pete Wells declined to answer this question when I put it to him over email, but no—of course you can't imagine it. For one thing, the *Times*, unlike the *Chronicle*, recycles its restaurant critics every few years. The *Chronicle*, meanwhile, seems more than content with the arrangement: When I emailed its publisher, Jeff Johnson, for a response, he replied, “Frankly, I don't see much here to comment on.... We believe Michael Bauer conducts his work with the highest level of professionalism and takes his responsibilities very seriously as an independent critic.”

But the *Chronicle's* rationalizations aside, part of the reason Bauer has held his position for so long, perhaps, is that the group of people who are arguably best positioned to voice their opinions about his decades-long grip on the food scene choose not to. “In terms of people tolerating the way he and Murphy conduct their affairs, that burden falls back on restaurant owners and chefs to not tolerate it,” Nakano insists. “And

we do. Everyone plays the game. Everyone talks shit on the side, but there they are, playing up to [Bauer] when it comes to be their turn” to be reviewed by him.

One prominent Bay Area chef who has worked with IfOnly sums up the dilemma another way. “I think the whole thing stinks to high hell,” he says of the Bauer-Murphy-IfOnly triumvirate. “But it's like the foie gras debate: Do I believe foie gras should be legal? Yes. But am I going to be the guy banging the drum? No.”

Before I began reporting this story, plenty of people were happy to tell me their misgivings about Bauer and Murphy. But once those idle musings were met with formal interview requests, the tune didn't so much change as go eerily quiet. One well-respected chef-owner made me agree to sign a waiver protecting his anonymity, and then still decided he couldn't comment. You can label this as garden-variety paranoia, but the culture of silence pervading the San Francisco restaurant scene gives it particularly fertile ground in which to grow.

Fear does funny things in a village, particularly where money is concerned. It makes you think about what a community is, where its fault lines lie, and what its members owe to one another and to themselves. “We can be skeptical about these things, but we all live in this community together, no matter what our roles are,” Brioza says to me over the phone. “I look at IfOnly and go, ‘You know what? This is our community, whether you like it or not.’ If it makes sense and sounds like a good business decision and makes sense for the community, then I don't know, it's kind of amazing.” Murphy's role in the local restaurant industry “is significant, no doubt about it,” he adds. But if there's an opportunity to turn Murphy's relationships with chefs and restaurateurs “into good stuff, then why not?” Brioza asks.

I thank Brioza for sharing his thoughts with me for my story. “I hope,” he says just before we hang up, “it's not going to be overly controversial.” ■