

Pastry chef Gregory Baumgartner reflects on his career in the food service industry – the road from addiction and substance abuse to recovery and optimism

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Critically-acclaimed pastry chef Gregory Baumgartner battled substance abuse and untreated mental health afflictions throughout his rapid rise to culinary notoriety. From age 14 when he first started washing dishes in a restaurant to 31 now consulting for and cultivating the pastry

teams for multiple Michelin star restaurants, Baumgartner recounts his lifetime in the food service industry. Baumgartner currently works for [Cranes DC](#) to create and maintain their dessert menu while also consulting for restaurants in L.A. and working on his own projects for the future.

Baumgartner was named on Zagat's 2016 "[30 under 30](#)" list of L.A. food and beverage industry professionals who are making a significant impact on the industry. [StarChefs](#) awarded him with the "Rising Star" title in 2017 for his work at [71Above](#).

His time in the industry are stories fellow chefs and industry professionals know all too well, escaping the tightly bound grip of 100-hour work weeks, extreme conditions and cyclical experiences of restaurant work through alcohol and drugs. The environment that restaurant work breeds and substance abuse are close "friends," Baumgartner said, highlighting the "intensity" of the industry and its effects on the mental health of the staff.

I met Chef Gregg in August 2021 when I started working front-of-house at Cranes upon moving to D.C. from Charleston, SC. This was my fourth restaurant job, fifth year serving and second year working in fine-dining. I am 19-years-old, and as I was listening to Chef Gregg speak about his time in the industry, I began to reflect on the similarities of our experiences despite the time we entered the industry and what kinds of jobs we did.



Tell me a little bit about you and your experience in the food service industry.

"My father was a classically trained master chef from Europe, and our language of love in the family was just cooking. It's kind of where I found my love for food. My father would bake and cook, and I just had a natural knack of curiosity for it. Certainly wasn't my first career choice, but 14 through 18, it kind of paid my short amount of bills, I would say, helped me have a car to get to work and do other fun things. And then as I kind of fell out of love with the degree choices that I had in college, I kind of fell back into the industry and I took it a little more seriously, and I found myself wanting to do pastry.

"I ended up working at a place for free for a couple of months, and finally they gave me a job as someone fell out of the pastry cook position, and I was able to kind of take it on. I didn't really know anything about it. I didn't know how to make chocolate chip cookies. It gave me the opportunity to kind of start to elevate my career... At that point, I think I was probably around maybe 20.

“I had already been a sous chef for two years at that point. So a very young manager. I was fortunate to have some training from hotels, but I don't know that it could have ever really prepared me for my twenties.”

When you were growing up, what did the industry look like to you as an outsider?

“My dad actually probably when I was probably around 10 or 11, I believe he stopped working in the industry and decided to do something a little bit more independent and be a mail courier. And that's kind of how he lived out his life as a mail courier.

“I mean, it is an opportunity for those who don't necessarily know what they're trying to do with their lives. For some people, they're very passionate about food, it speaks to them. There's just a natural curiosity of it. People love to eat. People love to understand the science behind things. People want to know how other people made something. They want to do it better themselves. So they just want to have the ability to do it. So I think for me that was the natural draw was the curiosity and honestly, to pay bills.”

Was there pressure for you to rise to a certain level of notoriety very young?



Baumgartner's "Calamansi Cheesecake" on the winter 2021 menu at Cranes. A creme fraiche cheesecake with Calamansi sherbert, olive oil citrus cake, lemongrass 'caviar,' and a pistachio streusel.

“The industry [can] promote young pastry chefs into positions of management. I can't necessarily call it power, but it is this sort of strange power structure that works to put young cooks into those positions as pastry chefs and to give them notoriety and to give them this sort of 15-minutes-of-fame. Then they burn out by the time they're 28, 29, 30, and they end up leaving the industry. So there is a little bit of pressure. I wouldn't say anyone ever put a gun to my head and forced me to do anything. I certainly had my own ambitions, and they've changed a hundred times since I started.

“This is a game of ego. It really is. Especially depending on what part of the industry you're working in, but I should imagine it affects – it probably affects every industry, but it certainly in, in the food and beverage industry, it's all about being seen, being heard, being the loudest voice, being the most effective.”

Was there anything that you wanted to say early on in your career?

“Early on, it was all about wanting fairness. I really wanted to take influence from the tech industry and flatten the curve in terms of the hierarchy... Since you're hiring so many people with a lot of different backgrounds, a lot of different experiences in life to give them a voice to be able to be more creative. And I felt like by creating that fair atmosphere, you might blossom a new sort of creativity that doesn't really exist in the industry, doesn't really exist anywhere that I've been familiar with. But as I've gotten older, I don't see that as a good solution.”

Is there anything you're trying to say now at this point in your career?

“Not necessarily, no.”

Can you describe the reputation that the industry has in regards to addiction and substance abuse?

“[The food service industry] tends to pull in people who don't necessarily have a good direction in life. Maybe they do. And depending on the style or part of the industry that you work in because of its high-risk, very low-reward, it can be very grueling on your body. It can be very stressful in very short increments of time that a lot of people turn to stimulants, whether it be alcohol or drugs to either fill a void, to fill an emptiness or to kind of make them feel alive, make them feel something after something that they didn't really enjoy for six hours at a time.”

You talk about this from a very distanced point of view or at least that's how I'm hearing it. What are your experiences with this side of the industry or what have you seen?

“I've seen it hit just about anyone at some point in time. Honestly, I've seen it, especially with the, you know, kitchen staff, It builds sort of a comradery, but also it can build a very unhealthy comradery, and I've seen plenty of chefs ride a wave of success only to find themselves coming, crashing down to reality, to recognize that they have an issue.”

What does that necessarily look like?

“I give you an example of a chef that I knew who was relatively famous. He had an alcoholic tendency to drink at work. His day would start at eight or nine in the morning, and he would get a Big Gulp from 7/11. And he would, I would imagine, inevitably pour out whatever the contents were or fill it up with ice and also walk right next door to the liquor store and fill the Big Gulp up with alcohol and straight into work, he would drink through the day.”

You could see his mood swings, you could see the ups and downs that kind of come with that sort of addictive personality. And with those mood swings, you can see, you know, some vicious words are constantly passed along to certain employees. You can see a strong desire towards sexual tendencies trying to lash out. All in all, it's just very unhealthy.”

I applied for my first restaurant job at a mom and pop Italian restaurant to help save for college, hoping the \$8.50 an hour for only five shifts a week would generate the appropriate funds needed for the 2020 high tuition rates. This was a hole-in-the-wall, only-15-tables-in-the-entire-restaurant kind of place. Deep into the pandemic in August of 2020, I lamented putting in my two weeks and started at a fine dining restaurant downtown when I realized the kind of money I could be making.

Shortly after starting, this restaurant became my whole life. With complete isolation other than going to work, this became my only source of social interaction, and I began putting full-time hours and energy into a part-time job. I never saw the effects of working in food service on substance abuse until I started working in fine-dining – partly because now I wasn't a minor (a fresh 18) and partly because I mainly worked with a small staff of an immigrant family at the previous restaurant.

What elements of the food service industry create an environment for that behavior to flourish?

“I certainly can't speak for everyone in the industry. I would imagine that one of the reasons it flourishes so much is probably because of the way in which the business works and operates. Typically if you're working in the restaurant, there's alcohol around, and with alcohol there's sometimes drugs. I would say that the restaurant industry, when people get out of work after working a long time, comes the party and with the party comes all of those substances, we just mentioned, and you can [party] into the late hours, and it becomes a habitual cycle. That's really what it is. And it's not just one restaurant that goes out at night, it's all of them. All service industry folks go out at night, and they meet and they do all these activities and it's how the web and the process starts.”



Within walking distance from both fine dining restaurants I worked from 2020 through 2021, were a strip of bars and restaurants with bars that knew everyone that worked in the industry by name, uniform and drink order. Most offered “food&bev” discounts on drinks, some even 50% off all well liquor, all wine and all beer all of the time to only those who worked in Charleston restaurants.

I started to go out with coworkers to these bars after six-hour shifts starting in October 2020. We'd go every night, have a few drinks, a round of Montenegro or Jameson shots for the table and then go home, to then repeat this cycle the next day.

Then, I'd start to go out for one or two or three rounds of drinks in between gruesome double shifts. After my second White Thai (local craft beer), I would make eye contact with the bartender that knew my name, real age and the regular shifts I worked and he would close out my tab for less than \$10.

Closer to the end of my time in Charleston, I started to buy adderall off my ADHD coworker before a shift or bring in a to-go cup of tequila-water and place it on the shelf next to all the other servers' water cups.

Constant verbal degradation from unrelenting clientele (whose standards were somehow higher despite a global pandemic), 14 plus hours in a hot kitchen, carrying 60 pounds worth of plateware/glasses/trays of food up and down multiple flights of stairs and just needing a semblance of normalcy and comradery lead me to the corner of North Market and East Bay Street every day, often twice a day.

Do you have any specific experiences with that kind of lifestyle?

“Oh yeah, absolutely... It started, for me, I would imagine my first intermingled relationship with alcohol came from my father. My father was a raging alcoholic. He probably used alcohol to self-medicate from particular mental health issues that he, given his age, probably was very unaware of, or maybe he was very aware and I just I'll never know. That would probably be my first experience – watching his own suffering with his own relationship with alcohol.

“And then it, of course, inevitably hit me when I was younger. Maybe when I was a teenager, working in a fine dining restaurant, it was very easily accessible for me to get alcohol and to drink. And what seems like an innocent, fun time, as you get older, you start to recognize and realize it's an easy way to escape.

“For those who don't necessarily have a good grasp of life or a good grasp of their goals or their drive, it can be an easy way to escape for them. And so then it becomes a habitual process. And then it becomes an unstoppable process. And then it inevitably becomes a sickness if you can't stop it.”

When did you realize that this cycle had tangible consequences on you or in the industry itself?

“I had a very fast-paced career. I was moving up very quickly. I would say that it certainly presented its own issues with my own ego. It certainly grew out of control at some points. And for me, I was always ambitious in the sense that the grass always looked greener somewhere else. And the further that I drove, the greener it would become and the easier it would get until one day I found myself a part-owner in a business, my father passing away, battling alcoholism already and working. I was probably working about 100 to 110 hours a week to make the business work. One day, it just came crashing down, and I found myself at work drunk.

“An actual investor had to take me home. And this is probably around nine o'clock in the morning where I passed out, and I woke up, and I realized I had an issue. I had more than one issue, but I also recognized that my illness had impacted everything that I had created for myself. And that's the key. I did it to myself.”

My struggles with alcohol misuse did not really have the opportunity to become an illness at this point in my life, fortunately, but it did have an effect on my mental health and my work. On multiple occasions, I woke up an hour late for work so hungover that driving back downtown was unsafe and difficult.

I once had to sleep in my car in a not-the-safest neighborhood after getting back from the bar to find a boot on my tire. The police wouldn't unlock it until the morning. I went to work at 9:00 am in the same clothes that I wore the shift before.

I almost missed the early morning flight to my grandfather's funeral the morning after a late shift.

At the time, I just thought 'I'm young. I'm allowed to make these kinds of mistakes. I was always so driven and on time and well-behaved that this behavior is a mere blimp in my life trajectory.'

It was when two of my closest friends who also work in the food and beverage industry individually got underage DUI's after driving home from a post-work night of drinking.

This terrified me. That is not just a 'blimp in my life trajectory.' That is a night in jail. A night of no one knowing where you are. That is not being able to leave the state or even losing your license. That is permanent record type scarring.

How much of your illness do you attribute to your circumstances within the industry?

“That’s a tricky question. I would like to think that my own mental illnesses certainly play hand-in-hand with alcoholism... There are probably aspects [of working in the industry] where it was easy to find access to things that could help me numb my mind from a young age. But I certainly can’t blame the industry for that.”

34% of food service workers have self-reported to have been under the influence of drugs while at work, while 36% have reported to have been under the influence of alcohol while working, according to a study done by [American Addiction Centers](#). They also reported that one in 10 restaurant workers are under the influence of drugs for the majority of their shifts and simultaneously, one in 20 are under the influence of alcohol for the majority of their shifts.

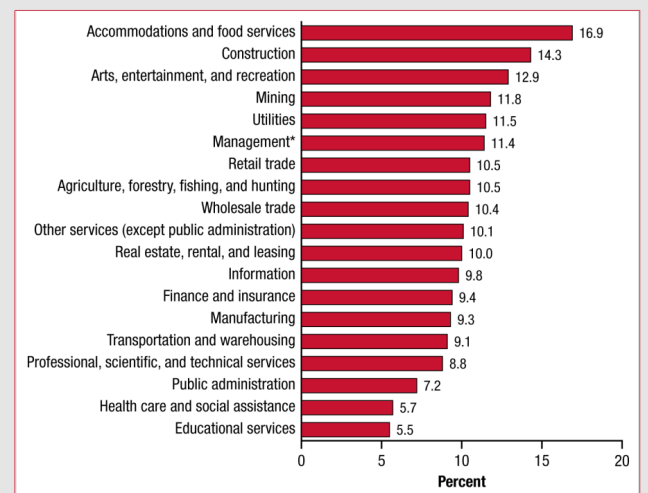
The [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) published in 2015 by The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) attributed the highest rates of substance use disorder to the accommodations and food services industry with 16.9% of employed adults ages 18 to 24 with substance use disorder work in this industry.

74% of chefs are sleep deprived, 63% of chefs feel depressed, and 50% or more of chefs have felt pushed to a breaking point, according to a 2017 study by [Unilever Food Solutions](#).

Can you speak to these statistics?

“The industry is a bit of a pitfall. There are very slim margins. You have to be very passionate to survive in this industry. There are plenty of other jobs where you can go and make a higher profit for your time. And so yes, there are a lot of repetitive tendencies in this industry to push as hard

Figure 3. Past year substance use disorder among adults aged 18 to 64 employed full time, by industry category: combined 2008 to 2012



* The full title of this category is "Management of companies and enterprises, administration, support, waste management, and remediation services."
Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs) 2008 to 2010 (revised March 2012) and 2011 to 2012.

as you can every single day. And eventually everyone will hit a breaking point, no matter what the set of circumstances are that cause it.

“I can see it from the highest of celebrity chefs who don't know how to manage their own issues. And you can see it from people who are just getting started. It can be very hard to break in, especially given, if you don't start early enough, you don't start young enough. It can be even harder to make your own imprint into the industry.

“I could throw an additional statistic in there, and I'm not gonna necessarily give you a number, but from what I have discovered, one out of two, if not a higher number of people who suffer from alcoholism actually suffer from bipolar disorder. And if you think about how many people in the restaurant industry suffer from alcoholism or some slight addiction to alcohol, or use it for an escape, if you look at that statistic, it should speak to how big of a problem there actually is.”*

* “60.7 percent of people with bipolar I disorder had a lifetime diagnosis of a substance use disorder (i.e., an alcohol or other drug use disorder); 46.2 percent of those with bipolar I disorder had an alcohol use disorder; and 40.7 percent had a drug abuse or dependence diagnosis,” according to the [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#).

Additionally, adults ages 18 or older with any mental illness were over twice as likely to be users of illicit drugs as well as 8.6% more likely to be binge alcohol users, according to the [2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) from SAMHSA.

You mentioned both having mental afflictions and addiction or substance abuse. How did they interact and play a role in your work life?

“When I was in my early twenties, my mid-twenties, I could escape my mental afflictions by making myself busy with my own outside activities. And I could essentially find myself being able to try to be an extreme athlete to some degree, but then turn that athleticism also to drinking. And I could find myself sleeping very little. I could drink very early in the morning. I could work out for hours at a time. I could go and I could work 18, 19-hour shifts, and I could turn around and get very little sleep and do it all over again until essentially I reached burnout myself.”

What did burnout look like for you?

“My burnout, it came in phases. It wasn't just one hard break – until it was – certainly what I said earlier about having to be taken home by my investor for being drunk at work. And that was

probably my ultimate breaking point to which my reaction then was to leave my job and to have no job on the horizon until I really started to look inward and ask myself what was going on.

“Look, it's a faux pas to talk about mental health issues... There are not a lot of people that don't necessarily want to speak out about their own shortcomings, their own illnesses, things that they suffer from because you don't know what you're going to be met with. Are you going to be met with backlash? If you're going to be met with open arms, if people are going to understand what you're talking about and be empathetic and sympathetic at the same time. So for me, what does that mean? It just simply means to be someone that's willing to have a conversation about it.”

By the summer of 2021, I was working 40 hours a week at my radio internship two hours away from the restaurant job I was working five shifts a week. Seven days every week. 90 hours every week.



I was sick all the time, drinking all the time, sleeping in the little time that I could. My mental health was plummeting and the other person that noticed was my sister – someone so far removed from the industry at the time to actually see that I wasn't acting normally or like myself. I quickly reached burnout by August, by the time I was supposed to move to D.C.

I arrived in D.C. on August 21, 2021 and was hired at Cranes on August 23. Without hesitation, despite my burnout and mounting regrets, I came back to the industry that allows me to pay for my education. That was my motivation all along, but I lost sight of my passion for my education and my priorities. Starting work again in a restaurant may feel counterproductive, but now, I'm reconfiguring the role I play in the industry and the role it plays in my life.

Since moving to the city, it has taken a lot for me to actually engage in drinking. My drinking is reduced to special occasions and limited quantities. I've gone months without drinking up here and not even noticed it. I've lost weight and feel less tethered to the industry I once vowed to leave upon turning 21.

Working at Cranes, there's less of the culture to drink with coworkers every night – even if it still happens sometimes – and I feel infinitely more confident about declining the offer of a night drinking after work.

Serving is no longer putting on a fake smile just to collect tips and spend it all in one night on a way to forget that time. I've developed a passion for the work that we do at the restaurant – for the cuisine, traditions, sake and wine, for the elements of service that create a memorable experience for guests.

Do you see this happening with a lot of chefs at your age?

“Yeah. Of the chefs that I know at my age with similar work experience, yes. For those who have not necessarily had the same sort of experiences or been in the same sort of environments, I can't speak to that.”

You mentioned before how a lot of times chefs will go through this experience and then they'll leave the industry ultimately. You are still in the industry to a certain extent, and so how have you managed to shift your experience?

“I think there's a bit of a necessary evil in every industry, I really do. Had I not shifted my own personal goals and what I was reaching for, I would not be working in this industry anymore. And it's to say that it's because I feel the industry promoted some unhealthy habits. Those choices are mine, whether I wished to partake in them or not. But I would say it was just a matter of shifting my goals. What am I looking for? I always wanted to have some imprint and not necessarily for my ego, but just to lay groundwork for someone coming after me.”

Who is there to support chefs in the industry, in their mental health addiction issues?

“I think a lot of people have mentors. I think a lot of people have people that they can reach out to and talk to. And there are plenty of empathetic and sympathetic people in the industry who are at different stages in their career and can look back, and they can see someone and whether they're okay or not. There's always going to be someone that reaches out and asks, you know, someone's always watching, someone's always caring enough to say something.”

Are you that person for anyone?

“I couldn't say, I couldn't say.”

Is this issue unique to the food service industry?

“Absolutely not. I doubt it. You could read plenty of articles about people that work on Wall Street that struggle with addiction issues, struggle with nootropics and smart drugs to keep up with the fast pace of the industry.”

Then why is it important to tackle these issues specifically through the lens of the food service industry?

“Well, it's absolutely necessary. And if we wish, as an industry, to push forward and move beyond this whole PR stunt, the ego stunt, and to just diminish that and grow as a community, we have to come together and have these hard conversations. And the truth is there are a lot of people that are struggling with mental health issues. There's a lot of people struggling with substance abuse issues. They don't know how to talk about it. They don't know how to ask for help. They don't know who to turn to, and they may think that they're going through it alone. But the truth is there are a lot of people that have gone through it and can help them out.”

How can we remedy these systemic problems in the industry?

“I have spent a decent amount of time thinking about this... There are a lot of people that hold very high positions in this industry that have a huge voice who have an opportunity to come together to promote this opportunity to talk about substance abuse issues, to talk about mental health issues.

“I do believe it would be a lot more impactful if they were coming from people who are pretty highly renowned in the industry, because it offers people the opportunity to be comfortable and to realize that, ‘so-and-so dealt with this issue, and here I am thinking that I could never rise to that occasion,’ but in truth, these people are just relatable as you and I.

“I'm not one to say that you can't drink, and I'm not one to say that there isn't room in other people's lives, not mine, but in their lives to use substances to benefit their life. I'm not a doctor, I'm not a psychologist, I'm not a therapist, but I would imagine there are plenty of people that do benefit from all substances or any substance. Hell, there's room to have that conversation, but nobody's having the conversation at all, you know?”

“Offering a resource to people who have substance abuse issues, offering resources to people who have mental health illnesses, offering clinics, which are a cheaper option... offering resources for people that are in the industry to reach out to if they need anything.”

What do you think can ignite that conversation?

“Could be something as small as this. One candle can light a thousand other candles and still stay lit, you know, and it just takes one person to say something and to be relatable and to be empathetic for someone else to feel comfortable. And then I think it might spread that way, but it's still, it would be more impactful with someone with a megaphone.”

Have you seen many people in the industry begin this conversation?

“There is a shift. There is a shift.”

“People are more inclined to value their time in their life, you know, on this planet. And not everybody wants to work all the time. There are those individuals who are great at it, and God bless them for it, but there are people who want to do other things with their life. And the more they start to realize, ‘oh my God, I spend most of my day at work. Then I go to the bar or I go somewhere else. I indulge in a couple drinks or drugs or whatever. And then I spend the rest of my night trying to sleep, trying to recover for the next day to do it all over again.’

“Whereas now I'm meeting more and more people that say, ‘if I got up early, like really early, I tackled the work that I need to get done on my computer. First thing, I have my coffee, I meditate. I work out, I go on a hike, I do something that I actually enjoy. And then I tackle work.’ People, when they're in that better positive frame mindset, are more likely to be inclusive of other people.”

And is that what your day looks like? Do you start pretty early?

“I start very early. Yeah. Typically I start around 4:00, 4:30 in the morning. I do have a cup of coffee, I work out, I do computer work, I have dogs and a girlfriend and we all just kind of get together and have a quick family huddle. Then I go about my day. I try to be as healthy as possible. I walk to work, I walk back. I have life goals, so I try to work on them as well.”



In your stage of life now, what do these problems look like as you're working in the industry? What have you seen recently?

"I would say given my type of work and how I work in the industry now, I don't really interact with it, which is great for me. Because it offers less opportunity to be influenced, but I should imagine it exists just the same.

"It's easy for people to place a lot of blame on the industry. But again, I believe that the people have implicit choice. They can choose to be doing something or not. And if they desire to do something else, which I should hope the pandemic has taught everyone to some degree, just go, just leave, do what you really are passionate about, what really draws you in. But the industry is not to blame for that. It is a personal choice."

What is the ideal environment for food service workers that you can imagine? You know, putting your big optimist hat on...

"Oh sure. Paying a living wage, not working someone more than 40 hours a week, so that they can live their lives and go after other opportunities that they're interested in, offering good health insurance, offering mental health benefits, whether that's to see a doctor or have a counselor on staff. Promoting healthy lifestyles, just as much as there is incentive to go out after work and party and do some of these illicit activities that we talk about, there should be just as much of an incentive to, I don't know, do a group run, maybe go to the park. I don't know, maybe collectively write something, do art, I don't know, but there's so many different options.

"Those might be a healthier work environment for other people, you know, maybe operate in hours that make sense for other people. Don't operate early in the morning all the way to the next day. I understand that for plenty of people, when they're paying rent on a space, they want to maximize their revenue stream. But it doesn't always need to come at the bottom dollar for everybody. It'd be nice if it could include everybody. A little bit more inclusive."

I keep saying 'the industry' and I keep calling it by this name, but it's, it's faceless. We can't hold 'it' accountable for anything.

"It's really easy to blame something that can't actually have its own voice.

"It's turning your voice inside – looking inward and asking yourself, 'What are you doing? What are you providing? Are you okay? Did I say something to someone about it? Am I asking for help if I need it?' I don't think that it should feel like such a problem to ask people for help."

**Edited for brevity and clarity*