ARTICLE 24 · HOSPITALITY · LEADERSHIP

When the Regulars Stop Coming Back

The people who know a restaurant best often feel the changes before they can name them.

BY DAVID AMBROSE · OCTOBER 25, 2026

“It just doesn’t feel like it used to.”

I knew regulars who stopped coming in because the restaurant no longer felt the same. I understood what they meant. I was so busy trying to stay afloat that I couldn’t make time to talk with them. If I stopped for a conversation, I wouldn’t get my work done.

That was the choice I kept facing. I wanted to be the kind of host who had time for those conversations. Instead, I was often doing catering set-ups. We had so few resources that if I didn’t do them, they wouldn’t get done. My attention was on completing the setup, while the guests in the restaurant received less of the attention I wanted to give them.

When the delivery drivers were out making deliveries, we were short-staffed, and I was stuck working a position. The restaurant still had to run. Guests still needed service. The work did not pause because people were out of the building.

A recent Esquire essay by Mark Alan Burger about the lost art of being a regular brought that memory back. He describes the comfort of returning to a place where people know you. I thought about what it takes to create that familiarity, and what happens when the people working there no longer have room.

The Work Behind the Welcome

At the restaurant where I used to work, labor was being cut, and catering pulled people and attention away from the restaurant. The work still had to get done. Orders had to be prepared, tasks completed, guests served. Everyone focused on the next thing in front of them because the shift demanded it.

As the years went on, guardrails around catering deliveries were dropped in pursuit of more sales. Requirements such as a minimum order for deliveries beyond a certain distance were removed. That made it easier to capture business, but each new order

still had to be prepared, set up, and delivered by people whose time was already divided between catering and the restaurant.

At the same time, I saw the catering sales manager participate in speaking engagements and industry conventions while our teams were trying to absorb the workload of expanded sales. I cannot speak to what mattered most to them. I could see what the stores were being asked to carry.

The work was not abstract. It meant setting up catering orders, covering positions when drivers were out, and keeping the rest of the operation moving. Every added demand had to be absorbed somewhere. Often, that meant less time and attention for guests who had come in expecting a familiar experience.

What Regulars Feel

A conversation with a regular could seem like a small thing. A few minutes of catching up. A chance to ask how someone was doing. But those minutes came from somewhere. If I stopped to talk, the rest of the work did not stop too. I had to choose between giving a guest my attention and keeping the operation moving. Too often, I kept moving.

That choice changed more than the length of a conversation. Regulars return partly because a place becomes familiar. They recognize the people working there. They know what to expect. They feel that someone noticed they came back. When employees are too stretched to look up, talk, or remember, the visit can still be technically fine. It may simply feel less personal.

This is not a matter of employees needing to care more. I cared about the regulars. I also had work that could not wait. The pressure came from the gap between what the restaurant wanted the experience to feel like and what the shift gave us time to do.

Hospitality is often described as an attitude: be welcoming, be attentive, make people feel at home. Those things matter, but they take time. A warm greeting, a remembered preference, a conversation that is not rushed: each depends on someone having enough room in the workday to notice the person in front of them.

The gracious host becomes difficult to be when every minute is already assigned.

From the customer’s side, the reasons may be invisible. They may not know about labor targets, delivery policies, or catering volume. They may not know which decisions were made by the manager on duty and which came from farther away. They only know that the visit feels more hurried, familiar people are harder to find, or the restaurant seems occupied with everything except the person who walked in.

Sometimes “It doesn’t feel like it used to” is nostalgia. Restaurants change, customers’ lives change, and memory can make an old version of a place seem better than it was. But the comment can also point to a real consequence that never appears

on a sales report. A customer may not be able to name the staffing decision behind the change. They can still feel it.

Make Room for the Host

The business can count orders, labor hours, and catering sales. It is harder to count the conversation that never happened, or the familiar customer who quietly chose somewhere else. Yet those absences are part of the experience too.

A regular is made through repeated encounters. Familiarity grows when a customer sees the same people, feels recognized, and has reason to return. If a restaurant wants to keep regulars, it has to make room for the work that turns customers into regulars.

Catering has to be counted as a demand on the same people serving the dining room. Time spent welcoming someone cannot be treated as spare time left over after every other task is complete. The gracious host needs room in the shift to be a host.