



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

January 4, 2022

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## Bruce Hensley, Creator of Queen's Feast

By Elly Clary

Can Charlotte's full-service restaurants overcome challenges posed by the pandemic? A person with myriad dining connections found divergent answers from various proprietors.

Bruce Hensley and his wife Jill are gearing up for the late January edition of Queen's Feast: Charlotte Restaurant Week.® It's an eating out promotion they initiated in 2008. He shared a wealth of observations from more than a dozen restauranteurs who are participating in the twice-yearly event.

A negative view: "The business is a nightmare and it's not fun anymore. It's non-stop dealing with stuff I shouldn't have to be dealing with."

A positive view: "When \$8 trillion (in stimulus) is pumped into the economy, it's going to take a while to spend it. I'm bullish on the future."

Hensley shared many other anonymous comments from restaurant owners and admitted they run the gamut. Yet, he added, "Overall they lean towards optimistic. The restaurant industry is resilient and I hope it will continue to survive."

The Hensley husband-and-wife team is strongly motivated to augment this resiliency. Through their Hensley Fontana Public Relations firm, they have

helped more than 60 restaurant clients during 40 years.

The Hensley's started Charlotte Restaurant Week with 42 participating establishments almost 14 years ago. It peaked in January 2020, with 143 restaurants in 10 counties serving about \$10 million in specially priced dinners.

Then COVID all but nuked dining out. The Hensley's shut down their promotion for July 2020 and January 2021. They geared up in July 2021 with 43 restaurants. They're looking to have about 70 participating this January 21-30.

The concept is simple. Dozens of upscale restaurants offer three-course dinners at reduced, prix fixe prices. This encourages "trial" business, introduces diners to restaurants new to them and creates sales volume during normally slow times.

The restaurateurs hope many folks attracted by the promotion will diverge from the set menu and order normal-priced items – and that they might splurge with high-margin beverages. Further, they try to make these guests want to return multiple times.

Problems restaurant owners shared with Hensley included major staff attrition, difficulty finding replacements, a pandemic-produced dearth of diners, supply chain disruptions, inflation, real estate concerns and an unreliable liquor supply.

"I'm hopeful, but not optimistic," Hensley quoted one owner. "Our sales have recovered nicely, but staffing is still a big issue. We're paying \$20 an hour for cooks, if you can find them."

Another spoke of adapting. "We've had to learn how to adjust to supply chain and inflation issues. Everyone loves our she crab soup, but the price of crab has gone up so much that if we kept it on our menu, we would have to charge at least \$17 a bowl for it."

Still another take from an owner who has opened new restaurants during the pandemic and is planning one more. "Our belief has been to simply focus on the guest experience and higher-level operations. The rest will take care of itself. People are motivated to dine out."

And serious-mixed-with-whimsical advice from another: "Owners must be sure to have capital, patience and a strong culture that people can identify with – and a certain amount of lunacy."

\*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/662407679>

The program introduction begins at 27:40 minutes.