Looking Over Our Shoulders at Disaster

Brent Rosen
brent@southernfood.org

Elizabeth M. Williams
liz@southernfood.org

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LOOKING OVER OUR SHOULDERS AT DISASTER

Brent Rosen, JD

President and CEO

Southern Food & Beverage Museum

1504 O.C. Haley Blvd, New Orleans, LA. 70113

Brent@southernfood.org

Elizabeth M. Williams, JD

Founder

Southern Food & Beverage Museum

1504 O.C. Haley Blvd, New Orleans, LA 70113

Liz@southernfood.org
ABSTRACT

In a journey spanning almost 20 years the Southern Food & Beverage Museum has become established as a solid and reliable museum and attraction in New Orleans, Louisiana. Its journey to established museum has been fraught with disaster and determination – from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the financial crisis of 2008, the BP Oil Spill, and COVID - to more local disasters like floods and hurricanes. Today it is ready for whatever may happen, as well as prepared with a plan to pivot, innovate, and re-invent itself, all the while deepening its mission and continuing to be the Southern Food & Beverage Museum.

https://southernfood.org/

KEY WORDS: museums, disasters, resilience, COVID, SoFAB

INTRODUCTION

Planning a new culinary tourism attraction in the early 2000’s in a city alive with culinary tourists like New Orleans seems like an automatic road to success. Creating a business plan for the Southern Food & Beverage Museum (SoFAB) with overall tourism numbers, factoring in the number of restaurants, the number of James Beard Award winners, and the annual tourism data that lists cuisine as one of the top reasons to visit the city, there is little motivation to plan for too many bumps along the journey. Fortunately, during the fundraising and planning time before actually opening, we learned that almost no one had any idea what a food museum might be. There was some awareness of what might perceived as single-subject museums, whether large and well-funded like The World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta or quirky like the National Mustard Museum in Middleton, WI, but our idea of a cultural museum that would examine the world through the lens of food was new to most people. Besides giving us marketing information as we began to inform people of our existence, that initial reluctance from people based on their lack of familiarity with the concept of a food museum raised a red flag of warning for us, such that
despite the rosy-seeming data, we might not have a linear path to success. But fools rush in, and so did we, because we were so committed to and excited by the idea of a food museum.

Having established that we had selected the right city for our museum, we began to plan. How do we raise money? How will we market? How will we obtain artifacts? How will we program? We knew that we would be operating on a knife’s edge, but we also had ambitions to be the biggest and best food museum, even if we didn’t have government funding and we didn’t have an angel investor covering our start-up. Every time something didn’t work, we tried something else. We just moved forward all the time, even if the steps were baby steps. We were told “no” so often that we developed a thick skin, but the train kept moving forward, so without being aware of it, we were learning to be resilient.

Resiliency is a state of mind. And unless it is fueled by blissful ignorance, it requires 3 things: a plan, a goal, and a stubborn doggedness not to give up. But we all know from personal experience that it is impossible to anticipate everything, and a plan is only as good as what we can anticipate, so we have to be ready to adapt the plan (which we can do, because we have a goal) and continue moving the train forward. Cultivating that state of mind, with plan and goal in hand, is the key. The state of mind is based on confidence, flexibility, optimism, stubborn doggedness, and a willingness to proceed into the unknown.

Besides the tragic number of deaths the COVID-19 global pandemic has caused, the upheaval in the hospitality industry, including culinary and other tourism all over the world, has made the industry insecure and precarious. It has caused havoc for workers who have been laid off, interrupted food distribution on every level, and created uncertainty and fear about the future. The pandemic is experienced locally, and in many ways is merely a local catastrophe experienced on a larger scale. Hyper locally for us since the Southern Food & Beverage Museum has experienced unpredictability, confusion, and uneasiness caused by the pandemic, including financial and health insecurity. But we have had practice, having previously survived Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the 2008 recession in the United States, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010, and a developer meltdown. The unprecedented 10 year period without crisis seems to be more of an aberration than the quick sequence of disasters.

FIRST A LITTLE HISTORY...

SoFAB was founded in 2004. That year was the beginning of the planning and execution of a dream. In 2004 we were raising money, planning for a permanent space, as well as mounting pop-up exhibits to give people a taste of what was to come. We also put up a website to give ourselves a presence and make it seem that we really existed, albeit without a brick-and-mortar
location. We had a crazy idea that we could build a food museum. We had few models. (Everyone knows what an art museum is, but almost no one was familiar with a food museum.) This lack of recognition was mostly daunting, but it had its upside. We were making it up as we went along, but there was no authority who could say that anything that we made up was wrong? We were operating without a feasibility study, because we knew that we were going to do it whether it made sense or not. We were operating with optimism in the face of the unknown without the money or the backing of the powerful. It was mostly fun.

In August 2005 shortly after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and the canal walls collapsed, all of SoFAB’s plans were dashed and many of the people and the institutions in our growing community were devastated too. We were back to square zero. All of our plans for a location for the museum were no longer relevant, the artifacts and books we had accumulated were damaged, the exhibit we had just opened in July was destroyed, and we were now planning to open a museum in a crippled city. All of the data about visiting New Orleans to enjoy culinary tourism meant nothing.

We pivoted away from our original plan because we had to find a new location, wait until the city was receptive to tourists, and we had located a new source of funding. Since we had not opened yet, we were at our most flexible. We had already developed some solid supporters, had a small bank of capital, and found the city and the tourism industry in the city to be open to new ideas. We spent a lot of time with the existential question of whether we could call ourselves a museum if we did not have a permanent location which included exhibit space, even if we were mounting exhibits around the city. We decided that if we did not open in a location that we could call home that we were just an idea. But we were an idea that was developing a new plan with the same goal. And that plan – designed to capitalize on the momentum that we had established – was to become a food and culture hub online to coordinate the cultural research that was developing out of the impacts of Hurricane Katrina. In addition, we decided to start to act like a museum and we began collecting plates from devastated restaurants, gathering the temporary menus that the first few museums that began to open printed based on their limited capabilities, and reaching out to those New Orleanians who had moved around the country for temporary shelter to let them know what was happening in the food world of New Orleans.

Finally in 2007, we approached a local mall in downtown New Orleans, the Riverwalk Marketplace, about filling some of its empty space. The Riverwalk Mall had been a successful tourist mall before Hurricane Katrina. In spite of the serious reduction in the number of tourists in the years after the hurricane, the mall was still conveniently located, but not well-visited. We reached an agreement with management, and we opened in the space in July 2008. We took over about 8,000 square feet in the mall that had formerly been occupied by The Limited (a national women’s clothing store chain that no longer exists). We believed that it was better to be open than to be a museum without a home. We did lose some board members who disagreed with the
idea of having a museum in a mall, but most of our board was happy for us to finally have a place to call our own. This meant that we were no longer just an idea.

In anticipation of opening, we began fundraising in earnest. We received some grants and some promises of funds from foundations. We based our budget and projections on these commitments, all of which were in writing. But the bottom fell out of the economy in late 2008. Several of the foundations which had made commitments simply did not have the money to honor their commitments to us. For a poor and nascent organization whose ambitions were larger than our bank account, not receiving the funds that had been anticipated was more than a setback. It was a catastrophe. It made it necessary to not keep personnel that we deemed key to the organization. More and more of the daily operations were carried out by fewer people, which was bad for morale and also for performance.

But there were many acts of kindness and offers of thanks that made us feel that by opening the Southern Food & Beverage Museum, we were representing the celebratory spirit of food held by the people of New Orleans. Our first exhibits were very text-heavy for 2 reasons. First, none of us on the team were museum professionals. We were all practiced at telling stories with words, but we had no experience telling stories with objects. Many of us felt that museums often did not give enough cultural context for the objects to fully appreciate the objects in exhibits. And secondly, we did not have enough objects. After we opened and people began to visit us, people began to give us things as wide-ranging as swizzle stick collections, menus, old kitchen gadgets, and a restaurant bar from 1859. They often said that they did not want the object, but it seemed too important to get rid of it. They entrusted us with them, because we were sharing the objects with the public.

This outpouring of objects immediately improved our exhibits, which in turn made it possible for us to begin selling memberships, do local and smaller fundraising, and begin to attract people who paid for programming and wanted to use our space for special events. This money did not completely make up for the promised money that we never received from foundations, but it made it possible for us to continue to operate as we kept pulling the train forward.

**AFTER SURVIVING HURRICANE KATRINA AND THE FINANCIAL CRISIS...**

We have come to consider the five years that we occupied the space at the Riverwalk our incubation period. We learned a lot about what we lacked, what we needed, how to become more locally important, and how to become relevant in the worlds of tourism and food. The mall had given us a 5-year lease, so from the beginning we knew that our time there was temporary. We
began looking for a permanent home almost as soon as we opened, because we knew that it would take time to find the location and to plan the move. Through a city program we located a building that is now SoFAB’s home. It was known as the old Dryades Market. The city had built a traditional covered market on the site in 1849 with the opening of the neighborhood called Faubourg Lafayette. Then in 1912 on the same site, the city reopened the market as a fully enclosed market. It had operated as a market until World War II. And after the war, the city sold the 15,000 square foot building into commerce. It was being used as a warehouse when we bought it. It was a building with a developer looking for a purpose. We became that purpose. We developed plans with an architect and began to let it be known in the city that this would be our new home.

We had to take over the project due to the developer having a personal crisis. We kept the plans and the architect, and with the help of the construction company, a local bank, and the support of our board, we closed our museum in the mall, boxed and stored our artifacts, and finally reopened in the old Dryades Market, now the Southern Food & Beverage Museum, in 2014. This newly-renovated building has 2 kitchens – one a demonstration kitchen with home appliances and a commercial kitchen. We have a bar, a liquor license, and a garden with culinary plants and large artifacts where we can also demonstrate outdoor cooking. Not long after opening, we had another setback. In 2017, the bank that had been our partner, was taken over by the FDIC.

AN ASIDE. . .

If we had relied on a strong business plan, we could never have anticipated any of these events. In every case it was probably mostly dogged stubbornness that kept us pulling the train forward. But that stubbornness was fueled by all of the positive things that had happened. People enjoyed our exhibits. They began to loyally volunteer. They participated in our programming. They used our space for their events. Our board was proud to be associated with us. People around the country knew about us and came to visit. We had become a part of the local community. We felt that we had been validated by the public. And that validation gave us the stubbornness that we needed to carry on.

THE TRANSITION. . .

We didn’t know what lay ahead, so we kept going in blissful ignorance. We were constantly reminded that plans can only be based on what you can anticipate, and that means that plans must be constantly adapted in light of the goal. With that in mind, as founder, President, and
CEO Liz Williams aged, she knew that a succession plan for the museum was necessary. With the support of the board, the new President and CEO of the organization – Brent Rosen – were selected in 2019. Williams remained as the institutional memory and as the person engaged in institutional development with the title of Founder.

THE NEXT 10 YEARS AT SOFAB

When Liz Williams reached out to me about taking over as the President and CEO of the Southern Food & Beverage Museum, I told her I needed to visit the Museum and have her show me around. We met a week or so later, and we started at the beginning – or at least the entrance to SoFAB.

What we saw while we walked was opportunity. Liz and her team had built an impressive facility, and all of the various components of the Museum came together to form something incredible. Liz explained the vision for the Southern Food & Beverage Museum while we walked. We talked about a Museum that would be a community center for people interested in food. A museum full of artifacts, but also good smells and tastes. A museum that would start conversations about important topics – race, gender, immigration, assimilation – using food as the point of departure. A museum that covers a topic everyone knows but very few understand. The opportunity to carry this vision forward was too great to pass, and SoFAB’s board named me President and CEO of the Museum the first week of April 2019.

Within a month, the Museum suffered its first catastrophe. It was Mother’s Day Weekend 2019. A rain storm sat on top of New Orleans for hours, pouring inch after inch of rain into a city already underwater. The sewers backed up, flooding the streets. Any cars that forded the riverine streets pushed water up and over the tops of the sidewalks. From there, the water ran into the Museum. When the flooding peaked, six inches of water covered the entire Museum floor. The flooding soaked artifacts, shorted the electrical in appliances, and brought potential contaminants into the building’s walls.

Not how I envisioned starting my museum career. Fortunately, I’d come to work for an organization that had, over its first 10 years, gone through a lot of adversity. That adversity created organizational resiliency.

We turned the Mother’s Day flooding from a crisis into an opportunity. The flooding required the demolition of large sections of the Museum’s interior walls. Water-logged drywall becomes a mold threat very quickly. Our insurance carrier provided us with the funds necessary to demolish the flood-damaged walls. We knew after talking to various contractors that the repairs were
likely to take two or three months. The repairs would also generate substantial amounts of dust and noise, two things best kept out of museums. We would certainly have been justified in feeling disappointed; instead we felt energized.

The demolition and rebuilding process allowed the team to rethink much of the Museum’s space. The flood damage impacted almost 6,000 square feet of the facility, including the Museum’s teaching kitchen, podcast studio, exhibition areas, and dry storage space. We optimized these areas during the rebuilding process.

By the end of construction, in many ways it felt like we had a new museum facility. Our podcast studio once occupied a hot, dark, windowless room. After the flood, we moved the podcast studio forward and provided it with a sound-proof window to allow our visitors to look in on recordings in progress. We built tall storage to take advantage of the building’s height. We carved out a new rotating exhibition space from some of the former kitchen and storage space. The rotating space allows the Museum to host more traveling or temporary exhibitions. Rather than feel like the construction was an imposition, we found ways to make the construction work for us.

The contractors finished most of the construction by the holidays in 2019. We had successfully torn down large portions of the Museum and rebuilt them in ways that would improve the Museum experience for years to come. Taking stock, we felt like the team had handled another crisis well. We thought we’d get through Mardi Gras in February 2020, and then we could start taking advantage of all the improvements to the facility. An exciting future awaited. The team was ready to begin the next 10 years of SoFab.

THE WORLD HAS OTHER IDEAS

We had no idea that within weeks, the entire city of New Orleans would be under lockdown. The first reports about COVID-19 talked about Seattle, Vancouver, other cities on the West Coast. At that point, we weren’t worried. The West Coast always seems to have some mystery illness going around, but rarely do those illnesses travel to the interior of the country. It wasn’t until the NBA cancelled the New Orleans Pelicans basketball game that we realized that COVID-19 was going to be a big deal. For the next 6 weeks, none of us left our houses except for groceries or other essentials.

During the initial lockdown we had to figure out how we could provide value to our Museum family members without being open to the public. We knew it would be months before we had
many visitors to the Museum. We had to figure out how we could keep people interested in our work without them visiting our galleries and seeing our objects on display.

We knew things would not be easy. Fortunately, most of the team had responded to the flood of 2019 only a few months before the pandemic. The team already knew what it was like to have operations impacted by factors beyond our control. We’d had experience with unreliable revenue projections because of unforeseen circumstances. We also had a belief: keep moving forward.

No one on the team was required to attend work in-person, but we all started showing up anyway. We thought the building was plenty big for social distancing – 15,000 square feet for at most 4 people – and honestly all of us were bored sitting at home. What started as an excuse to get out of the house began to feel more and more like a new normal. We started discussing how we could continue our work.

Our discussions identified four main areas that would allow us to continue making an impact without Museum guests. Those areas were the Museum newsletter, the Museum’s podcast studio, our children’s programming, and digitization of our collections.

The Newsletter

Before the pandemic, the newsletter was not terribly effective. We had developed a decently sized digital audience, almost 30,000 emails, but our open rate was below 10%. We looked at the newsletter content and realized that most of the newsletter was information that had already been put out on social media in some other format. In addition, the newsletter told people about ways they could spend money with the museum – “take our classes,” “come to our fundraiser,” “Give Nola Day is Coming,” – but we did not really tell people much about Southern Food. We needed to make a change.

We decided the key was to provide value with our newsletter. Our focus would become more new content, and less the information you could find on the website or on social media posts. Each newsletter became a weekly opportunity to tell a story to our audience. We found ways to feature our staff, our podcasts, and our collection without trying to “sell” anything. We also added an interactive piece called “Back of the Drawer” asking readers to identify obscure cooking equipment from the past.

The change paid immediate dividends. Within a few months, the email open rate had doubled. Today, we are hovering around 25%, with substantial interactions and website visits generated by the content in the newsletter. Our email list has also grown significantly as we continue to add
new subscribers without generating substantial “unsubscribe” responses to the newsletter. As we move forward from the pandemic, the newsletter has become a key communications tool for the Museum that actually reaches its audiences and can generate enthusiasm, ticket sales, and donations to SoFAB.

**The Nitty Grits Podcast Network**

The podcast studio presented another opportunity for the Museum. Having an in-house podcast studio was a unique asset for SoFAB, so we looked for ways to optimize it during the pandemic. Liz Williams’ podcast, *Tip of the Tongue*, became a mainstay on the network. The podcast really connected with our audience. Liz averaged around 4000 monthly RSS subscribers.

While it was impossible for the Museum to have visitors, Liz was able to keep a large audience of people interested and engaged in our work. Her topics, like how COVID-19 has affected the restaurant industry or the role of technology in the future of food, provided people interested in the intersection of food and culture a place to gather.

Not only did the podcast network have Liz, but the Museum added five other podcasts to the network. Today, the Nitty Grits Network features the following podcasts: Bryan Dias with the NOLA Drinks Podcast; Poppy Tooker’s “Louisiana Eats” show; Roger Anderson’s “Kitchen Counter;” Melanie and David Young’s “Connected Table” podcast; and Tracy Stuckrath’s show “Eating at a Meeting.” Each of the podcasts covers a different area of food and drink. And new shows are soon to be added to the growing roster.

Creating the Nitty Grits podcast network provided SoFAB with its own in-house media company. After the pandemic ends, the Museum will still have this resource and its audience of podcast listeners. These listeners can be reached directly, without mediators, when the Museum wants to announce new exhibits, end-of-year fundraising appeals, or membership drives. Our hope is to continue to grow the network, to both expand the network’s topical coverage and create new opportunities for Museum audience growth and engagement.

**Kids Activities**

One of SoFAB’s historic strengths was its children’s programming. Since the beginning, the Museum emphasized kids cooking and nutrition education as an important part of its mission. If kids don’t learn how to cook, it’s impossible to pass on culinary traditions to future generations.
During the pandemic, when kids everywhere were stuck at home with little enrichment, we felt it was particularly important to continue our kids cooking programming.

Our education team met and decided that we would provide free virtual kids programming during the pandemic, using Facebook Live as the streaming service in order to make the classes as accessible as possible. Our education director, Jennie Merrill, also made sure that the ingredients for these classes could be found at most any corner store or small neighborhood grocery. We wanted to make sure that the choices of ingredients didn’t exclude anyone from participating in the class. During the pandemic, we hosted the classes twice monthly, and were able to connect with thousands of children during the worst lockdown portions of the pandemic.

Post-pandemic, the relationships we made with children during lockdown are turning into live participants at the Museum. We made an effort to give kids and parents something they could do together during the pandemic; now we are seeing the return in paying customers attending our programs now that in-person programming is back.

**Digitizing the Collection with an App**

SoFAB’s collection of objects is enormous. We have over 10,000 catalogued items, spread across a half dozen major collections. Visitors to the Museum are able to experience cooking equipment, menus, memorabilia, packaging, and branded products. Visitors learn about agricultural processes, food processing techniques, and influential restaurants. Our collection explains the historical connections between food and the immigrants to the American South. When the Museum was forced to lock down, our collection became inaccessible to those interested in learning more about the food of the South.

We decided the best way to digitize the collection was to work with an application developer. We talked about creating one-off digital tours of different portions of the Museum, but in the end decided to go forward and fully develop an app. The app allowed for near- and long-term benefits to the organization.

In the near-term, the app would become the Museum’s content management system. Using the app as a content management system allowed the Museum’s curatorial staff to gather photographs of objects, descriptions of artefacts, and other digital media that would describe the collection in one place. From there, the information could be used to create digital tours, social media posts about the collection, and games and quizzes about the collection. These new digital offerings can be offered to anyone with a smartphone. The short-term benefits were clear during
the pandemic: the app provided us with a way to show our collection to digital visitors and to introduce the Museum to new people.

In the long-term, the Museum also greatly benefits from having this app. The app has allowed the Museum to broaden the experience of visiting the Museum. By connecting the collection to the internet, the app allows for more in-depth object descriptions, provides opportunities to present relevant secondary materials about objects, and creates infrastructure to present photos and materials showing objects in the collection out in the world, and not just on display at the Museum. The additional depth of experience alone would be worth implementing the app, but the data capturing technology further allows Museum development staff to begin the stewardship and donor management process from the moment a user downloads the Museum app.

**NEXT 10 YEARS, REDUX**

In her introduction above, Liz Williams suggested resiliency required three main aspects: a goal, a plan, and a dogged determination not to give up. The first two aspects are easy, almost every organization, non-profit or otherwise, has goals and plans. Our goal at the beginning of the pandemic was the same as our goal at the end of the pandemic – provide unique experiences for our visitors by being a food community center that features exhibits, rather than a food museum that occasionally does community activities. SoFAB’s orientation toward the community helps attract both tourists and locals to the Museum.

SoFAB has been innovative in its approach to attracting tourists since the Museum’s founding. New Orleans enjoys millions of tourists every year, and according to New Orleans and Company, our CVB, 70% of those tourists say they are coming to New Orleans because of the city’s food and culture. As a food Museum, SoFAB had to figure out how to capture our visitor’s energy and enthusiasm for the food and culture of New Orleans within our walls. The Museum’s staff knew that the pandemic would reduce the gross number of tourists, but those tourists were still going to be coming to taste and experience the food of our city.

During the pandemic, SoFAB emphasized the history of New Orleans food in its exhibits and programs to maximize potential tourist visitors. The Museum’s curatorial staff created an exhibit about SoFAB’s role as the “birthplace of brunch” in America. The bar at SoFAB developed a classic New Orleans cocktail menu that allowed the bar team to tell the story of New Orleans in a glass. The cooking education department changed up the menus for cooking classes and demonstrations to highlight classic dishes like Gumbo and Jambalaya. All of these efforts allowed tourists visiting the Museum to have a multi-sensory and immersive experience.

Tourists alone are not enough to make a Museum successful. Support from locals is essential for a Museum like SoFAB, both for financial stability and for community support. The changes made by SoFAB during the pandemic created more ways for SoFAB’s local community to engage with the Museum. The changes SoFAB made to its digital offerings allowed SoFAB to communicate with local fans across a number of channels, including social media, podcasts,
email, and virtual events. By adding more content about Southern people, Southern traditions, and Southern foodways, SoFAB’s local fans were able to better see themselves in the Museum’s work. Locals came out in great numbers to see the brunch exhibit, are the major consumers of the Museum’s podcasts and other content. These additional offerings from SoFAB will create new ties to the local community that will benefit the Museum for years to come.

COVID-19 presented extreme difficulties for the Museum at the beginning of the 2020s. Instead of being paralyzed by indecision, or deciding to wait COVID-19 out, or worse, quitting entirely, the team at SoFAB continued to move forward. Despite the pandemic, SoFAB is closer to its organizational goals than it was when we first shut down in March 2020.
PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

The exterior of the Southern Food & Beverage Museum on Oretha Castle Haley Blvd in New Orleans.
SoFAB Founder Liz Williams making announcements at an event in front of the Mississippi state exhibit.
Guests enjoying a cooking class in the Culinary Innovation Center at the Southern Food & Beverage Museum.
The “Gallery of the South” at the Southern Food & Beverage Museum which showcases exhibits on 14 Southern states.
SoFAB’s exhibit about the history of Popeye’s is one of the most popular attractions at the Southern Food & Beverage Museum.