

CAFÉ RESCUE

A Musical Comedy Murder Mystery

by Butch Maxwell with Dustin Heavilin

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PRODUCTION INFORMATION

Cast: 5 actors plus 3 audience participants

Script Running Time: Approximately 60–70 minutes

Intermission: One

Pre-show Character Mingle: Approximately 20 minutes

Audience Detective Card & Solution: Approximately 20 minutes

Typical Performance Event (excluding meal): Approximately 2 hours

Typical Dinner Theatre Event (including meal): Approximately 2 hours 45 minutes

Audience Participation: Three selected audience members portray Barb Dwyer, Saffron Sterling, and a restaurant customer.

THE SETTING

The Corner Café, Established 1987

THE TIME

The present

THE CHARACTERS

CARBY BURNZOTTO

Head chef. Passionate, ambitious, and determined to reinvent everything—whether anyone asked for it or not.

RICKY LIPSOVICH

Front-of-house manager and Carby's cousin. Practical, observant, and quietly keeping the place from falling apart.

AH-CHOO

Sous chef. Precise, meticulous, and deeply committed to doing things exactly right—or at least proving that he did.

BETSY CROCKER

A relentlessly cheerful celebrity chef who approaches cooking with confidence, creativity, and a unique relationship to reality.

JOHN TOUGHER

A high-energy restaurant consultant with bold ideas, strong opinions, and an unwavering commitment to dramatic change.

SAFFRON STERLING (Audience Participant)

A feared and influential food critic whose presence has a way of changing everything—sometimes before she even speaks.

BARB DWYER (Audience Participant)

Owner and “silent partner.” Focused on results, solutions, and making sure the restaurant survives—no matter what that requires.

CUSTOMER (Audience Participant)

A restaurant patron who asks the question no one on the staff can answer: what is this place called?

MUSICAL PARODIES AND PERFORMANCE RIGHTS

This play contains musical parodies performed to the tunes of well-known songs.

A license to produce this play does not include or grant permission to perform any copyrighted musical compositions. Responsibility for securing any required public performance rights rests with the producing organization and/or venue. Most theatres, restaurants, and performance venues already maintain blanket licenses through performing rights organizations such as ASCAP, BMI, and SESAC.

If appropriate licensing is unavailable, the play may be performed without the musical numbers. The songs enhance the production but are not essential to the plot, and dialogue may be substituted in place of the musical parodies.

FUN FACTS

- Carby believes every dish should tell a story. Unfortunately, some of those stories run longer than the meal itself.
- Ricky keeps detailed mental records of every customer—what they order, when they come in, and how they like it. He also notices when something doesn’t add up, which is great for the restaurant and terrible for his peace of mind.
- Ah-Choo labels everything in the kitchen. Everything. Including things that may not need labeling.
- Betsy Crocker has learned from many “mentors,” though not all of them appear to have actually existed.
- John Tougher insists that pressure reveals the truth—but he seems unusually comfortable when things start to fall apart.
- Barb Dwyer describes herself as “hands-off,” though major decisions have a way of happening shortly after she arrives.

PRE-SHOW MINGLE

Before the formal action begins, the characters circulate informally among the audience while remaining in character. During this time, they choose three audience participants to portray Barb Dwyer, Saffron Sterling, and a restaurant customer, establish relationships with audience members, and may draw upon the Fun Facts to improvise conversations and build the world of the play.

The pre-show mingle should feel spontaneous and welcoming while introducing the personalities, relationships, and comic tone of the evening.

ACT ONE

Corner Café kitchen. Early morning.

CARBY and RICKY enter, mid-argument. Carby wears an oversized chef's hat that's slightly too big. He's gesturing intensely at a notebook.

CARBY

—and then we do a play on the classic, right? We call it “Hand-formed Bovine Expression!”

RICKY

You want to re-name our hamburger?

CARBY

We deconstruct it. Brioche foam, pickled cucumber air, caramelized onion dust—

RICKY

(Holding menus)

Carby. Carby! Nobody wants onion dust. That's not a garnish, that's a Yelp photo.

CARBY

It's not just dust, it's a technique. It's about elevating the—
He unconsciously gives his oversized chef's hat a precise little adjustment before continuing.

RICKY

You know what else is a technique? Serving food people recognize without needing a glossary. The Corner Café has been serving regular burgers for thirty years—

CARBY

(Physically struggling)

The bur— the handheld... beef composition with traditional garnish applications has been—

RICKY

Just say burger.

CARBY

I literally cannot.

His hat falls.

The words won't form. It's like my mouth is staging a protest. And it's the Corner Bistro—

RICKY

—it's called the Corner Café, Carby! Say "Bistro" one more time and a regular will burst into flames.

CARBY

Not for long. When people see what we're capable of—this is about excellence! This is about pushing boundaries! This is about—

He stops to square his hat with meticulous precision. It's somehow slightly more crooked.

RICKY

(Deadpan)

—hat management, apparently.

CARBY

(Ignoring him, hat back in place, still intense)

Look. The Corner Bistro will serve elevated comfort food. Nothing from before. Nothing the regulars remember—

RICKY

The regulars don't come anymore, Carby. You know why? Because Tommy Kowalski— Table 4, Tuesdays, extra pickles—asked for a patty melt and you gave him a crime scene on a slate. He asked if the food was coming later.

CARBY

A slate is more elegant than a plate—

RICKY

It's a patty melt, Carby. Not a performance piece. Look, our most popular lunch item for years has been a grilled cheese sandwich. Are we still going to serve that?

CARBY

Certainly. Clarified dairy lattice on toasted wheat architecture.

(A beat.)

We're in transition. Once people see what I can do—

He moves to the "prep station" area with enthusiasm, miming pulling out a metal bowl. He picks up an actual (empty) metal bowl.

Carby mimes checking something - opening an oven door, looking in. His expression changes.

CARBY (CONTINUED)

Oh no. No, no, no. The short ribs.

RICKY

What about them?

CARBY

(Staring into the pan, devastated)

No. No, this cannot be. After seventy-two hours of precisely monitored braising...

RICKY

What's wrong?

CARBY

(Pulling out the pan, holding it like Yorick's skull)

They have achieved... an unintended dehydration through prolonged thermal exposure.

(A beat)

The collagen structure has become... compromised.

RICKY

You mean they're dry?

CARBY

(Tragic whisper)

Dry doesn't capture the existential horror of what has occurred here. These short ribs... they trusted me.

(He adjusts his hat)

And I have failed them. I have failed their bovine sacrifice.

RICKY

(Gently taking the pan)

Carby. They're just—

CARBY

Do not say "just!" There is no "just" in cuisine!

Pause.

RICKY

(Gentler)

Look. You're talented. But maybe we don't need to reinvent everything. The diner was good. People liked it. We had regulars. We had community.

CARBY

(Adjusting his hat, quietly intense)

The diner was dying, Ricky. Slowly. You know it was. If we don't evolve—if we don't try to be more—

RICKY

We're gonna die faster. And we'll be reviewed.

A beat.

CARBY

We just need time. And focus. And maybe better equipment. And if Barb would stop—

RICKY

(Bitter laugh)

Oh, don't even get me started on Barb Dwyer. She read a book called Micromanaging for Idiots.

CARBY

She doesn't know anything about running a restaurant —

RICKY

Hiring a “celebrity chef” without consulting the actual chef —

CARBY

A celebrity chef who takes more time talking to the pantry than using an actual pan —

CARBY (CONTINUED) & RICKY

(Overlapping, united in frustration)

Betsy!

They share a brief moment of agreement. Carby adjusts his hat.

RICKY (CONTINUED)

Two weeks. She's been here two weeks. Do you know what she did yesterday?

CARBY

I know. I was there. I saw.

RICKY

She burned water, Carby. That's not cooking. That's arson with confidence.

CARBY

She said the water burned because it was over-hydrated.

RICKY

Then she said the pot was wrong for the water.

CARBY

Then she said the water burned because it wasn't respected.

A beat. The absurdity hangs between them.

RICKY

We're doomed.

CARBY

(Adjusting his hat)

We're not doomed. I moved her off the line. She's hospitality hostess now — front of house. Greetings. Out of my kitchen.

RICKY

That's my house, Carby! I'm front-of-house. My whole job is making people feel safe while lying to them. And besides, she was in the kitchen an hour ago.

CARBY

She drifts. Like the smell of escargot from the dumpster. But at least officially—

Carby unconsciously picks up a spoon, tastes something, makes a face.

Needs acid.

(Realizing)

Why did I just taste the sanitizer water?

RICKY

(Deadpan)

We're doomed. And someone's live-streaming it.

AH-CHOO bursts into the performance space, frantic.

AH-CHOO

Someone stole my mise en place! [Meeze ahn plauce]

Carby and Ricky turn to stare at him. Carby pulls his hat back from his eyes.

CARBY

What? Listen, nobody stole anything, Ah-Choo—

RICKY

(Automatically)

God bless you.

CARBY

(Confused, turning to Ricky)

What? I didn't sneeze.

RICKY

You said "Ah-choo."

CARBY

I said his name. Ah-Choo.

RICKY

Oh.

(To Ah-Choo)

Sorry.

AAH-CHOO

(Not listening, increasingly frantic)

My mise en place! All my prep! My knife cuts, my brunoise [*Brew-naus'*] — someone came in here and they took everything!

CARBY

Calm down, Ah-Choo—

RICKY

Gesundheit!

CARBY

(To Ricky)

Stop that!

RICKY

You keep saying it!

CARBY

Because that's his name!

Ah-Choo is now frantically searching—patting himself down, checking around the "prep station," looking under the table, growing more agitated.

AH-CHOO

It was right here! I set everything up this morning—forty-five minutes of prep work— and now it is gone!

CARBY

(Trying to restore calm)

Okay, okay. When did you last see it?

AH-CHOO

Ten minutes ago! Right before I went to check the walk-in!

(Spinning around)

Did someone follow me? Did you see anyone come in?

RICKY

Nobody came in. We've been here the whole time arguing about patty melts.

AH-CHOO

Then where is it? Someone has it out for me—first the good knife last week, then my favorite cutting board, now this—

He's spinning in circles now, checking the same spots repeatedly.

CARBY

Ah-Choo—

RICKY

(Automatically)

Salud!

CARBY

(Sharply)

Ricky!

RICKY

Sorry! I can't stop. It's like muscle memory, but stupid.

AH-CHOO

(Not hearing them, to himself)

Maybe it is sabotage. Maybe someone wants me to fail. Maybe—

He stops suddenly. Looks down. There's a beat.

AH-CHOO (CONTINUED)

(Quieter)

Oh.

CARBY

What?

AH-CHOO

(Pulling something from his apron pocket)

Here it is.

Pause. Carby and Ricky stare at him.

RICKY

You've got to be kidding me.

AH-CHOO

(Sheepishly but also defensively)

It was... I was certain someone stole it.

Ah-Choo pulls out masking tape and a marker and writes on the tape.

CARBY

So, nobody stole it.

AH-CHOO

Well, I mean, it felt very stolen.

RICKY

It was in your apron.

AH-CHOO

(Defensively)

I have had a lot on my mind! There is much stress! When there is pressure, things go missing. It is a pattern.

He places tape on a ladle, very deliberately.

AH-CHOO (CONTINUED)

Ladle A.

CARBY

The pattern is you put things down and forget where you put them.

(He shoves his hat)

I didn't see that coming.

(A beat)

Look, just—focus on prep. We need everything ready.

AH-CHOO

Yes, Chef!

CARBY

We have actual problems. Barb is breathing down our necks, we're barely keeping this place afloat—

AH-CHOO

Since you let Miss Betsy into our kitchen, everything is chaos. I call her H-2-OH-NO.

RICKY

She's my problem, now. Hospitality hostess.

AH-CHOO

(Gathering his mise, checking himself one more time)

All I am saying is, something feels off today. Call it intuition.

RICKY

I'd call it paranoia.

AH-CHOO

Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. And if something is stolen, you will thank me later.

Ah-Choo starts to exit, then pauses, checks his pockets one more time.

I know I had my phone... *(Exit)*

RICKY

(To Carby)

He's going to have a nervous breakdown before lunch service.

CARBY

He has one every Tuesday. This is normal.

(A beat.)

So, we've got a paranoid sous chef, an incompetent "celebrity," a meddling owner, and a restaurant that can't decide what it wants to be.

RICKY

And my cousin who can't keep manage his hat.

CARBY

At least Ah-Choo can actually cook. Betsy, on the other hand—

RICKY

Don't. Don't even start. I'm still traumatized from yesterday.

CARBY

The water thing?

RICKY

The pot was smoking, Carby. Water doesn't smoke.

CARBY

And she just kept stirring it. Like everything was fine.

RICKY

Smiling the whole time. That's what gets me. The smile. Customers think it's "confidence." It's actually... a warning label. Oh well. At least no one is struck in the freezer.

(A beat)

Again.

Carby shoots him a look.

CARBY

Don't. We agreed never to say that out loud again.

SFX: Music – “Walking on Sunshine”

They exchange a look of dread.

Oh no.

RICKY

Maybe if we're very quiet — and if the universe has mercy —

BETSY CROCKER enters with enormous energy, beaming, radiating delusional confidence. She is in mid-dance already and she carries a large magnifying glass.

BETSY

Good morning, gentlemen! Isn't it just a glorious day to cook?

(Singing, full of joy)

♪ I used to think cooking was dreadful, I thought it was true
But Mrs. Paull showed me what a lens and the sunshine
could do

My Aunt Jemima gave me the strength to bake and sauté
I said, mama, I just want to cook, and I want it all day ♪

During the song, Betsy's magnifying glass – ostensibly for reading the hostess reservation book – is playfully “aimed” it at audience members like she's burning ants.

(Singing, full of joy)

♪ I magnify sunshine!

(Who-oh!)

A beam of hot sunshine—whoa-oh!

I'm cooking with sunshine—whoa-oh!

And don't it feel good! All right now! And don't it feel good!

♪

Betsy is dancing around the space, completely unaware that Carby and Ricky are watching in horror. Perhaps she nearly knocks something over but doesn't notice.

(Singing)

♪ I'm cooking with sunshine! I'm cooking with sunshine!
I feel alive, I feel the love, I feel the love that's really real
I feel alive, I feel the love, I feel the love that's really real
I'm cooking with sunshine I'm cooking with sunshine
And don't it feel good! All right now! And don't it feel good!
♪

Big finish. Betsy strikes a triumphant pose. She's beaming. Carby and Ricky stare at her.

CARBY

That song has killed more kitchens than salmonella.

BETSY

(Speaking cheerfully)

What a way to start the day! My Uncle Ben always used to say, "Cooking is love!" That's why his funeral was so awkward when everyone brought a pot of water.

Carby and Ricky exchange a confused glance. Betsy is looking at the reservation book with her magnifying glass.

RICKY

(Carefully)

Uh... Betsy—

BETSY

(Not hearing him)

Oh! Speaking of which—we have a VIP tonight! Seven-thirty reservation!

RICKY

Great. A VIP. You know who was a VIP? Tommy Kowalski. Table 4. Tuesdays. Extra pickles. Now he sends me passive-aggressive Christmas cards with just a picture of a normal burger. No note. Just the burger. Like a threat.

CARBY

What VIP?

BETSY

(Reading)

Saffron Sterling, table for one.

Betsy reads the name. A flicker of recognition crosses Ricky's face. Carby goes still. Not angry — something quieter. He stares at nothing for a long beat.

Sounds very fancy, doesn't it? Saffron Sterling.

(looking up, bright smile)

As Hospitality Hostess, I'll make sure she gets the best seat in the house! The Colonel always said hospitality is ninety percent of the battle. Or was that Little Debbie?

(Waving it off)

One of them said it.

Carby and Ricky exchange another confused look.

RICKY

Betsy – are you sure you're okay working front of house with me?

BETSY

Of course! I studied social-ology under Harvey Wallbanger.

RICKY

That's not a real person.

BETSY

He never let category define him. Neither do I.

(A beat, then to herself as she starts to exit)

Maybe you should serve a nice mushroom risotto. Mrs. Butterworth always said mushrooms make everything fancy...

She exits, humming "Walking on Sunshine."

Long pause. Ricky watches Carby.

RICKY

You went somewhere just now.

CARBY

(Adjusting his hat, too deliberately)

I'm fine.

RICKY

Carby.

CARBY

(Quietly. Final.)

Just thinking about the menu.

A beat. Ricky chooses not to push.

RICKY

(Letting it go, but not forgetting)

Did she talk about Mrs. Butterworth like she's a real person? Because if I have to explain this to a table, I'm jumping into the fryer.

CARBY

I... think so.

RICKY

And the Colonel? And Uncle Ben?

CARBY

(Adjusting his hat, which has slipped)

We're not paid enough for this.

RICKY

We're barely paid at all. I'm basically volunteering for trauma.

(A beat.)

So, this Saffron Sterling—whoever she is—does Betsy think she's cooking for her?

CARBY

No! I'll make it myself. Or maybe Ah-Choo.

RICKY

God bless—

(Catching himself)

Nope. I'm not doing it. I'm going to check the dining room setup. *(Exit)*

Carby notices BARB DWYER, an audience member.

CARBY

(Surprised)

Barb! I didn't—we weren't expecting—

BARB

I need to talk to you. Now.

CARBY

Of course. Is everything—

BARB

(Cutting him off)
I've brought in help.
A beat. Carby stares.

CARBY

Help? What kind of help?

BARB

A consultant. John Tougher. He's coming. Today. Now.

CARBY

(Confused)
John Tougher? The guy from that show? The one who yells at people?

BARB

The one who saves failing restaurants. Which is exactly what we are. Failing.

CARBY

(Defensively)
We're not failing, we're in transition—

BARB

(Firmly)
Carby. Listen to me. Do exactly what he says. Everything depends on this.

CARBY

Everything?

BARB

The restaurant. Your job. Everyone's jobs. Everything. Do you understand?

Carby adjusts his hat and stares.

CARBY

(Quietly)
I understand.

BARB

Good. He'll be here any minute. Get everyone together. Oh, and Carby? Try not to cry. He feeds on tears.

Carby stands alone. He pulls his hat off. Just stands there.

CARBY

Thirty years. Thirty years this place has been here.

(Toying with hat)

My dad opened this place. The Corner Café. Corner. Café.

(A beat)

He used to say, “Carby, a restaurant isn’t about food. It’s about showing up. Same place, same time, same face. That’s what people need.”

(A beat)

And I can’t even keep a hat on my head.

(Looking at hat)

Dad never worried about consultants. Or rebranding. Or... elevated comfort food. He never wrote a mission statement.

(Quietly)

He just knew everyone’s coffee order. (A beat, putting hat back on) And now Barb’s bringing in some TV guy to tell me I’m doing it wrong.

Ah-Choo re-enters, looking around cautiously.

AH-CHOO

Where is my ladle?

CARBY

Hanging up. Where it always is.

AH-CHOO

...It was on the counter.

(A beat)

It has been taken.

CARBY

You moved it.

AH-CHOO

(Quietly)

That is what they want you to think. *(A pause.)* Where is everyone?

CARBY

Ricky's checking the dining room. Barb just left.

AH-CHOO

Miss Barb was here? What did she want?

CARBY

(Adjusting his hat)

To make our lives worse. She's bringing in some consultant.
John Tougher. From that restaurant rescue show.

AH-CHOO

(Alarmed)

The man who yells?

CARBY

The man who yells.

AH-CHOO

This is not on the list.

CARBY

We just need to be ready. Tonight's service has to be perfect.
We've got a VIP coming in – could be a food critic.

*Ah-Choo freezes. A dark expression crosses his face. His
eyes are focused far away.*

So, whatever we serve has to be impressive. What can we add
to the menu that's safe? For some reason, I'm thinking about
a wild mushroom risotto? Upscale, impressive—

AH-CHOO

(With meaning)

Food critic.

CARBY

Yeah. Why?

AH-CHOO

(Quietly)

Five years ago, a critic reviewed my cousin's restaurant.
Salvatore's. Four generations. My uncle taught me to cook in
that kitchen.

(A beat)

One review. "Tragically outdated." Six months later, closed.
My uncle stopped cooking after that. Wouldn't touch a stove.
My cousin lost everything. The building is now a vape shop.

(Shaking his head, bitterly)

Food critics know nothing. Except how to destroy.

CARBY

Ah-Choo, I'm sorry—

AH-CHOO

(Shutting it down, back to business)

It is nothing. It is in the past.

(A beat, then intensely)

Which is why tonight's risotto will be perfect. No critic will find fault.

A beat. Betsy enters, carrying something, humming. She doesn't announce herself, just starts puttering around in the background.

And nothing is wrong with mushrooms. Unless, of course, they are the wrong mushrooms. Then everything is wrong.

Betsy is now fully paying attention, though still appearing to be busy with her task.

CARBY

We'll use the ones from our supplier—

AH-CHOO

I forage sometimes, but I triple-check everything. Always.

CARBY

Okay, well, I need to go check on those short ribs. *(Exit)*

BETSY

(Still cheerfully)

He worries too much! Cooking is about intuition. The Quaker Oats Man always said, "If it feels wholesome, it probably is."

AH-CHOO

The Quaker Oats Man did not forage mushrooms.

BETSY

(Laughing)

Of course not!

(A beat, looking around)

Although I studied mycology under Orville Redenbacher. Turns out he was more passionate about fungi than popcorn.