**[ashley\_christensen](https://www.instagram.com/ashley_christensen/)** Dear Steve,

Yesterday, I posted a happy birthday message to [@MichelleObama](https://www.instagram.com/MichelleObama/) from my personal Instagram account (which, at some point, you chose to follow of your own volition). Years ago, I had the great honor, as a small business owner and community-focused chef, of introducing her at the convention center in Raleigh. It was an experience I will never forget, and that I hold dear. She is a personal hero to me, and to many others.  We are all entitled to be inspired by others.
Your initial comment to me, “just cook and be quiet,” is a command, suggesting that you view me and my colleagues as mere servants of a trade to fill your belly. It implies that chefs and cooks should put their heads down, cook their food, and make their customers happy. First I want to share with you... I am not employed by “customers.” I am an employer of hundreds of incredible hospitality professionals in the capital city of the state you call home. Together, we work tirelessly to create and invest in the relationship of hospitality with GUESTS. We have an incredible and diverse base of guests, for whom we are tremendously grateful. And our work is a constant conversation with them in effort to build brilliant relationships. It goes so much further than a simple transaction of food for cash. Through this relationship, we drive our industry and community forward.
Furthermore, your comment makes me think that you’ve missed a few decades of growth and change in our industry (and in the world), and of the concept of hospitality as a whole. That’s okay...you can’t help what you don’t know, or what your circumstances may have prevented you from experiencing. I’m excited for you to learn what has changed in a world of which you claim to be a connoisseur. If you truly love food and hospitality, I would think you’d be thrilled by the strength and impact of the people who do this for a living.
Restaurant operators and food personalities have more reach and influence than ever before, and with that, comes responsibility. We take it seriously and so many of us do our best to step up and invest in our people, give back to those who need it, and push towards progress. [Continued in comments]

 **[ashley\_christensen](https://www.instagram.com/ashley_christensen/)** In cities across the country we are some of the most present, powerful, and generous groups of people at the center of the community. I’m tagging some (just some) of the players across the country who use their platforms as “food people” to be actively involved in their community beyond just cooking. We are called upon for donations and our time and platforms to serve on behalf of great points of need at least as much as any any other group of industry leaders. I personally (with the support of my incredible employees and our guests) spend nearly half of my time fighting for causes in my community that need funds and exposure. The causes that occupy the majority of my time are centered around ending child hunger in the US, providing life changing services and education for special needs children, and for all issues that surround creating a space at the table for all people. I, like so many chefs, have been professionally trained to advocate for causes. I have been to government offices and crossed the aisle to advocate for many bi-partisan issues (and have been successful in doing so). I am the daughter of a veteran, I am a product of the NC public school system, and I am 100% a believer in country before party. Steve, I have no problem with your political affiliation, whatever it may be. And if I followed you on Instagram, I wouldn’t care who you wished happy birthday to, or made statements of hope and positivity about. If I did, I think that would imply that I didn’t feel in control of the world that surrounds me, or that I was threatened by ideas of inclusiveness and hope.

Your bathroom comment is a conversation that would be wasteful of my time. I have a published essay on our stance on this (as a restaurant group, and as part of an overwhelming majority of a restaurant community) that’s easy for you to look up. In hospitality, it will never be wrong to create a safe and welcoming space and experience for ALL people at our tables.

 **[ashley\_christensen](https://www.instagram.com/ashley_christensen/)** I appreciate that you love restaurants (ours and others). Your feed is full of food photos from your visits and conveys a real passion about dining and the craft of cooking. But I hope you can come to understand that you cannot “be proud of me” while simultaneously attempting to silence and disrespect me. You cannot be a food connoisseur while insulting those who cook for a living by telling them their voice doesn’t matter.
I hope that these words, and the powerful leaders copied on this thread, can help you to understand the importance of not “being quiet.” I also hope that you realize that you chose to follow me personally, and that you felt entitled to suggest that because I am a chef I should not wish one of my heroes happy birthday in the presence of my platform of personal followers. (Honestly Steve... I feel silly re-typing your statements.) I want to remind you... you can unfollow at anytime. Otherwise, if you stick around, I hope that the nearly constant positivity on my thread creates a spot of peacefulness in your day.
Steve, this is my last contribution to our conversation. I won’t be chiming in further from here. Should you (or anyone with a similarly disrespectful mindset such as yours) choose to no longer dine at our restaurants, I support that decision. We appreciate welcoming and learning from those who have different opinions than ours, but draw the line when those opinions shirk mutual respect and human equality. It is our hope to feed a community of people that value us and our contributions as much as we value them, and no amount of $ will ever be worth compromising that commitment. We wish you the best in your future dining experiences.

 **[ashley\_christensen](https://www.instagram.com/ashley_christensen/)**\*\* To all others reading this, one important note: there were some comments connecting Steve to BGood in North Hills (as a former employee). Please do not pass judgment on this establishment. We know nothing about the type of business that they run, and it’s unfair to judge them or punish them based one ex-employee’s personal beliefs or sense of entitlement. You are all more positive and better than that. If anything, show them a little extra support for being tied to the negativity that this gentleman’s right to freedom of speech unnecessarily brought into this tribute to one of my heroes. It saddens me that his version of expressing himself is to attempt to silence others, but  [#DontForgetKindness](https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/dontforgetkindness/).\*\* And last but not least, again, happy birthday [@MichelleObama](https://www.instagram.com/MichelleObama/).