

# THE COMEDY GAZELLE



# ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *Why haven't I heard of her before?*

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle – to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger. It was also the pandemic and I had shit else to do.

Thanks for your support!

– Jerry

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# INTERVIEW: PROFESSOR PIZZA

*Days away from opening his first brick and mortar location, I sat down with local legend and comedy superfan Professor Pizza (@professorpizza) to discuss his new restaurant, catering for JB Smoove, building a brand, The Bear, and more.*

## **Congratulations on the restaurant! That's gotta be exciting.**

Yeah, we're partnering with the people behind Roots, which is Fifty/50, a hospitality group. For me, it's the opportunity of a lifetime because it joins a lot of my different loves and passions: comedy, Chicago, and pizza. It's obviously a legendary building with all the history in the Second City space, and we see it as a bottomless pit of opportunity. It's really the first chance we've had to show the full expression of what we're capable of.

## **You're going to have a full menu, right?**

Right, it's a big step. We'll always be pizza centric and have a slice counter, but we'll also have salads, sandwiches, pastas, desserts, appetizers, snacks, full bar menu, full coffee menu, and a collaboration with Black Dog Gelato that I'm really excited about as well. It's an opportunity for us to do a lot and take all our talented friends throughout the city and activate them in one central space and celebrate everything they've been working on.

## **How are you feeling about going from pop-ups to brick and mortar?**

My first focus is going to be being in the restaurant and having a day-to-day presence in the restaurant. With that said, part of what helped build the brand and ingratiate me into these different communities is doing pop ups: at MADE Gallery, Blind Barber, Humboldt Jungle, Dorian's, Emporium, and going to some of these different green rooms, like the Chicago Theater, the Vic, Zanies, Laugh Factory, and just showing a presence for the art form that I'm so passionate about.

## **I know you cater every Humboldt Jungle show. How did you start working with them?**

Joe Eames reached out to me a couple years back for a 420 show they wanted to promote. I was like, "Yeah, let's figure it out!" So we did that and I instantly fell in love with what they were doing and saw this rocket ship to the moon in terms of DIY Chicago comedy. They've only



exceeded my wildest expectations; it's just such a hotbed for comedic talent. Not to mention what Nate's been able to curate in terms of music. It's a cool spot.

## **Where does your passion for comedy come from?**

I think standup's something that I always wanted to do, and maybe at some point I'll scratch that itch, but I was also really into food. If I didn't already have this crazy, intense passion for pizza and Italian American cuisine, I think my obvious trajectory would have been, "Oh, I should try stand up." I love it, but I've never done it. I think if not for this other passion of food, I would have gravitated towards what my funny friends are doing, which is stand up.

## **You've made pizza for a lot of great comedians. Did anyone surprise you with how nice or genuine they were?**

I've done it for a lot of famous people, but I can say that one of those famous people has converted to a genuine friend — and that's J.B. Smoove. He and his wife, Shah, have been intensely supportive of me over the years. They came to the Rooftop Tetto this past summer and ate. For them to come out of their way, as opposed to me just bringing it to them, is a big deal, you know?

### How did you guys meet?

People always ask me, "How do you get these connections?" And the more you do it, the better you get at sleuthing out the opportunities or building the relationships with the people around them that are going to be able to make it happen for you, whether that's the venues or tour managers or opening acts. He was the first comic I'd ever done it for, though, so I didn't have any of that yet. I just posted on Facebook: "Does anybody have connections to Thalia Hall? I would love to bring JB Smoove pizza tonight." My buddy, Tony Martin, knew a bunch of people there and was like, "If you have the pizza on you and you give it to security, they'll bring it to his green room and tell him about it." At the time I was still managing Dough Bro's, and I'm already on my way to the show when I get this message from him. And on top of it, JB's vegan, so I don't have any vegan cheese or products ready for him yet. I think the opportunity's passed. But I see the message and I'm like, "Fuck! Turn around, we gotta go to Dough Bros!" I'm calling Dough Bro's like, "Yo, open that little can on the shelf and get that ready for me!" I have so little time before the show starts, and I bake him this cheeseless, heavy veggie, sauce pizza. It's got the Dough Bro's box, it doesn't say anything about Professor Pizza. I've got a sharpie I steal from the pizzeria. I write, "Made lovingly from Professor Pizza" — I'm like fully bootlegging their box. Then I get to the show, give it to security, watch the whole show, and then he does the meet and greet of all meet and greets afterwards. Any person from the entire theater that wanted to say hello to him, he gave them his time. I met him and said, "Look, I don't know if it got to you, but I brought this pizza for you." And he's like, "Oh yeah, I can't wait to tear it up after this! I appreciate you!"

### Oh, he didn't eat it yet?

No, no.

### So he got a cold bootleg pizza?

Oh, yeah. Now I bring ovens and hot tables, all sorts of stuff. But the reality is, comics are so grateful, and just grateful in general. I feel like they're kindred spirits with cooks, and that's been a reason that I've been able to link with them over the years. You go so long for a goal, for so many years, that you don't make any money at, and you may not get anything out of it. We're kindred spirits, right? A lot of times they're eating cold pizza, but they're happy to have it. And I had no previous experience doing this yet.



### This was the very first one?

Other than Joe McMahon and Dale McPeck for Not Your Father's Comedy Show at North Bar. That was my first one ever.

### Oh, hell yeah. North Bar, baby!

Show respect, you know. But first celebrity? For sure. Anyway, the show's over, they're all back there, he's a celebrity, they've never heard of me, and they're all looking at that pizza, and somebody's like, "Okay, you take the first bite," cause they don't know who this person is. Then somebody does, and they're like, "Holy shit, this kinda slaps!" Before you know it, he'd eaten the whole pizza. I'm just on this high of having met him in a meet and greet. I'm in the passenger seat of my buddy's car and we're driving home and I get a DM, and it's fucking JB Smoove, and it's a picture of an empty box "just smashed that pizza." The next day he does a post, he thanks Chicago, he thanks Thalia Hall, and he thanks Professor Pizza. It's like a two slide post, and I think the second slide he posted the half eaten pizza box or whatever.

### I can hear him, like, "That pizza was good as fuck!"

Yeah, exactly! I was like, "Fucking A. I'm off to the races! I'm going to be in the next season of Curb!"

**So I imagine that the pizza business, like comedy, has to be so difficult and competitive. How have you been able to break in?**

I've always had the mentality that I had to fake being famous for this whole thing to work out. There's just so many pizzerias out there; there's so many Italian kids making pizza. I've never even been to Italy. It's hard to separate yourself from the pack, so for me, I've embraced my own brand of ADD where I do a variety of different styles; I do more than anybody in the city. Then the fact that I have this intense love for comedy and have been ingratiated into the scene, and I make these comics pizza. I have that somewhat quasi-celebrity recognition that sets me apart: I've made myself - my look and my image - my brand. A lot of pizzerias will use a last name, but I think a lot more people will remember Professor Pizza than will necessarily remember Scardino. I was a huge hip hop fan growing up, and a lot more people know who Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent are than Calvin Broadus or Curtis Jackson. Pizza makers aren't known on the level of like a Gordon Ramsay, yet. My mentor, Tony Gemignani, is a god in my world, globally, but you ask people outside of the pizza world, and this is no knock on Tony, but you probably don't actually know who he is. I think it's a generational thing, and I'm part of the generation that has the responsibility to change that because we have the internet as a tool.

**What kind of advice would you give to comics about brand building and putting themselves out there?**

I've seen two schools of thought: a lot of comics say to not wait for the gatekeepers, that there aren't gatekeepers anymore and you can do your own thing. I've seen other people say to hone your craft a little before you start posting. Now, for me, I have to look at it from the perspective of a restaurateur and a business owner. I think you are a small business owner as a comic, but as a restaurateur, it's a little bit different because there's so much overhead. I'm buying cheese and sauce and flour and pepperoni. But for me, I think the biggest thing I did that set me up for success is that I built this following and I started building that following before I had any bills at all. I look at this kid now on TikTok, who works for Papa John's, who's a fantastic dough spinner, and he has like 400,000 followers and is sponsored by them. His end goal is probably not just to work at Papa John's, but this kid is smart enough to weaponize TikTok and be like, "I am gregarious and outgoing, I can spin this dough and build my brand on somebody else's dime. So let me set up my phone and make some videos." And now this kid



has a platform to do whatever he wants. I am of the opinion that documenting your journey before you have those bills to pay is really important, and before you have a perfect product is really important. Comics might disagree with me and want you to post something a little bit more polished, but I actually think the opposite. I think people really like to follow people's journey and see, "Holy shit! I was watching his COVID Instagram lives when he was making focaccia in his apartment!"

**Those are the real fans.**

Yeah, people come up to me today saying, "I used to go to your apartment." It was like, dude, that was like half a decade ago. That's when this started for me, at least on an independent basis, and I wouldn't even be in the situation I am in with the people I'm partnering with if I just tried to do it now. The whole reason I have any success right now is because I started posting about this stuff when I had nothing - when I was using government COVID checks to buy cheese, sauce, and flour. I'm a big believer in posting every step of the way. But I'm not a comic, so do as you will.

**Well, when I interviewed Ken Flores, he was like, “You have to build your following because your audience is your currency.”**

It's your best marketing tool. My favorite comedian of all time is Tom Segura. And my favorite comedy podcast of all time is *Your Mom's House*. Huge admirer of what he does and what they have built. I've seen Tom say this a bunch: that being a stand up comic is totally akin to running a small business. You have to do all the accounting, all the travel arrangements, all the marketing, and oh, by the way, be really funny and write new jokes all the time. So it's really tough and I have a lot of admiration and respect for anybody that's able to do it on any level. Even open mic-ing because it just takes balls on any level to do it.

**Have you gotten to cater for Tom?**

I have not gotten to cater for him or Christina P. I have gotten to cater for both of his sisters, his now deceased father, and his mother. Because in the pursuit to cater for him, I went out to Florida on my own dime to cook with his sister, who at the time had a YouTube cooking show, and did some episodes with her.

**You're doing all this just to give a guy a free pizza?**

Yeah, that's the level of crazy, which is psychotic. That's why I haven't made him a pizza; because he's like, “It's this fucking stalker! Get him away from me!”

**Has catering for these comics directly gotten you followers?**

It's a hard thing to fully quantify each time, but I remind myself: “You're doing this because you really love comedy and you'd like to hang with these people. It's fun for you, and you get a thrill out of it when you get brought up on these podcasts.” A lot of the people that see these podcasts, they don't even live in Chicago, so they're not immediately going to be converted into a customer. But it builds the lore.

**The lore!**

Everybody knows I'm the guy that does this, so it makes it easier for me to do it in the future. I've had people like Steve Rannazzisi DM me on Instagram and be like, “Hey, I've heard about you. Would you make me pizza?” And I'd be like, “Dude, I grew up watching *The League*! Of course I'll make Kevin pizza!” And it's because I do it so often so it just feeds itself on some level.

**Any plans to branch out of Chicago?**

Well, I've been lucky to have people like Sam Morill, who's a lifetime New Yorker, and Mark Normand be like, “This is

some of the best pizza I've ever had; you should open in New York.” I would love to do more in New York. I always have fun being out there. I really would love to do something in Austin one day. I'd definitely love to be in some different cities; New York, Austin and LA are high on that list.

**I imagine you're just focused on getting the first restaurant started.**

All of this does happen really step by step. I started by working in other pizzerias and the pandemic hit and I did it in my apartment, and then in the back of one friend's restaurant, and then in the back of the Full Shilling in Wrigleyville for almost two years, and then in a ghost kitchen for a year, and then in the West Loop for a year on that rooftop. And now I'm opening my first brick and mortar. So even just to get to this point? Years. I started making pizza for friends and family 15 years ago. I'm 33, so it's approaching half my life at this point. So, do I want to be in these other cities? Yeah, of course, but let's make this place a little bit known in Chicago first. I already have the benefit of being on the back of giants by being in the Second City building, right across the intersection from Zanies. There's a lot of talent still being churned out in that building, so I'm excited to be there a lot more often. Also, I wanna hopefully influence more standup comedy happening in that building. Part of my story is that connection to stand up comedy, and if I can have that happening in that complex, I would love to be a part of that.

**Anything you can tease about the opening? Any inside scoops?**

There are some non-pizza items on the menu that I've always wanted to invest the R&D time into and have as a part of my larger culinary story. One of those things is a porchetta sandwich, which I've been working on a lot recently, so keep an eye out for that. And as an Italian American kid growing up in the

suburbs of Chicago, spaghetti and meatballs was one of those classic Italian dishes that I grew up eating. So we want to bring back the Sunday gravy meal. We're going to have a spaghetti and meatball large format dish that is only available on Sundays, so people can come in and have the whole experience with two huge balls of burrata on there and a fuck ton of meatballs and spaghetti and garlic bread, and really have the whole Sunday dinner experience.

### **I feel like I have to ask: what's your take on The Bear?**

I love it. But if anyone is looking for a carbon copy replica of what it's like to work in the industry, I think you're going to be disappointed. The reality is it's still a television show; its end goal is to entertain you, so obviously there's going to be some dramatizing of certain elements. But it's closer to telling the story of what it's like to work in this industry than anything else I've seen thus far. I think it does great justice to Chicago by and large. It's cool to see some of my friends' restaurants, and personalities throughout the industry have cameos in it. I kind of grew up in this industry working at places like Publican Quality Meats and looking up to the founders of that, like Donnie Madia, and to see him in an episode of it was awesome. In my pursuit to make the cast pizza, I have googled and IMDB'd everybody on that show. If you were an extra on that show, I've probably DM'd you and offered you pizza. A handful of those actors have gotten back to me. I'm inching closer. And I'd love to be on the show at some point, you know? That's like the ultimate goal.

### **I respect the hustle. You're going on IMDB and cold calling these people.**

Yeah, I am my own agent. It's become a fun game, too. I like doing it last minute with somebody really big, like, "Okay, I've got 24 hours. Can I make so and so pizza?" More times than not it doesn't work out, but sometimes it does.

### **As somebody that's around the Chicago comedy so much, if you could change anything about the scene, what would you want to change?**

I think it's time we all delete Facebook. Just promote your shows on Instagram. All of this nonsense is like high school. All these comics getting into these comment threads and pulling guns on each other. Manifestos from their car and shit like that. You guys should just be writing jokes and promoting shows and doing podcasts. Maybe it's because I don't live in LA or New York that I don't see the drama that happens in those cities, and I'm sure it exists on some level, but the reality is we are a hotbed for comedic talent and we shouldn't be seen as lesser than any other city in the world. But when we do stuff like that,

you kind of get the reputation you deserve a little bit. That's townie, high school behavior to me, and I wish we didn't partake in that type of shit. I see it from afar, but everyone sees it from afar. Other people that aren't comics chime in, then you see comics responding to those people, and it's like, "You all look ridiculous right now." I want all the really funny people to be rich and famous, and I think if you're really funny and you're involved in that, you're not doing everything you could be to raise your price in this world. You can't be like, "That was yesterday's price," if you're still in yesterday's text thread. It's so dumb. I think using social media for anything other than, "These are my friends and family," or "this is my business come support" is a waste of time.



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# Professor Pizza's Top 10 Chicago Comics

- 1. BLAKE BURKHART**
- 2. MICHAEL MEYERS**
- 3. JOE EAMES**
- 4. PAUL MILLER**
- 5. KRISTEN TOOMEY**
- 6. CHRIS HIGGINS**
- 7. DALE MCPEEK**
- 8. DANNY KALLAS\***
- 9. MARILEE**
- 10. MARTY DEROSA**



# Comedians Recognizing Comedians

## **GEORGIE MOORE**

"Georgia's style is sharp and witty, yet so relatable! She also brings a unique performance element to all her sets. She's definitely someone to watch!"

## **SAM BIRU**

"Sam is one of my favorite newer comics. His jokes are really well structured and his understated delivery just makes them that much funnier. Book him or you're an idiot."

## **RYDER OLLE**

"Ryder is positively unhinged. He's so energetic and goofy on stage, I could watch him read the dictionary."

## **ALEXA JAEGER**

"Alexa is such a devoted producer and amazing writer, her energy makes every show better and she only continues to grow and improve."

## **DANNY LANG**

"Danny has been quietly grinding away, building out his hour. He now has a strong repertoire of jokes that are both incredibly funny and personal. His storytelling paints a picture that is both uniquely Danny and hilariously relatable. A KING."

## **CHRIS DRITSAS**

"You want to see the future of alt comedy? It's this guy. An extremely nice dude who puts on some of the best comedy shows out there. You would be hard to find another comic who is able to put on as big events with as much skill and passion as him."

## **SETH DAVIS**

"A long time Chicago comedy veteran possessing a charming stage persona coupled with a hilarious collection stories about teaching in the city, mentally scarring childhood mishaps, and awkward run ins involving cybersex."

## **ANTHONY HERNANDEZ**

"The most endearing person I've ever seen both on and off stage, with really funny and unique jokes to boot."

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?  
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