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TELEVISION



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Consumed: The Real Restaurant Business Wednesdays 10 p.m. CNBC

What a great show. "Consumed" focuses on five restaurants and their owners, either trying to get a business going, expand it or keep it alive. Filmed like a documentary, it is everything gripping and realistic that shows like "Kitchen Nightmares" and restaurant-war challenges can never be. Best, all that goes on here, from the personality clashes and financing choices to the desperation that comes with sinking revenue—and above all, the gut-churning drive—is the story of entrepreneurs everywhere.

The two semifamous owners of the Meatball Shop in New York have been friends since childhood and are deciding how to grow beyond six successful Meatball Shops which collectively take in about \$22.5 million a year. One partner wants to go slowly—in part to keep control of what they built, in part because he doesn't think they have found a formula yet to make every restaurant deliver consistently good experiences and food. The other partner is elated by the suggestion from a financial adviser that their minifranchise is worth up to \$50 million and that they should seek investors who could take them national and into the billionsphere. The disagreement over this decision

and others, almost on a daily basis, is not just profound, it is profoundly personal—and we may be watching the end of the affair.

In the Bronx meanwhile, two other partners are fighting like the brothers they are as "Ann & Tony's," the Italian restaurant their immigrant great-grandfather began, loses customers and, at the current rate, 20% of its former gross a year. What's left is no longer enough to support three families (including the restaurant's owner, their mother.). While they flounder, one brother in tears, searching for ideas that will keep them from becoming the men who lost the family legacy, they scramble to treat the customers they do have like "queens." It can be hard to watch, but it is how things go.

And then there is Melba, who 10 years ago opened her Harlem eatery Melba's using \$300,000 she saved in rubber-banded rolls of cash under her mattress. Now she wants to expand further and open a bar in a space she has been renting for a year, while waiting for inspiration. From \$1.4 million in annual business she makes about \$390,000 in profit. But to open the bar she needs either a bank loan, which means if the bar fails she could lose the restaurant, or an investor, who would want a say in how Melba runs what she alone created.

Whether you've been there and done that or not, seeing these people make fateful decisions is as exciting as any scripted story, and a lot more like the high-stakes drama that building a business really is.