

Technical Foodies Ep 2_Are They Dead? Drive-ins

[00:00:00] **Delia Sargeant:** Welcome back to Technical Foodies, where we discuss QSR technology and hot topics in the food and beverage industry presented [00:00:10] by ACRELEC. This month we're talking about drive-ins. As we mature, restaurant concepts mature with us most of the time. [00:00:20] Drive-in restaurants have been a staple of American culture since the mid 20th century.

[00:00:26] **Delia Sargeant:** My European colleagues know them mainly from American [00:00:30] movies like Dazed and Confused and American Graffiti, but you can definitely still find them today. Sonic, of course, is the largest drive-in chain, but local mom and [00:00:40] pop drive-ins still exist all over the country, and they look almost exactly like they did in the fifties, except maybe for the roller skates.[00:00:50]

[00:00:50] **Delia Sargeant:** As we discussed with Tyler last month, QRS are going digital, investing in tech, and taking advantage of partnerships to stay relevant and profitable. So what's next [00:01:00] for the drive-in? Will this fixture of Americana jump on the tech train or stay antiquated? Stay with us to find out.

[00:01:09] **Delia Sargeant:** Today I have with [00:01:10] me one of my favorite colleagues and probably one of the most knowledgeable people on drive-ins Paul Crawford.

[00:01:16] **Delia Sargeant:** Paul spent almost six. As president of Automatic [00:01:20] Corporation and one of the first names in audio systems for Q S R. A major player in audio for drive-ins all over the country. Now. A program [00:01:30] director for Acry for a little over a year now. Welcome, Paul.

[00:01:35] **Paul Crawford:** Well, hello Deila. How you doing today?

[00:01:38] **Delia Sargeant:** I'm great. ■ I'm so glad you could [00:01:40] take the time to, to talk, with me today.

[00:01:42] **Delia Sargeant:** I'm excited to pick your brain a bit here. Um, there's not a lot out there about drive-ins in the present tense, so this [00:01:50] is, this is gonna be really cool. How did you get involved in drive-ins? Let's start there.

[00:01:56] **Paul Crawford:** Well, I literally drove into one [00:02:00] in 1985. It's, I mean, that's, that's the answer, right? I mean, it's,

[00:02:06] **Delia Sargeant:** that's the answer.

[00:02:06] **Paul Crawford:** We pulled in and it was there yard we're in the [00:02:10] drive-ins. Um,

[00:02:11] **Delia Sargeant:** do you have any memories of drive-ins growing up?

[00:02:15] **Paul Crawford:** Well, well, that's what made it special. Um, drive-ins are very [00:02:20] nostalgia oriented. And, and, and personally, it, it's a big deal for me because, I mean, just when I think about drive-ins, I'm, you know, I'm back in my 1980, [00:02:30] black Turbo TransAm with screaming chicken on the hood and, and the tee tops off, uh, with, with the girl had a crush on forever in the passenger [00:02:40] seat. And we're ordering cherry vanilla Dr. Peppers. I, it's, it's just so Americana. I love that she mentioned America Graffiti. Uh, I mean that's back in the [00:02:50] fifties, but even I, I was late eighties, uh, when I was hitting it.

[00:02:54] **Paul Crawford:** And it is just been such a big deal. It was a place that almost every one of my dates into that we, we [00:03:00] stopped by, uh, you know, when we were dragging the strip back and forth. And it's also the reason I, uh, I got out of my first ticket [00:03:10] because I had just had, I had just had a onion rings for the very first time in my life and they pulled me over cuz we were going a little too fast and was worried I've [00:03:20] had alcohol. And he asked me, um, please blow on my face. And I was shaken. Oh my gosh. And I blew in his face. And then I just said, sorry sir, I had onion [00:03:30] rings, . And he just, boy, it's all he could do not to laugh. And he just said, 'Son, get home and'

[00:03:37] **Paul Crawford:** So thank you to drive-ins. You saved me. Probably a [00:03:40] pretty nice ticket right there from the very start.

[00:03:43] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah, I think that they really, I think that you find them more often, at least like the one-off mom and pops in what that maybe more [00:03:50] rural areas or less, you know, less suburban type places. Um, which is similar to where I grew up.

[00:03:58] **Paul Crawford:** One of our biggest ones is in Chicago.
[00:04:00]

[00:04:00] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah. Super Dawg is a, a real staple,

[00:04:03] **Paul Crawford:** super dawg

[00:04:03] **Delia Sargeant:** out here.

[00:04:03] **Paul Crawford:** Has, they had over 80 stalls at one point. That's, I mean,

[00:04:08] **Delia Sargeant:** that's crazy.

[00:04:08] **Paul Crawford:** Just hopping crazy. And that was it. I mean, they were [00:04:10] trying their best to, to produce as many stalls as they could to get as much business going as they could at one time.

[00:04:16] **Paul Crawford:** Very interesting.

[00:04:17] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah, it's definitely an interesting. [00:04:20] Way to manage traffic. I can't imagine, like, I feel like it's, it's a really weird combination of a drive through and [00:04:30] like, let me sit down and my, and eat.

[00:04:32] **Paul Crawford:** Well. So Drive Ins started about 1920 is the first time we hear of one and first drive through was around [00:04:40] 1946.

[00:04:41] **Paul Crawford:** So right there at, the end of World War ii. So I mean, there's a big difference

[00:04:45] **Delia Sargeant:** Wow.

[00:04:45] **Paul Crawford:** You know, between those that it's really just how Americans. how Americans, ate. [00:04:50] Uh, and it kind of echoes what's going on in, in society.

[00:04:54] **Delia Sargeant:** So, um, what is the current state of drive-ins here in the US? [00:05:00]

[00:05:01] **Paul Crawford:** So I, I think you said it well, that drive-ins are, are very, they're very nostalgia oriented.

[00:05:06] **Paul Crawford:** They are typically small, the mom and pop [00:05:10] shops. I mean, someone who owns one, maybe two of the shops, uh, they're locally well known, Right? I mean, they're just [00:05:20] famous.

[00:05:20] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah.

[00:05:20] **Paul Crawford:** You know, in their, in their own little backyards. Um, except for Sonic, it's the one that actually grew outside of that shell and [00:05:30] became, I mean, full, uh, full Americana to the point that last week they actually opened the first Sonic in Hawaii in Capuli.[00:05:40]

[00:05:40] **Delia Sargeant:** I saw that. And they had, they were like, cars lined up for miles or something like that. Just to, to do it.

[00:05:46] **Paul Crawford:** It was so cool. What a better place to sit out in your car and [00:05:50] look at, you know, just enjoy the air? I mean, it's awesome. Yeah. So, yeah. That's exciting. When you think about, uh, the current state, it is viewed [00:06:00] as, uh, pretty retro.

[00:06:02] **Paul Crawford:** It's viewed as kind of being something, uh, quite a bit old fashioned. and it's, it's interesting, uh, as a [00:06:10] case study in business, uh, if you're watching, uh, something that's, well, we're talking over a hundred years old now and how the, the country has evolved. and it's very American [00:06:20] because we're car centered, right?

[00:06:22] **Paul Crawford:** I mean, you don't, that's why European friends, that's they don't understand eating in a car. Why in the world

would anybody want to eat in a car? But [00:06:30] it's, uh, for us, it's, we love our cars and then it, you know, it's a place to hang out, which is why you'll see like Sonic has done some of their. Their media, uh, and probably in the last couple [00:06:40] years has revolved around just like family and friends eating in cars together and just talking about normal stuff.

[00:06:45] **Paul Crawford:** They're kind of trying to give that this is where life happens, kind of, kind of, uh, [00:06:50] persona.

[00:06:51] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah. I think going back to the, um, I think they had commercials in the 2010s that were the two guys sitting in the car just joking [00:07:00] about, you know, whatever the, the new, you know, item was from Sonic and, um, always super fun.

[00:07:06] **Delia Sargeant:** But I think, you know, **Europe, Europeans, and** in Europe, they're just now implementing [00:07:10] drive-throughs, you know, so I think they kind of skipped that period of time where they were just looking to eat in their car as opposed to now [00:07:20] they're shifting to that kind of mindset of like, let's move quickly. You know, I want to do things quick and efficiently where drive-ins not necessarily fit that [00:07:30] bill.

[00:07:31] **Paul Crawford:** Drive-Ins were a place where you could, you could just sit back and enjoy for a bit. I mean, it was just life. Yeah, life seemed to slow down a little bit.

[00:07:38] **Delia Sargeant:** What does the [00:07:40] average mom and pop drive-in look like, technology-wise?

[00:07:43] **Paul Crawford:** It's, it's gonna be pretty antiquated. So OrderMatic came on the scene in 1955 and [00:07:50] really, uh, just hugged that niche of drive-in as, as time passes, uh, you know, you've, I mean, what was innovative [00:08:00] many years ago doesn't, is not, it's gonna hold up over, you know, 50 years. So in 50 years, some of the things that we have [00:08:10] done, which were innovative, were not exactly as innovative anymore.

[00:08:14] **Paul Crawford:** There are new technologies, thank goodness, coming through, which are making life easier, uh, [00:08:20] in some ways, and we want to try to leverage those wherever we can. But yeah,

mom and pops, it's, it's a fairly simple, I'm gonna say very, let's call it basic. [00:08:30] Sometimes it's not very simple, uh, but sometimes it's, it's definitely very basic and it's, uh, it's approach.

[00:08:35] **Delia Sargeant:** So are we talking using the same audio systems that, you [00:08:40] know, maybe were installed originally in the fifties or, you know, car hops going out with pen and paper, like just very.

[00:08:48] **Paul Crawford:** Oh yeah, initially it was, it was the, [00:08:50] yeah, I love the, the, yeah, the image of the, the American graffiti, the people on skates, . So they still wanted to keep that right.

[00:08:56] **Paul Crawford:** They still kind of want to hang on to that nostalgia a bit. [00:09:00] Uh, that's, yeah, definitely. The, the way they began, um, when we started in 1950, when OrderMatic started in 1955, the concept was that people were, were [00:09:10] struggling with making that connection. There's just, they couldn't be efficient with someone ordering. So sending out the person on skates.

[00:09:17] **Delia Sargeant:** Mm-hmm. ,

[00:09:18] **Paul Crawford:** it just isn't really efficient. And when they [00:09:20] have to go back and forth after a while, they get tired of that. So having a, a button to click to be able to talk to Elaine was just, like I said, in that, in that day and time, it was very [00:09:30] innovative.

[00:09:30] **Delia Sargeant:** So then how does that differ from chains like Sonic or Stars where they at currently, technology-wise?

[00:09:39] **Paul Crawford:** Okay, [00:09:40] so what they have done. Uh, so now they have moved to the point where, yes, they're doing the ordering cuz it's going to be the larger your chain gets, the more, uh, economies of scale you're gonna [00:09:50] be able to pull in. The more resources you're gonna be able to allocate towards that. So they've really put money into learning how to communicate customers more effectively, how to manage the queues, [00:10:00] how to get people in, at least get your order in and out as quickly as possible.

[00:10:06] **Paul Crawford:** So I think when it comes down to those, those [00:10:10] two that you've mentioned, which are, are definitely the largest, and then one of the other largest, probably one of the second or third most large in the, in the country.

[00:10:18] **Delia Sargeant:** Mm-hmm. ,

[00:10:18] **Paul Crawford:** they are, [00:10:20] they're separating themselves through technology. It's just one of their strategies, uh, and gaining those efficiencies.

[00:10:28] **Paul Crawford:** So it's interesting, [00:10:30] you've, if you've been to Sonic, you've used their app. That's one of the ways. Okay. Uh, you can, you can order outside. Uh, I love it. Well, I don't know if they call it appy hour or not, [00:10:40] but it's, it's appy hour all day long if you order through the app drinks or half price. Not trying to the commercial through here, but that makes us stop.

[00:10:48] **Paul Crawford:** So, um, [00:10:50] but they're able to do that and get people into the, into the stalls able to with really without even communicating. Cuz you've done everything on the [00:11:00] way. In fact, that's one of neatest things, my family on the way when we travel, we'll just pass the phone around in the car before we get to our stop plan out where you gotta stop, pass it around.

[00:11:09] **Paul Crawford:** Everyone [00:11:10] orders, hits the button, and when we show up, just pull into one of the mobile spots. That way you're, I mean you served, right as soon as you get up.

[00:11:17] **Delia Sargeant:** And where are they, how have they [00:11:20] innovated in terms of audio for Sonic and Stars?

[00:11:24] **Paul Crawford:** So where they have innovated, uh, first there was the, uh, where [00:11:30] you had to be at the station in order to, in order to communicate.

[00:11:34] **Paul Crawford:** Then they moved to headsets so they could actually get a little more freedom. [00:11:40] They moved to wireless headsets so that they could now move all about, uh, they can go even in and outside, uh, to answer headsets, uh, [00:11:50] answer the

customers move around. Now they are looking at things even like, uh, automated order taking that's been on kind of in the list for a while. I [00:12:00] mean, how great if you had 25 different stalls and you know, you hit a button and, and you're able to actually answer and get your order [00:12:10] taken correctly, uh, the first time. You know that and some, and, uh, and someone that doesn't forget to, to tell you about the specials, somebody that doesn't [00:12:20] forget about the, the pieces that sometimes, uh, humans do.

[00:12:24] **Paul Crawford:** So, I mean that's, that's up and coming. That is definitely a next step, [00:12:30] uh, when you talk about next where technology, yeah, it's kind of the, the next step of technology.

[00:12:35] **Delia Sargeant:** That's so cool. It's very interesting, especially considering, um, you [00:12:40] know, classic drive-throughs as well, have kind of those big classic chains have, have played with implementing that there as well.

[00:12:46] **Delia Sargeant:** So I think it's a really interesting concept. [00:12:50] and to me, fits a little bit better into the drive-in, I think, than the drive through.

[00:12:57] **Paul Crawford:** Yeah, no, I think that's an interesting [00:13:00] point. No, they're both trying to do the same, trying to do the same thing which is queue management. How do I, how do I get my through, but increase my through, but so theoretically [00:13:10] that I can increase the number of people that come in, but it's.

[00:13:13] **Paul Crawford:** Yeah, they're both attempting to do the same thing just a little bit differently. But we really had something that happened in the last [00:13:20] couple years, which kind of flipped everything up on its head. Uh, when you start thinking about the, the approaches that people take, and that of course is

[00:13:29] **Delia Sargeant:** Oh, [00:13:30] the pandemic.

[00:13:30] **Delia Sargeant:** Yes. That completely changed everything I think. The idea of a drive-in. I think just drive-ins passed through the public consciousness [00:13:40] again once we hit the pandemic. Um, so how did they fare during the pandemic? What changed?

[00:13:48] **Paul Crawford:** Well consider, consider [00:13:50] restaurants and think about who had to change the least during the pandemic.

[00:13:55] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah. Sonic.

[00:13:57] **Paul Crawford:** Exactly. So if, if [00:14:00] you, if you, you know, I, I thought about that and then I went and studied back to kind of find out. So is is, is that intentional or was that just coincidental? Mm-hmm. . And if you go look [00:14:10] back and you realize that it was 19, about 1920, uh, I think it was Kirby's Pig Stand in, uh, Dallas, Texas.

[00:14:17] **Paul Crawford:** Well, what, what came out in [00:14:20] 1918? Soldiers coming home, supposed

[00:14:22] **Delia Sargeant:** I think it was the Spanish flu, right?

[00:14:23] **Paul Crawford:** Spanish flu, another pandemic.

[00:14:25] **Delia Sargeant:** Interesting.

[00:14:26] **Paul Crawford:** So it was very possible that this

[00:14:27] **Delia Sargeant:** Wow

[00:14:28] **Paul Crawford:** itself. Exactly. This [00:14:30] itself was a response to a pandemic. Therefore, a hundred years later when a pandemic shows up, another one shows up that you're like, well, it was [00:14:40] resilience.

[00:14:40] **Paul Crawford:** I mean, the model was resilient a hundred years later.

[00:14:43] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah.

[00:14:44] **Paul Crawford:** I thought that was pretty fascinating. , but you start thinking about what else, uh, what else changed? And what you saw is, [00:14:50] so you had a lot of stores that have both a drive, they have drive-through and then they had in indoor seating. That's

why Sonic didn't have to change, cuz they really don't have any, they have a few places with indoor [00:15:00] seating, but not much.

[00:15:01] **Paul Crawford:** Uh, but the indoor seating kind of got canceled for a while. Then everybody's doing a drive-thru, which is typically 60, 70% of a restaurant's [00:15:10] business is gonna go through a drive-thru. Well then they restaurants had to figure out what do we do with all these parking spaces that have allocated for folks that are gonna walk [00:15:20] in?

[00:15:20] **Paul Crawford:** And I thought it was, it was, I mean this, this is where things seem to kind of be kind of retro, like, you know, we've kind of discovered the beginning again. And that is [00:15:30] like mobile carryout. Let's talk about mobile carryout spots. So they dedicate a spot where you order on your device and somebody brings it, from indoors out [00:15:40] to you.

[00:15:41] **Paul Crawford:** Sounds a lot.

[00:15:42] **Delia Sargeant:** That's like a drive-in

[00:15:44] **Paul Crawford:** like a drive-in to me. Right? And, and you started seeing that. You started saying, Hey, um, here's, here's a spot where you can order and we'll have someone [00:15:50] come out to you. So it was the same thing on how do I monetize my parking spots? Um, but mm-hmm. . In order to do that, you kinda have to allocate certain parking spots.

[00:15:59] **Paul Crawford:** I've [00:16:00] seen a, I've seen a Chick-fil-A on I-40 with like 45 spots allocated for mobile.

[00:16:09] **Delia Sargeant:** Wow.

[00:16:09] **Paul Crawford:** That's crazy.

[00:16:09] **Delia Sargeant:** [00:16:10] I mean, it's Chick-fil-A.

[00:16:11] **Paul Crawford:** Yeah, it's Chick-fil-A. But I mean, imagine anyone could actually have 45 spots where I mean people are just

[00:16:16] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah.

[00:16:16] **Paul Crawford:** Lining up to, uh, to get, and that's including the [00:16:20] drive through. That's I, I think that that's fascinating that the model of a drive-in was resilient. Very possibly because it was a response to the initial [00:16:30] pandemic that had as a country. And then, uh, secondly that what you see others doing that are not drive-ins is leverage some of that drive-in. [00:16:40] Uh, mentality to monetize their parking spots and try to get a bit more business.

[00:16:44] **Delia Sargeant:** And I think that also speaks to kind of how we're progressing [00:16:50] culturally as well. Um, because, you know, those Gen Zs really don't like to talk to people. They don't like to order to a person. They like to be able to put it in their phone and it pops out. And [00:17:00] I'm speaking more so in terms of having a sibling who's very much Gen Z and would rather do my laundry than, um, call and, and order a pizza . [00:17:10] So, you know, um, I think it's here to stay to your point because that's, yeah, that's where we're at, at least in this case.

[00:17:17] **Paul Crawford:** That's absolutely, so it's, [00:17:20] it makes sense. And, and I'm, I haven't, I assume that other countries are doing this, but I, I need to research that, that they're doing something about spots dedicated or mobile ordering. [00:17:30] Um,

[00:17:30] **Delia Sargeant:** yeah,

[00:17:30] **Paul Crawford:** so that little,

[00:17:31] **Delia Sargeant:** I think it would depend on the restaurant because I, I think a lot of the foot- footprints that we see in Europe, um, are a lot smaller [00:17:40] than what we have here. Um, and I think that's another way that restaurants are able to kind of, you know, um, leverage all of that [00:17:50] space that, you know, in a post-covid world might not necessarily be, um, as needed in the way that they were first intentioned to be.

[00:17:58] **Delia Sargeant:** And now, you know, we can kind of [00:18:00] see that shift to where they're, they're useful again.

[00:18:03] **Paul Crawford:** Absolutely. Well, I mean, everyone's playing with models trying to figure out what is the most efficient model. Uh, you seem like Taco Bell [00:18:10] as, what is it, the Ford Drive through lanes? Yeah. They put the, they

[00:18:13] **Delia Sargeant:** put one dedicated to pick up.

[00:18:15] **Paul Crawford:** Right. They have the, the operation goes on the second floor, [00:18:20] and then people, that way you're con, you're, you're saving space, but including your operations up, but then you have, you're just using as much of that space for people to customers to go. , [00:18:30]

[00:18:30] **Delia Sargeant:** it almost reminded me when I saw that concept for the first time, the, the, the four-lane Taco Bell reminded me of a bank almost.

[00:18:37] **Paul Crawford:** Um, it does look like that, right?

[00:18:39] **Delia Sargeant:** It really does [00:18:40] look like a bank. And I, I imagine like, you know, sending tacos down a vacuum tube or something like that, to a car

[00:18:45] **Paul Crawford:** sounds a little messy.

[00:18:47] **Delia Sargeant:** A sushi, a rotary sushi [00:18:50] bar, but for Tacos. That's what I would love.

[00:18:55] **Paul Crawford:** That would be really interesting to, to, to witness.

[00:18:58] **Delia Sargeant:** So let's, let's [00:19:00] the backtrack smidge. Um, so the future of Drive-in, we said is kind of that increased tracking [00:19:10] and, um, ability to, we said AI ordering or AI voice ordering. Assisted voice ordering, right? What hurdles do brands like [00:19:20] Sonic and Stars face getting to that next level of. You know, where, you know McDonald's and, and those bigger chains are?

[00:19:28] **Paul Crawford:** Oh, absolutely. [00:19:30] Um, you know, cost of labor. So with, with any new technology, it's gonna be inits, it's when

it's, uh, right there on the bleeding edge, it's [00:19:40] just gonna be super expensive. So, uh, yeah, it, I love it. We've seen the technology in the, in the fifties, you know, technology.

[00:19:49] **Paul Crawford:** I [00:19:50] guess it was 69, right? But the first moon landing came out and they said that there's more tech, more computational power in your iPhone than there was in the entire mission that got us to the moon. [00:20:00] So now everybody's got one of those things. It, it seems like, . So we're trying to advance and figure out what to do with these devices that helps. And if I'm a [00:20:10] restaurant or I, I wanna know what can I do with this device to help me actually, uh, become more efficient on, do we leverage what people are having in a [00:20:20] pocket versus this because cost matters. And then you also had labor. I mean, that, that's where you start considering things like, uh, the electric order [00:20:30] taking.

[00:20:30] **Paul Crawford:** Maybe it might through an app, through a Kiosk, through AI assisted audio. Uh, anything I can do because I can't get human beings to show [00:20:40] up, you know, uh, reliably and actually, you know, work on it. And that is, so I would say that those are definitely, those are definitely [00:20:50] probably the biggest hurdles that they have in trying to keep up.

[00:20:53] **Paul Crawford:** What's also interesting is I see, uh, two different approaches happening and uh, one is what the major QSRs are [00:21:00] doing, which they're really leaning on technology heavily. I mean really heavy and jumping in and deep and going and seeing what technology can do for them. The other direction, uh, [00:21:10] is Chick-fil-A, you know, which this weird oddity of a, of a restaurant that is, uh, that is leveraging people.

[00:21:19] **Paul Crawford:** It's kind of [00:21:20] going the other direction. Say we're gonna use technology, but we're gonna match that up with human beings. because human being to human being interaction matters, which is why [00:21:30] they've spent a ridiculous amount, on those patios on every Chick-fil-A with fans and heaters so that their employees can be outside to meet customers, uh, to make [00:21:40] that difference.

[00:21:41] **Paul Crawford:** It just fascinating. Include these two different approaches. And, and which one is uh, which one is better? I don't

know. I can tell you right now. I think the [00:21:50] report came out last year, so the average. I don't know if we pick, uh, McDonald's, it was like two, 2.25 million a year, something like that. [00:22:00] And the average, uh, chick-fil-A was about 5.5.

[00:22:03] **Paul Crawford:** Somewhere in there.

[00:22:04] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah, it was like, and that's more than double.

[00:22:06] **Paul Crawford:** And that's six days a week cuz they're shut down one day [00:22:10] and that's the day you go to Canes

[00:22:11] **Delia Sargeant:** yeah, something to consider.

[00:22:12] **Paul Crawford:** Because Cane's put their store across the street,

[00:22:13] **Delia Sargeant:** Strategically across the street, yes, yeah.

[00:22:17] **Paul Crawford:** Genius move. Genius move. I just wanna know between [00:22:20] those, those two, I mean, you're, those are different ways of tackling each, have their costs associated with them.

[00:22:26] **Paul Crawford:** Uh, they're just different ways of attacking that same problem of how do I [00:22:30] keep my costs down and how do I get my queue up more reliably so that people can get in and get a consistent uh, experience whenever they [00:22:40] come through because it's all about the experience. I mean, otherwise you're just a commodity item.

[00:22:44] **Delia Sargeant:** So what hurdles, you know, we, we talked about, you know, kind of where [00:22:50] your Sonic and your Stars are headed with, um, you know, whether that's digital menu in the, the car port or order kiosk or, um, you know, auto [00:23:00] order taking. What hurdles do mom and pops face when trying to digitize? Or do you think that they [00:23:10] kind of leave that to the, to the big guys?

[00:23:13] **Paul Crawford:** So there's this weird fine line I think that goes between the nostalgia of what they try to [00:23:20] represent and the

technology. So, uh, at some point you're, you're kind of ruining the, the nostalgia to put something there that's not [00:23:30] nostalgic.

[00:23:31] **Paul Crawford:** And you're kind of getting that 1950s feel and then you have a computer. It's like, it's not, oh, that's, those are two different, it's like half, it's the way I dress half the time where my [00:23:40] wife has to say, no, no, no, no. We don't wear those things together. You know? And I think there's,

[00:23:44] **Delia Sargeant:** that's from the 80's that's from yesterday.

[00:23:48] **Paul Crawford:** Everything. I wear is from the eighties because [00:23:50] it rocked . Um, okay. But you know the deal when you talk about the modern pops Sonic is, Geez, they're, they're a hundred times bigger than their closest competitor as [00:24:00] far as number of stores and their closest competitor's, probably 30, 40 times bigger than mom and pop.

[00:24:06] **Paul Crawford:** So when you, when you lose that, well, when you don't [00:24:10] have the, the multiple stores to, to work with, you end up with, um, you end up with really struggling to grow because you can't take advantage of economies of scale. You can't, [00:24:20] you don't have a group that's dedicated to figure out how to make technology work more for you.

[00:24:25] **Paul Crawford:** uh, and test stores and, you know, all that. I mean, that, that stuff [00:24:30] matters. So I think for a mom and pop, just trying to really gauge whether they want to be the nostalgic 1950s thing. And there's a, there's [00:24:40] a place for that. It's niche. It's, it's very, you know, there's definitely a place for that.

[00:24:43] **Paul Crawford:** And a lot of these live on these, live on these highways and in these rural towns where they're just, everyone [00:24:50] knows that's Pete's place. And for goodness sake, you know, I, I've been going there 50 years, you know, or my, my dad. You go there.

[00:24:56] **Delia Sargeant:** Exactly. You go there after, you know, be, band concerts [00:25:00] or choir concerts, right. Or little league games, you know, everyone's in the parking lot, you know, eating ice

cream like they're part of the community, especially these, these mom and pops.

[00:25:09] **Paul Crawford:** It's, [00:25:10] it's where life happens. I mean, they come in and they just in, it's, it's where we celebrate. And my family and I have, uh, for us it was Outback, you know, Outback Steak House for [00:25:20] 15 years. Whenever something big happens, we're like, Hey, let's go to Outback. And we all get it thunda from down under. We, you know, we split it and now we have to get two. They're a lot [00:25:30] bigger and, uh, but yeah, that's, uh, I love that about that. I just love that, about that small town that, that drive-in feel. But you've got [00:25:40] a place where life happens and people, you know, you, you'll see buddies there, you know, you wave at each other, these cars, you might get out and go visit or something like that.

[00:25:48] **Paul Crawford:** It's, [00:25:50] yeah, I know. I, I literally, I, when I think about when I go back there, I'm smiling as I'm thinking about it, so I know that it, it is definitely, uh, [00:26:00] definitely a special Americana thing and that that's a big deal just to get to that point.

[00:26:05] **Delia Sargeant:** It is, yeah. To be so ingrained because you can have these one-offs and [00:26:10] they're still, they still do reasonably well in these towns where they might be competing.

[00:26:14] **Delia Sargeant:** They might be the only fast food in town that's not a chain, you know, and there's, they're [00:26:20] competing.

[00:26:20] **Delia Sargeant:** So to answer the big question of, of this episode, What is the outlook on drive-ins? Are they, are they dead?

[00:26:29] **Paul Crawford:** Are [00:26:30] they dead? You know, I very honestly, uh, while I was with OrderMatic, I, I was looking ahead down the road and going, this is not good, [00:26:40] drive-ins.

[00:26:40] **Paul Crawford:** If you look at, if you look at a, uh, let's say a Sonic that's 20 years old and count the number stalls, and you looked at a brand new Sonic. You'd notice [00:26:50] that they are spin, they're putting less parking and spots right. A around us so they have less stalls and they all now have a drive-through and [00:27:00] drive-

through is at, at a typical restaurant, uh, just a typical qsr, are 60 to 70% of the business.

[00:27:06] **Paul Crawford:** Every other place we go has a drive through and we're taught [00:27:10] how to do that. Uh, I think humans kind of feel like when they get into a drive-in and they. I think there's some psychology with that, that when [00:27:20] they stop in the stall, that time stops or, you know, and they're watching people go through the drive through and get out and go on, well, that was [00:27:30] faster than this.

[00:27:31] **Paul Crawford:** Back then I felt like this is it probably not looking good. But then the pandemic happens again, the [00:27:40] resiliency of the model, which people are, are still worried that that's not the last pandemic that we'll see. And, and we know there's a hundred percent chance and at some point, maybe a [00:27:50] hundred years, whatever, uh, uh, after us, or sometime in the ne near future, there will be another one.

[00:27:55] **Paul Crawford:** And you know, it's a resilient model, but we've also seen the [00:28:00] leveraging those systems. So I think you'll see, um, some really cool innovation that comes out of drive in. Where people use, figure out what to do with these, with [00:28:10] these spots. I mean, if we're having more electric cars, why not charge my electric car in some of these small towns, which separate the large town?

[00:28:18] **Paul Crawford:** So if I'm [00:28:20] traveling, I have a place not only to charge my car for a bit, but why not get some food while, or some drinks while I'm. Because it takes a little bit to do that. [00:28:30] Yeah. So, uh, you might see, you might see one of the, some of these drive-ins turned to little gas station 'gas' stations, right? Like a little electric gas station.

[00:28:38] **Paul Crawford:** Yeah. Electric. Yeah. So, uh, [00:28:40] there's, I think there's definitely some innovation that can occur. I think the model, uh, has shown that it has some bright spots in it. Uh, but there's going to have to be [00:28:50] some, there's have to be some realization on what to do, uh, when somebody is in a stall, because we are so ingrained to think that if we are not moving, [00:29:00] then it's not fast.

[00:29:02] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah.

[00:29:03] **Paul Crawford:** And, and then that's definitely it. So, um, for these, you know, like you start thinking about these mom [00:29:10] and pops and, I mean, what is, what is their future. Now, hopefully we'll see some of those that actually want to take their model. They found something, they found something cool and bright, [00:29:20] uh, that they want to take that model and start to grow it.

[00:29:22] **Paul Crawford:** That's the kind of thing honestly, I would love to be able to help with is how do we take that little mop pop and turn that into the next Sonic. [00:29:30] You know, something, something that large. I don't, I don't see mom, the little mom and pops going out anytime soon, they might actually consider selling to Sonic at some point, [00:29:40] which it kind of be sad, right? If you're in some little small town

[00:29:43] **Delia Sargeant:** a little bit

[00:29:43] **Paul Crawford:** and, and Mo's Tavern was there forever, and then it, you know, it becomes, you know, uh, I, I'm not gonna say a [00:29:50] name of anyone, but a, another particular chain. You'd kinda be like, eh, it's like something very personal just got wiped out.

[00:29:57] **Delia Sargeant:** Yeah. And i, I think at least in the [00:30:00] context of, you know, I come from McHenry County, Illinois, which is very rural or relatively rural. Um, and there's one that I can think of. I think it was the [00:30:10] Huntley Dairy Mart or something like that. Um, it, it's right off of the main highway that has since grown exponentially. Um, is so it's hard to get in and out of there.

[00:30:19] **Paul Crawford:** Yeah.

[00:30:19] **Delia Sargeant:** Um, but [00:30:20] I think that I almost feel like they would close before straight up selling.

[00:30:27] **Paul Crawford:** Yeah.

[00:30:28] **Delia Sargeant:** Because it is such... [00:30:30] it's ingrained. It is where everyone in Huntley goes after little league games. It is, it is

such a part of the community, even though it is [00:30:40] seemingly inconvenient to go to, um, people are there.

[00:30:44] **Paul Crawford:** Right.

[00:30:44] **Delia Sargeant:** You know, it's, it's always packed all summer. They, you know, sometimes they're only open seasonally and, and I think, [00:30:50] um, I think that they would rather just, they would rather let it die than than sell because it almost feels like a betrayal to your point. If we, if it's was something for so [00:31:00] long, for generations and now we're gonna let it be. A chain? No, I don't, I don't see it.

[00:31:06] **Paul Crawford:** So I grew up in Norman, Oklahoma, and uh, we had one that used to be [00:31:10] a Sonic, and at some point it converted to what they call the Classic Fifties Drive-in. Then, and when I was in high school, that was the thing, right? I mean, that's every, everything I mentioned happened to that Classic [00:31:20] Fifties, and there was some kind of a bottle, uh, you know, where I, I don't know all the ins and outs. This is a bazillion years ago where, Sonic put a store [00:31:30] right next to them,

[00:31:32] **Delia Sargeant:** oh, no.

[00:31:32] **Paul Crawford:** And I tell what the town threw a fit. Uh, and, you know, uh, everyone in high school, all of us with cars, you [00:31:40] know, uh, we were like not touching it. So we, we would pack the Classic Fifties and it's just that, that small mentality of this is something special and local and it, [00:31:50] it might not mean

[00:31:50] **Delia Sargeant:** and ours

[00:31:51] **Paul Crawford:** anything to anybody else, but it's ours.

[00:31:53] **Delia Sargeant:** You know, you, when it, when it's a mom and pop, there is a level of nostalgia that is required, I think.

[00:31:59] **Paul Crawford:** Mm-hmm.

[00:31:59] **Delia Sargeant:** for it [00:32:00] to maintain. And to your point, you need to, it needs to stay ingrained. It needs to be a little bit more, um, part of the community. Um, , but Sonic and those bigger [00:32:10] chains kind of are in a position where, because they look more so like a McDonald's and feel more like a McDonald's or feel more like something that younger [00:32:20] generations are more familiar with.

[00:32:21] **Delia Sargeant:** That is, you know, like a cool concept to them, sometimes I think that they can have that high tech experience [00:32:30] in something that is sort of meant to be antiquated. Yeah. You know, in the same way that they're all collecting, you know, records and, and all of, some of the more [00:32:40] technology that we've phased out comes back, but enhanced in ways that where, you know, we're buying it online in a way where you'd have to go to a [00:32:50] record sort to go pick it up, you know?

[00:32:51] **Delia Sargeant:** So I think that there's, it'll be really interesting to see what happens, especially with Sonic being so. So set on growth going forward. To [00:33:00] your point, they just opened up in Hawaii and they're,

[00:33:02] **Paul Crawford:** isn't that exciting? They said they got five, I think five stores that they're gonna be putting in Hawaii, three or five.

[00:33:07] **Delia Sargeant:** That's so cool.

[00:33:08] **Paul Crawford:** But that's good. Good for them. That's a little bit of [00:33:10] both Oklahoma that just somehow, uh, sprouted and groove successfully. I love it.

[00:33:15] **Delia Sargeant:** Well, thank you so much Paul, for taking the time to sit down with me and talk about drive-ins. [00:33:20] Um, like I said, very excited to, to do this because there's, there's not a lot out there.

[00:33:25] **Delia Sargeant:** So this will be, this will be really exciting. So thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

[00:33:29] **Paul Crawford:** Delia [00:33:30] You thank you. It's definitely been a delight, always to visit with you. So thank you very much for your time today.

[00:33:36] **Delia Sargeant:** And that's a wrap on the second episode of [00:33:40] Technical Foodies. Thank you so much for tuning in.

[00:33:43] **Delia Sargeant:** As always, don't forget to rate, review, and subscribe wherever you're listening. We will catch you in [00:33:50] April.