

Acre

Company Assessment Project

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Background Information

Acre restaurant was established in 2013 by Chef David Bancroft and his wife Christin, and is located about 3 blocks away from Toomer's Corner. They are a farm to table restaurant, carefully sourcing their ingredients to serve southern-inspired food and charcuterie.

"Our goal is to interpret the complex, traditional tastes of the Deep South in a totally fresh and modern way"

Acre strives to be a part of the Auburn experience, welcoming students, return alums, and University guests to celebrate this special town we share. They want to be the place students think to bring their parents for parents weekend, football games, etc.









Chef David Bancroft

David Bancroft is chef and owner of both Acre and Bow and Arrow in Auburn, Alabama. He was born in Alabama and raised in San Antonio, Texas. He was heavily influenced by his grandparents cooking and farming practices at a young age. Through learning how to smoke brisket and barbeque with his grandfather in South Texas, he developed a deep appreciation and care for meat and its procurement process.

He collaborates with the Auburn University Meat Lab and local ranchers to responsibly source farm-raised meat. Acre also sources ingredients from their on-site gardens and orchards, local farms, and the Black Belt region of Alabama.



General Manager John David Hammond

John David (JD) Hammond, originally from Fairhope, Alabama, graduated from Auburn in 2015 with a Bachelor's Degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management. He started at Acre as assistant general manager in the summer of 2017, and by November 2018 he was general manager.

We interviewed JD to gain some insight on how Acre approaches its service strategies, staff training, customer engagement practices, competitive advantage, etc.



Week 2 - Understanding Service

What does service mean to you?

“To me, service has two prongs - the technical side and the hospitality side.”

The technical side is how you’re delivering your products, how you drop off the food at the table, the menu knowledge of the servers, the mise en place, the table settings - all the mechanisms of the restaurant. Then there's the hospitality side of service: how you interact with guests, storytelling, how you make them feel throughout the whole experience. Hospitality is what sets us apart, can we have well trained staff that are knowledgeable, but also able to share Acre’s story, have a truly servant heart, and have a welcoming presence and mentality

Understanding Service

Acre creates value for customers through *storytelling*.

- For example, Acre's deckhand butter on the redfish… what is it? It's the summer David Bancroft spent in the Chandeleur Islands in Louisiana as a deckhand and learned how to make redfish on the halfshell and how to make the sauce we use.
- Acre adds value by explaining these small details and telling that full story. In doing so, the guests know that these two words on our menu - this one sauce - has meaning, and it's tied into personal experience, and made from scratch.
- Acre's storytelling and what they do to get the food on the table is what sets them apart from their competitors. One of the chefs, Chef Alex, took blueberries from the bushes in front of Acre last summer, turned them into blueberry wine, into blueberry vinegar, into a blueberry mignonette - which isn't even listed on the menu, it goes in a ramekin to go on the oysters. Telling these stories allows the guests to understand the time and the labor that goes into all of the little things they might have not noticed before. We want our guests to feel like they're a part of our story.

Understanding Service

Challenges of perishability for Acre:

“Perishability is always on my mind”

- For example, when setting up Resy (Acre’s reservation system), management has to balance multiple factors. If JD restricts bookings at 6:30—a highly sought-after time—he risks losing guests who specifically want that slot. But if too many reservations are allowed at 6:30, those tables may only turn once for the night, instead of being utilized earlier and later. It’s a hard, delicate balance.
- Acre mitigates perishability by trying to drive revenue to make up for those empty tables - doing private events to fill space when we don’t have regular business, pop-up bars, themed nights, etc. Some examples Acre has had in the past include Tiki bar, peach bar, cheeseburger in paradise night, and chicken and champagne night. They look at what weeks in the year are historically slower, what can they do to drive revenue during the slower seasons? Coming up with different ways to fill those seats.

Week 3 - The Difficulty with Service

What Moment of truth do you think is most important for Acre specifically?

“I'm a big believer in first impressions”

Moments of truth are defined as any touchpoint made with the customers and business that can create an impression on the service. John explains how his moment of truth may be different from a customers standpoint since he is looking at it from a business standpoint. Guests begin to subconsciously form their opinion before they walk through the door, at the valet stand. JD believes in three strikes you’re out. If you have a bad greeting at the valet and host stand, you’re already at 2 strikes before you even sit down. If anything goes wrong, you’re already hyper aware. On the other hand, if you have a good first impression at the valet stand and a welcoming greeting at the host stand, then the guests are more likely to be more forgiving during the service. The food can also help some service mistakes be forgiven. For example, if our kitchen is backed up, and we’re so busy that food is taking 45 minutes to get to the table, it better be good food. That way, maybe the guests will forgive the long wait and any negative feelings they had towards the restaurant before their food came out.

The Difficulty with Service

What are some ways you make sure you and your team stay engaged on their tasks and the business?

“I'm a motivator… I get people to buy into the importance of their job and the impact they’re having on people”

Acre understands that the company should not only focus on personal growth, but should also focus on personal growth. Engagement comes from empowerment. You should be built up at your job and not leave feeling bad about what you are doing. A negative attitude at work will create a negative environment thus creating negative service. JD knows the importance of letting your employees make mistakes and letting them problem solve on their own. He also, makes sure he has a motivational speech at the beginning of each shift to create a brighter and more engaged atmosphere.

The Difficulty with Service

Are there and arising problems Acre faces on a day-to-day basis?

Inflation and labor costs

- Ever since COVID, everything is more expensive, so people want to be paid more. You have to manage labor and find that balance - how can we afford to pay our employees, but also pay the mortgage, utilities, food, alcohol, etc., without having no money after all of that?
- Before COVID, Acre's tenderloin was $39, now it's $60 - and they make the same amount of money off of it. It all goes back to creating value for the guest, so they know our food is worth that money. Tell them how the sauce on the fillet takes two days and it doesn't just come from a Sysco truck.
- Lastly, the town of Auburn has exploded. Over the past 12 years, there's been a lot of new, great restaurants that have opened in Auburn since Acre was established. When they first opened, they were the only game in town. Now, they're competing with Lucy's, 1856, Depot, etc. and have to try to maintain their spot as an industry leader in Auburn.

Week 4 - Making the link between Hospitality & Service

Differentiation refers to the strategies a business uses to make its services or brand stand out from competitors.

How Acre *differentiates* itself from competitors:

Acre's brand is deeply rooted in the vision and story of Chef David Bancroft.

> *"Acre is very much a chef-driven restaurant—this is the food he cooks, and this is his story."*

- The building itself reflects that story. *"The building is his family."*

- Throughout the restaurant, personal touches bring this story to life. The hallways are lined with photos of David's family, the wood used around the restaurant was sourced from his grandparents' farm and close family friends, and the mounted animals on the walls were hunted by David and his companions.

Every detail—both in the space and on the menu—is intentional.

"The story we tell is how we differentiate from our competitors."

- This storytelling creates value at the table for guests, allowing them to understand the "why" behind everything they experience at Acre.

Making the link between Hospitality & Service

Customer retention and loyalty refer to a hospitality brand's ability to build lasting guest relationships.

Customer Loyalty Through Community at Acre:

"These are our neighbors, the people we go to church with, our teachers, our kids… and we want to be a part of that."

- In hospitality, customer loyalty isn't just about points or promotions, it's about relationships. At Acre, loyalty is created through consistent community involvement.
- Christin Bancroft plays a key role in Acre's outreach. David is involved with his church, and JD volunteers at the Auburn Chamber of Commerce.
- The team is committed to supporting local organizations and individuals—whether it's by donating, showing up for events, or cooking meals.

It's this genuine care and community presence that sets Acre apart, and keeps people coming back.

Making the link between Hospitality & Service

Maintaining customer trust and satisfaction through crisis management

Service recovery is an opportunity to win back guests by acknowledging the issue, listening attentively, offering a genuine apology, and making things right. This can often leave guests feeling more positive than if the mistake had never happened.

- Everybody's going to mess up, something will always go wrong, it's inevitable
- How you respond to that is what matters.
- People just want to be heard, so, listening, humbling yourself, apologizing, and making things right can positively impact the guests' experience in a huge way.
- Empowering employees to fix mistakes as they see fit is a great way to accomplish this.
- For example, if a table's food is taking a long time, sending out a free appetizer or dessert can turn their bad experience into a good one.

"We want to be police men, not firefighters"

- By being upfront and transparent, you can maintain trust and satisfaction, turning a crisis into a chance to reinforce guest loyalty.

Making the link between Hospitality & Service

Higher perceived value refers to the guest's perception that the experience they receive exceeds the price they pay, making them feel they're getting more for their money.

- At Acre, ensuring that guests understand the value of what they're paying for is essential - by effectively communicating the thought and effort behind every element of the experience, the value becomes clear.

"We know we charge a lot, so we need to explain why it costs what it does. If we don't, guests won't understand the value."

- A few years ago, a review pointed out, *"They really think highly of that meat board."*
- No one else in Auburn makes their own charcuterie, butchers whole animals, dry ages meat, or prepares their own preserves and pickles.
- If servers don't share these details when serving the charcuterie boards, guests won't fully appreciate the quality and craftsmanship that go into the price.

By communicating these efforts, you ensure guests understand exactly what they're paying for, and it enhances their overall perception of value.

Making the link between Hospitality & Service

Service strategies refer to the methods and approaches used to improve the quality of service and the overall guest experience, including personalized service, proactive communication, service recovery programs, employee empowerment, and loyalty programs, among others.

At Acre, service delivery is a top priority, and a robust training program is central to enhancing both service and customer satisfaction.

- The training spans 10 days, with the first half dedicated to menu knowledge, including tests to ensure staff are fully familiar with the offerings.
- The second half focuses on service skills, with an oral exam that includes situational scenarios to prepare servers for real-world challenges.

Preparation is key to Acre's strategy for exceptional service. However, empowerment is equally important.

- By giving servers the confidence to make decisions on the spot and act as problem-solvers, Acre ensures a more responsive, personalized guest experience.
- This level of autonomy helps servers address issues quickly and cater to each guest's unique needs, creating a positive and lasting impact on customer satisfaction.

Week 5 - Understanding Customer Needs

What are some challenges you face when trying to please your guests?

Delivering value

Equally important, though smaller in scale, it's ensuring that every guest feels seen, with thoughtful attention to the details that make their experience special. Acre aims to please everyone, but know it's impossible.

"Perfection is the goal. It is the pursuit of perfection– not the end result– that truly matters to us."

They also acknowledge the investment the guests make when dining at Acre. Understanding the value guests place on their experience helps them appreciate guest's expectations and motivates staff to exceed those expectations

Understanding Customer Needs

First time guests

Some guests can feel overwhelmed when they first go to Acre. That could be because of the atmosphere, the prices, or unfamiliar menu items.

"Our challenge is to make them feel welcome and comfortable while maintaining the integrity of our menu, without seeming pretentious."

Why do you think someone would feel hesitant or nervous to speak up at Acre?

Some people might not have the personality to speak up in the kinds of settings like Acre. They might be hesitant because they don't want to be confrontational or they might be hesitant since they don't want to make the server feel bad.

"People don't like to rock the boat."

They might not want to create a disturbance in a place like Acre which has a nicer atmosphere. On the other hand, they could not speak up because they are not sure if what they ordered is incorrect or it is just not something they like – they are not sure what it is supposed to be like. It's the server's job to make sure the guests get something they enjoy.

Understanding Customer Needs

Levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs at Acre

These levels play a role in shaping the customer experience. The hierarchy includes physiological, safety, social, ego, and self-actualization. Customers will ultimately feel or experience these needs while dining at Acre, so they make sure everyone feels welcome. Whether they are visiting for a business meeting, an anniversary, or bringing friends from out of town, they want guests to feel cared for, safe, and part of the community of Acre. The staff is focused on meeting guest's needs through attentive service.

"Our goal is to create an environment where guests can be social and enjoy their experience without worry."

Week 6 - Customer Perceived Service Quality and its Evaluation

Service delivery mapping focuses on every touchpoint a guest interacts with and ensures that each one aligns with the company's standards and objectives for customer satisfaction. **What does service delivery mapping look like at Acre?**

"The service delivery at Acre isn't mapped out on paper, but it's instilled through server training."

- JD emphasizes that every detail matters. From guests being seated at the host stand to the arrival time of the server to a table, Acre ensures close attention to these small details. For example, he explains how the service is uniquely tailored to the guests' choices. If the guest orders a steak, then a steak knife is placed at the table prior to food arrival. If the guest orders a glass of wine, the wine glass is placed on the table before the pour. Once the food arrives, servers are prompted to ensure that everything meets their expectations. At the end of the meal, servers ensure to sincerely thank guests for their visit, showing appreciation for the opportunity to serve them.

It all starts with "the greet." Servers ask, "Have you dined with us before?" If not, they introduce Acre's story, explaining how the restaurant sits on an acre of land, and they share Acre's story before taking orders.

Customer Perceived Service Quality and its Evaluation

How is **Acre** generally advertised? Customer loyalty, word of mouth, paid advertisements or something else?:

"Word of mouth. Acre has never relied much on traditional advertising."

- Although they have recently started some advertisements on the radio for their lunch options, most of their guests visit Acre due to word of mouth. Through David's regular attendance to wine festivals across the country and other events, Acre's story has been spread all throughout the world. David also makes it a point to share Acre's story with others in daily life and casual conversation, assuming that a unique story like theirs will bring more guests in.
- JD also explains that, because of their efforts to provide the best quality service, they hope that guests leave the restaurant eager to share their experience with others, further promoting the business and bringing more guests in to experience Acre for themselves.
- This is such a respectable technique considering the success of the restaurant. Through providing quality service and sharing their story, Acre has been able to build customer loyalty and continuously bring in new customers.

Customer Perceived Service Quality and its Evaluation

How **Acre** benefits from mapping out its service delivery:

Consistency–

"Whether they come today, tomorrow, or during a football weekend, the experience should be the same."

- Acre calls it the "server lottery." To elaborate, JD explains that they aim for each guest to have similar experiences, stating that they don't want guests at different tables to have different experiences.
- However, while consistent performance is crucial to quality service, management encourages servers to bring their own flair and personality to the table, which empowers the servers. There is a structured system within that individuality, though, which JD describes as: a clear set of service standards, consistent ways to answer questions, and a unified approach to hospitality.

It's a balance between personalization and precision, ensuring guests always receive the level of service Acre is known for.

Customer Perceived Service Quality and its Evaluation

Customer Expectations at **Acre**:

"Expectations for Acre are high. From the moment guests walk in, they come in with a certain mindset—James Beard nominee, Iron Chef winner, Auburn Opelika awards..."

- JD explains that many have seen David in *Southern Living*, on the cover of *Garden & Gun*, and have heard about Acre through word of mouth. Therefore, customers' perceived opinion of the restaurant and its service is already high, so it's their job to meet and exceed these expectations when guests visit their restaurant.

In terms of the disconfirmation model (where satisfaction is based on the difference between expected and perceived service), how does **Acre** ensure that their team consistently meets or exceeds that expected mark?

- That kind of reputation sets the bar high—higher than it may be for other restaurants like Hamilton's or One Forty Grill. Guests' expectations 100% play a role in their experience. When guests anticipate excellence, even solid service can feel disappointing if it doesn't match the level they imagined. It's not necessarily that anything was wrong—it's just that their expectations were towering. There's a lot of pressure on Acre to match guests' expectations.

Customer Perceived Service Quality and its Evaluation

How **Acre** uses qualitative methods (customer surveys and feedback) to make decisions about service, menu changes, and overall guest experience:

- *Resy* (an American online restaurant-reservation service company) sends out surveys to guests who make reservations at Acre, gathering feedback on various aspects of their experience—cleanliness, hospitality, friendliness, responsiveness, and more. Individual servers can also receive scores based on their service.
- In the case that there's a low score, JD takes notice, assessing whether it's something that needs to be addressed. Acre has used guest feedback to make meaningful changes in the past—like when the tenderloin was removed from the menu and guests kept requesting its return. JD listened, and now it's back on the menu.

The feedback isn't just collected—it's acted upon, helping Acre refine its approach to hospitality and keep guests at the heart of every decision.

Customer Perceived Service Quality and its Evaluation

Acre's use of quantitative data and its role in decision-making:

- One of the general manager's most crucial responsibilities is ensuring the financial success of the restaurant. JD closely monitors key financial metrics daily, including P&L statements, labor costs, net revenue, and sales per labor hour.
- Beyond analyzing the overall expenses, he also tracks operational expenses like linen costs, landscaping, dish detergent, disposables, and much more.

This data gives a clear picture of how much money is coming in and going out, allowing Acre to set and meet specific financial goals across all areas of the business

Week 7 - A Strategic Issue

Do you have a specific service strategy that your team follows to make sure every guest has a great experience? For example, Mcdonald's service strategy is to offer speed, efficiency, low price and convenience to the customer.

Acre's strategy is rooted in the service steps learned during training. Time targets help ensure efficiency—lunch dishes should be served within 15-20 minutes, while dinner service aims for 20-30 minutes. Turn times are also factored in, with two-tops expected to finish within an hour and 45 minutes, and four-tops within two hours.

While these targets help maintain a structured flow, Acre isn't about rushing guests through a meal. People come here to dine, to celebrate, and to enjoy the experience. The goal is to serve food somewhat promptly while allowing guests to relax, take their time, and fully enjoy their time at the restaurant without feeling hurried

A Strategic Issue

How do you manage quality?

“Guest feedback, review systems, and SOP’s”

SOP’s (standard operating procedures) help create consistency. It also helps to have lists that both front of house and back of house can follow. This includes things such as prep lists, recipe books, side work, cleaning lists, and steps of service.

These operations help create purpose. It helps the workers stay on task and lets them know all that needs to be done. Showing up to work and having a known set of tasks helps create a pattern and routine. This creates less stress in the workplace further increasing service.

Week 8 - Importance of Service Systems

Desirability focuses on customer needs and experiences. Feasibility focuses on the practical aspect.

Are the systems realistically achievable with the available resources? Are there times when what guests want isn't easy to deliver? How is that balance handled at Acre?

As a very popular restaurant in Auburn, Acre can get very busy and booked months in advance. Acre will not ever put something on the menu that they cannot pull off. The menu design and control at the host stand are a few things that can be hard to please guests with. The only time Acre comes close to total chaos is football season on Friday nights. It can become extremely hard to cook for 300 people throughout the evening.

"Putting little systems in place and making sure what we offer is doable, without making the guests feel like they're not getting what they want."

Importance of Service Systems

Implementation strategies for effective service

Walking through how Acre implements service strategies– like training, workflows, or technology– how does everything run smoothly during service?

“It all starts with management.”

JD developed a training program and shared it with the front of house manager who refined it and created a workbook. After JD’s final edits, the workbook was passed to Acre’s trainers– experienced servers who have been with the restaurant for years. Once the trainers worked with new servers, they provided feedback to management, highlighting areas that needed more emphasis. The process was slow and evolving, but it has shaped Acre into the restaurant it is today. This training process is what makes sure everything runs smoothly during service.

Importance of Service Systems

Does Acre's service system set it apart from others? If so, how?

"There's more than one way to skin a cat."

A service system refers to the structured combination of people, technology, and processes that work together to deliver services. Corporate restaurants operate with strict service systems and training. JD used Applebee's as an example– service excellence isn't the first thing that comes to mind, yet they have a rigorous and highly regimented strategy in place. Just because there is a system does not mean it will differentiate a restaurant.

Week 9 - Role and Importance of Internal Customer

Quality service is created by people, delivered by people, and sustained by people. **How important is the "people factor" to Acre?**

"The people factor is everything to Acre"

- JD's approach is **culture first**—he prioritizes hiring good people and training them to excel, rather than simply seeking experience. In the past, he's hired based on credentials and experience alone, only to find that some didn't bring value to the team. If someone isn't a good culture fit, they don't stay.

Acre wants employees who are proud to work there—who contribute to the team and embody the restaurant's standards.

> *"This job is stressful enough… if you don't have a good team full of good people, it's gonna be way worse."*

Role and Importance of Internal Customer

Strategies Acre uses to keep things consistent across shifts:

Having standard operating procedures and feedback loops will assure quality in restaurant operations.

- Implementing service procedures and product procedures - how to make drinks the exact same way, how to prep things the exact same way, how to cook things the exact same way.

  “You create systems to create consistency.”

- Having a rigid structure to operate within will level out any blips in service. If management gives you a framework to work within, you’ll have consistency across service - making mistakes minimized.

Role and Importance of Internal Customer

You can’t make happy guests with unhappy employees. Internal marketing focuses on treating employees like internal customers — **how does Acre apply this idea to keep its team happy and aligned with its service goals?**

“Being a good person. People want to know they’re doing a good job.”

- As management, being a listener, being engaged, and being available for your employees is so important. Empowering your employees, letting them know they can come to management and be honest. Working towards the same goal - hiring people who are self-motivated, proud of what they're doing, and willing to work hard. It pays off being a part of a team with good culture and good people. Additionally, the customers will enjoy their experience more as well if you have empowered and happy employees.

“At the end of the day, it’s just food - we’re selling groceries.”

- JD never wants his employees to feel their personhood and personal lives are secondary to Acre’s production. “That's not how we do business.” Acre wants their employees to have a good work life balance and feel supported.

Mystery Study

Last Monday, my boyfriend and I attend Acre to do a bit of personal research. Based on what we saw, there was a mix between a bit more training needed but also an amazing environment.

We started with complimentary valet from Jacob. At the end of the night, he ran to get the car and was amazing.

We did not have to wait to get seated seeing as we had a reservation.

Our waiter, Hunter, seemed to lack a bit of the charm everyone else had. It might have been because we were very quick and did not order a lot but he did seem slightly un-interested in our table. We did have to wait a bit for our food but the atmosphere and quality was amazing.

The dishes were slightly pricey and I ended up paying nearly 100 dollars for two meals and a sweet tea. The meals were amazing though but were slightly small for the price. However, you could tell the restaurant was a big appetizer place which we had to skip out on due to being cost conscious. I did understand though that the food we got was higher end and you could tell with the flavor of it.

