

October 30, 2018



Vancouver Food Policy Council Open Letter in Solidarity with Members of the Latin American Community: Escobar Restaurant

The Vancouver Food Policy Council (VFPC) is an official civic agency that advises City Council on issues relating to food policy and systems. As per our City of Vancouver mandate, this includes food for all residents that is “safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate,” and is “produced, processed, marketed, consumed, and waste products reused or managed in a manner that protects the health and dignity of people.”¹

We write this letter in solidarity with the Latin American community’s response to the opening of the restaurant Escobar (4245 Fraser Street) in May 2018. As evidenced by early marketing materials^{2 3}, the owners named the restaurant after the infamous narco-terrorist and mass murderer, Pablo Escobar. This generated criticism from thousands of members of the Latin American communities and allies in BC, Canada, and around the world⁴.

Five months have passed since its opening, and the question remains: how is a restaurant, whose owners claim no ties to the Latin American community, allowed to operate while bearing the name of a known terrorist and murderer? The unwillingness of the business owners to engage in dialogue with members of the Latin American community after many attempts, and antagonistic responses towards those who have raised questions about their business, contradict what we believe to be a just and sustainable food system built on respect and dignity.

Escobar restaurant’s publicity strategy glorifies violence, and has leveraged outrage and shock for its own benefit; this ignores the trauma of people affected by drug trafficking and the war on drugs. As has extensively been reported in media⁵ and beyond, this choice of name makes light of a painful period in Colombia’s history under the guise of entertainment; it trivializes the oppressive infrastructures set up by Escobar during his reign of terror, which continue to affect people’s lives in Colombia and around the world to this day.

When a restaurant is named after someone who is responsible for heinous crimes, mass displacement and the death of thousands of people, it automatically targets, victimizes, and alienates members of the community who have been affected by those historical events. Under these circumstances, the business does not operate under the key principles of the *Vancouver*

¹ <http://www.vancouverfoodpolicycouncil.ca/about/terms-of-reference/>

² <http://dailyhive.com/vancouver/escobar-latin-restaurant-vancouver-2018>

³ <https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/2018/04/09/escobar-bar-restaurant-vancouver/>

⁴ <http://dailyhive.com/vancouver/pablo-escobar-vancouver-colombian-consulate-2018>

⁵ <https://www.straight.com/news/1075006/pain-pablo-escobars-shameful-legacy-put-display-outside-new-vancouver-restaurant>



Food Charter (2007)⁶: the food is not safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate; the business threatens people's dignity and personal and social well-being, and fails to reflect meaningful dialogue between community and the food sector.

We highlight that the Colombian Embassy in Canada, the Consulate of Colombia in Vancouver, and thousands of members of the Latin American community have spoken out to show their discontent with the name of the restaurant as demonstrated through this [petition](#).⁷ The response by the restaurant team so far has been to stand by their culturally inappropriate decision and ignore the request to reconsider the name, while actively silencing any questions and critiques. They block and delete comments and reviews from concerned community members on social media. Many members of Vancouver's Latin American community have been victims of insults, racist and discriminatory remarks, and even threats to their safety in retaliation for standing up for their rights.

As our guiding *Vancouver Food Charter* (2007) states, "Sharing food is a fundamental human experience. Food brings people together in celebrations of community and diversity."⁸ A restaurant that is named after a known terrorist and glorifies drug trafficking culture, as in the case of Escobar, cannot be a cause for celebration. The VFPC is committed to supporting members of the Latin American community to research and develop strategies via which food-businesses, as part of their licensing process, should be required to address critical questions before they open. Such as: What is the inspiration behind the name? What are the cultural and historical implications? How does it fit in the overall brand? Is the marketing plan exploitative and discriminatory?

Vancouver is a city of great diversity, and is home to people of many cultures. The VFPC recognizes and affirms the connection between food, sustainability, and the complex cultural and historical experiences of Vancouver's people. It also recognizes that culturally appropriative marketing practices in the food and beverage industry contribute to the marginalization of Indigenous and people of colour, including erasing their histories, experiences, and voices.⁹

There is opportunity in the current dialogue for Vancouver, as an international leader in sustainable urban food systems (acknowledged through the 2016 Milan Urban Food Policy Pact award¹⁰), to lead the way in developing guidelines to affirm that culturally harmful food marketing practices do not have a place in a just and sustainable food system. As the *Vancouver Food Charter* (2007) reminds us "[w]hen citizens are engaged in dialogue and action around food security, and governments are responsive to their communities' concerns and

⁶ https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Van_Food_Charter.pdf

⁷ <https://www.change.org/p/co-owners-alex-kyriazis-and-ari-demosten-co-owners-change-escobar-yvr-restaurant-name-and-embrace-cultural-awareness>

⁸ https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Van_Food_Charter.pdf

⁹ <https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/09/food-is-a-political-issue/>

¹⁰ <http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/award/>



recommendations, sound food policy can be developed and implemented in all sectors of the food system and the community.”¹¹

We call on all members of the food, beverage, entertainment and hospitality industry to:

1. Recognize that food and beverages, their names, the way they are prepared and served, are closely tied to people’s cultural identities, and thus need to be approached with respect. Entrepreneurs who plan to open a food business, such as a restaurant, that aims to focus on food traditions that are not their own, should be responsible for understanding the historical context and cultural complexity of the culture they want to borrow from; it should be about honouring culture and not exploiting it.
2. Strive to create spaces for meaningful engagement with local diasporic communities to understand the heritage, historical context, and traditions, locally and globally, allowing for better-informed business practices that move beyond tokenism, hurtful stereotypes, and appropriation to sell products and services.
3. Stand in solidarity, listen to members of diverse communities when they voice concerns, engage in respectful conversations, instead of marginalizing, stigmatizing or silencing people who decide to speak out.

And finally, we call on the City of Vancouver within its powers and through advocacy to the provincial government to review and take action on the concerns we have laid out.

Sincerely and in solidarity,

The Vancouver Food Policy Council

**The opinions expressed here do not represent those of the City of Vancouver. For more information about the Vancouver Food Policy Council, please visit <https://www.vancouverfoodpolicycouncil.ca/>*

¹¹ https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Van_Food_Charter.pdf