

TIPLESS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

PROVIDED BY FLOW IN THE DARK PRODUCTIONS
& THE BREAKWATER NETWORK





LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:

Hello there,

My name is Cassidy van der Kamp, and I am the Director and Executive Producer of *Tipless*. Thank you for your interest in my film and your eagerness to engage in a conversation about tipping in America. I feel honored to claim this project as my feature film debut, and I'm overjoyed to finally share it with the world. My hope is that it plays a meaningful role in continuing a much-needed dialogue within the American restaurant industry.

Tipless was born out of my own experience working in hospitality industry. For over a decade, I worked in food service to put myself through college and fund my independent filmmaking endeavours. I worked in a wide range of environments—from fast food to casual fine dining—and in both tipped and tip-free systems. Through these experiences, I saw firsthand how tipping structures impact workers, business owners, and the overall dynamics of a restaurant. Those experiences ultimately inspired me to create a film that explores these issues more deeply and gives voice to people trying to build more fair and sustainable models of restaurant ownership—though I quickly realized just how complex and layered this conversation truly is.

In the United States, the tip-free movement has been closely tied to shifts in minimum wage laws, especially in more progressive cities where policy changes have significantly affected restaurant operations. Through this film, we felt a responsibility to explore how these legislative decisions are experienced in practice and how they are shaping the realities of small businesses, workers, and communities.

What became clear throughout this process is how deeply personal and, at times, divisive this issue can be. Restaurant owners, workers, and legislators are often navigating the same challenges from very different perspectives, each facing real consequences in their daily lives. Conversations around minimum wage and tipping can quickly become polarized, making it easy to lose sight of the humanity of the person on the other side of the table.

While I am a personal believer in the tip-free model of restaurant ownership, this film was not designed to argue for a single solution, but rather to create space for more thoughtful, empathetic, and productive conversations—ones where people can grapple with disagreement without merely scoring political points or dismissing each other's lived experiences. I believe that if we truly want to make meaningful progress, we need to find ways to support all those affected—restaurant workers striving for fair wages, owners trying to keep their businesses sustainable, and policymakers attempting to create effective legislation—without turning each other into the enemy.

Ultimately, there is much about restaurant operations and small business legislation that remains misunderstood by the public so I hope *Tipless* can play a part in bringing greater clarity to these systems while encouraging a more compassionate and informed dialogue about how we approach labor, policy, and business ownership.

This guide is an extension of that goal. It is designed to share what I've learned while navigating these conversations myself and to offer a framework that may help others engage in more constructive, empathetic dialogue—so that even in disagreement, we don't lose sight of each other's humanity.

-Cassidy van der Kamp



ABOUT THE FILM



SYNOPSIS

Tipless is a feature length documentary that explores the tip-free restaurant movement in the US.

After discovering their business plan would no longer be sustainable in the face of new minimum wage changes, Homestead restaurant owners Fred and Liz Sassen make the decision to switch their Oakland establishment to a tip-free pay structure in order to survive the changes long-term. The film explores the effects that the minimum wage laws are having on small business, specifically restaurants, and the drastic measures many are taking to stay afloat in the ever-changing market.

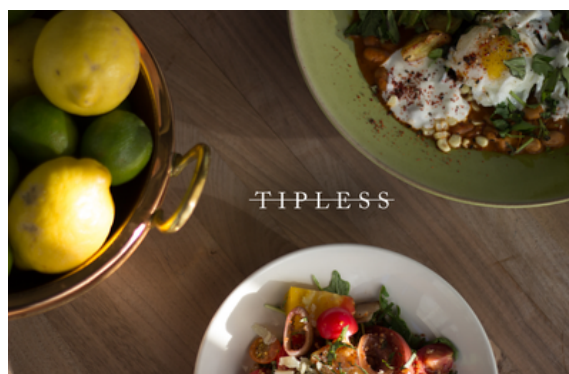
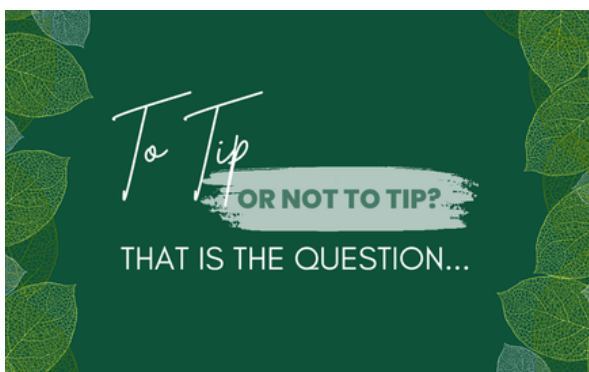
While the film focuses primarily on the Sassens, other restaurant owners, workers, economists, lawyers, and activists from around the country join in the conversation, discussing whether the tipless model could be the future for restaurants in America.

WWW.TIPLESFILM.COM
[TIPLESS: OFFICIAL FILM- YOUTUBE](#)

FILM STATUS

The film originally premiered at the Portland Film Festival in 2021. While the film has been shown at a handful of private and virtual screenings since its initial release, our team is eager to do more to have the film be part of the public dialogue. Because of this, we plan to release the film for free on YouTube to make it as accessible as possible to those who are interested in engaging in the conversation about tipping in America.

Our director plans to couple the film release with a long form conversation series that follows the subjects of the film and others in the restaurant industry to catch the audience up on where the film left off and how the restaurant industry has been impacted by the changes in the last few years. From there we hope to grow enough interest to be able to bring these conversations into lived communities with in person events and screenings.



THE MISSION

Our mission is to educate the public about what is happening in the restaurant world, give courage to restaurant owners facing unpredictable legislation changes and create a space for better conversation about tipping, small business affairs and the efforts of those trying to protect low-income workers. We have seen the seeds of this conversation growing in the last few years and we believe it's time that our film becomes part of that conversation.

THE VISION

Our vision for the film is to bring business owners, employees and legislators together to uncover what it could mean to create a more sustainable model for the modern American restaurant. We hope that through our efforts we can, inspire individuals to think more deeply about how to effect change within communities and make space for conversations that produced positive outcomes for those effected by tipping and other restaurant issues, independent of local or federal regulations.

THE STATE OF CONVERSATION IN AMERICA:

For many people, the state of our political discourse feels increasingly divisive. There is a growing sense of frustration and impatience with the injustices we see around us, and even more concerning is how that frustration has begun to manifest as physical violence. Along the way, we have lost meaningful connections with our neighbors. People who once felt familiar now feel distant, and if they fall on the “wrong” side of a political divide, they may even come to be seen as adversaries rather than fellow members of a shared community.

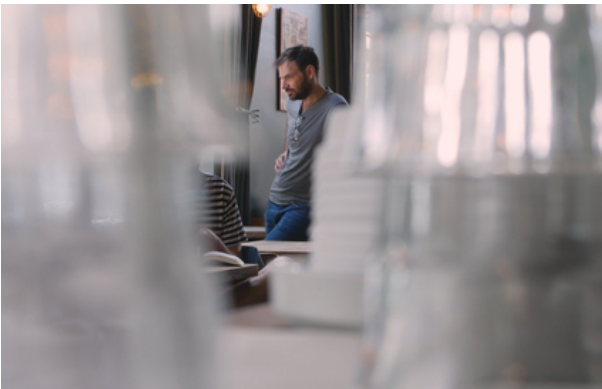
At the same time, the rise of social media and the constant churn of the 24-hour news cycle have profoundly shaped how we perceive our lived experiences and engage in conversation. We are inundated with rapidly shifting narratives and emotionally charged content, often leaving us disoriented and reactive. This environment makes it difficult to focus on what truly matters and even harder to stay committed to long-term measures of progress and change. In this context, it is noteworthy that issues like minimum wage and economic equity—topics that were central to political discourse between 2015 and 2017—no longer occupy the same level of attention. They have largely been overshadowed by other highly charged social issues that dominate today’s conversations. Yet this shift may present a unique opportunity. Because these topics are no longer at the center of cultural conflict, we have the space to revisit them under different conditions and with a different tone.

With time and distance, we can reflect more honestly on what has already been attempted. We can examine the policies we supported or opposed, consider their real-world outcomes, and ask what lessons they offer. This reflection does not have to be driven by a need to defend our past positions. Instead, it can be guided by a genuine desire to understand what worked, what didn’t, and how we might move forward more effectively in the future.

A similar opportunity exists in the ongoing conversation around tipping. People across the political spectrum are increasingly raising concerns about its fairness and sustainability. However, like the minimum wage debate, tipping has not yet become deeply entrenched in the most divisive aspects of political culture. This gives us a chance to shape the way the conversation unfolds.

Ultimately, the challenge is not just about identifying the right ideas or policies, but about how we engage with one another while discussing them. If we are intentional about maintaining a sense of shared humanity—even when we disagree—we may be able to foster more thoughtful, productive conversations. By setting a more reflective and less adversarial tone, we create the possibility of not only better policies but also a stronger, more connected public discourse.

ACTION STEPS



HOW CAN I DO THAT?

Over the past five years, our director has been deeply engaged with the Estuary movement— an international initiative dedicated to bringing together people from diverse backgrounds for structured, in-person conversations about life’s deeper questions. The movement uses a dialogue approach that emphasizes active listening, intellectual humility, and meaningful engagement across differences.

WHAT CAN I DO?

If you feel inspired to support the cause, there are several ways you can help raise awareness of the issues explored in the film:

- Like and share the film with your network
- Consider leaving a tip to support ongoing conversations and outreach
- Host an in-person screening in your community

Above all, the most meaningful way to create impact is to open up space for honest, respectful conversations within your own circles. Many people affected by these issues hesitate to speak openly about their experiences. Without safe, supportive environments to share and engage in dialogue, these challenges can continue to grow.



The ESTUARY PROTOCOL

The Estuary Protocol is a simple but powerful conversational structure designed to facilitate meaningful dialogue within the Estuary space and beyond.

It consists of four rounds:

1 | Person

2 | Pitch

3 | Point

4 | Play

1 | PERSON

Each participant briefly introduces themselves, sharing any relevant background information they think is important for the group to know before the conversation begins.

2 | PITCH

After introductions, each person proposes one topic they would like to place on the table for discussion. Topics should fall into one of the following categories:

Intellectual

Personal

Contextual

Estuarial

Intellectual

Something you've been thinking about:

- A book, article, video, lecture, or conversation
- What struck you? Challenged you? Stayed with you?

Contextual

Something happening around you:

- In your community, work, church, or country
- Events that affected you or those around you

Personal

Something from your own life:

- Personal issues you are trying to work through or make sense of
- A change, challenge, loss, discovery, transition

Estuarial

Something about this kind of conversation:

- Anything relevant to the group, the protocol, or Estuary at large.
- What's meaningful, frustrating, or emerging for you here?



3 | POINT

Participants vote on one topic proposed by someone else—the topic they are most interested in exploring further.

4 | PLAY

The conversation opens into an unstructured, free-flowing discussion, using the most-voted topic as the starting point.

The Estuary Protocol brings together participants from diverse ideological, philosophical, cultural, and demographic backgrounds—not as opponents, but as collaborators in a shared inquiry.

Rather than consuming ideas passively, participants work them out together through speaking, listening, and reflection.

At its heart,

THE PROTOCOL
EMPHASISES
**LISTENING AS
MUCH AS
SPEAKING.**

Through this exchange, participants build empathy, deepen understanding, and learn to discern what holds shared significance. Over time, this practice fosters communities that are relationally engaged—both within the conversation and beyond it.

ENTERING THE CURRENT:

The Estuary Protocol is meant to be lived, not just understood. It comes fully alive through **practice, presence, and community**. If this protocol resonated with you, you're already on the path.

WE WOULD LOVE TO SUPPORT YOU WITH TAKING YOUR NEXT STEP.

Our team is partnering with Breakwater, an international Estuary network that works to translate the Estuary protocol into real-world applications by offering events, Estuary facilitation support, and connection to others practicing Estuary across different local contexts. If you feel called to participate in the protocol or host an Estuary in your community, Breakwater can provide connection, guidance, and relational support so you don't have to do it alone.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Connect with Breakwater today!

<https://www.thebreakwaternetnetwork.com>

<https://tinyurl.com/BreakwaterDiscord>