

No Reservations

What it's like to open a restaurant — and reopen communities — during a pandemic

By Amber Gibson

After shelter-in-place orders started going into effect across the country in March, restaurants were among the first to absorb the hit. By mid-April, the state of the restaurant industry was dire, with federal economic aid through the CARES Act's Paycheck Protection Program unable to prevent mass layoffs. According to an April survey by the James Beard Foundation, about two-thirds of restaurants were uncertain that takeout or delivery could sustain their businesses, and more than half of responding restaurants had taken on at least \$50,000 in new debt obligations, crippling figures for an industry composed mostly of independent operators making slim margins even before the crisis.

OpenTable predicted in May that a quarter of restaurants in the United States would never reopen after the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, against all odds, brand new restaurants keep popping up, from New York City to Omaha.

According to separate studies conducted by the Harris Poll and Volition Capital in April, dining out at restaurants

has been the activity people miss the most. Diners miss the community and conviviality of restaurants, the comfort and nostalgia of favorite dishes at neighborhood watering holes, and the company of friends and family while celebrating life over a great meal with a bottle of wine. Independent restaurants and bars make up the complex and quirky fabrics of cities, crucial elements to a city's identity. These newcomers give us all hope as we begin figuring out what a return to normalcy looks like.

In New York, the epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S., a number of brave restaurateurs opened while the city was still sheltering in place. In Brooklyn, chef and owner Robert Guimond opened his pizzeria, Public Display of Affection, just three days before the governor closed dining rooms across the state.

"I decided not to hire anybody," he said. "It's just been me by myself every day." Working solo keeps labor costs down and eliminates the social distancing difficulties of having multiple cooks in the kitchen. Guimond serves wood-fired pizzas and vegetable dishes, and his experience working at renowned pizzerias as Roberta's and Speedy Romeo prepared him for the current challenge. He was lucky to be up on Caviar within a week

of opening and says more than half of his sales come in on Friday and Saturday, so he prepares ingredients accordingly.

"Friday is by far the busiest day in the week," Guimond said. "It's pizza day in New York City." Having a small menu that travels well for delivery has set him up to weather this storm. He says Public Display of Affection is breaking even right now, even without the commuter foot traffic that was a big draw for the location. "Nobody knows I exist unless you see us on Caviar or on social media," he said.

Mochidoki in SoHo, Tamam on the Upper East Side, American Brass in Long

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—Pineapple Club's Travis Odegard



Owner and chef Robert Guimond prepares cheese at his new Brooklyn pizzeria, Public Display of Affection.

Island City, and Bel-Fries on the Lower East Side all opened during the crisis too. Bel-Fries specializes in European-style, grab-and-go fries, with sauces ranging from black truffle to coconut curry or yuzu aioli. It delayed its opening a month, from April to May, in order to train staff properly and ensure the safety of both customers and employees by adhering to New York health and safety mandates.

“Thankfully, our grab-and-go business model is easily adaptable to the current environment,” said Todd Irwin, co-founder and CMO of Bel-Fries. Its takeaway model requires little, if any, person-to-person contact. “We are not profitable yet, but we are working towards it, and we are breaking even,” Irwin said. “We are a late-night munchie food concept, and the neighborhood that we are in is full of bars — that is our strategy, and right now, there is no street traffic, so it has been a challenge. The neighborhood is typically super busy throughout the night, and we anticipate that we will quadruple sales once things go back to normal.”

Even cocktail bars are giving the to-go world a try. Pineapple Club opened in mid-May with an “adult lemonade stand”

and takeout window serving bottled cocktails and bar food to thirsty New Yorkers venturing outside again. The tropical-inspired cocktail bar and restaurant in the East Village received its liquor license the day after all shops and restaurants in the city shut down, leaving co-owner Travis Odegard with the predicament of trying to create a cocktail-bar atmosphere in the age of social distancing. He opens the windows and plays upbeat dance music to attract passersby but also credits his publicist, Bullfrog + Baum, with helping to get the word out about a new small business during a pandemic.

“It’s pretty essential these days to have good exposure and get the word out about what you’re doing,” Odegard said. “People who are slashing their PR budgets right now ... it’s not very wise.”

There’s been great foot traffic, with locals swinging by for mezcal ginger margaritas and clarified rum punch. Thus far, 90% of sales are cocktails, but every order must include food, according to a new law in response to COVID-19, so Pineapple Club throws in a complimentary, fresh-baked chocolate chip cookie topped with flaky sea salt.

“Before we opened, there was a lot of stress and doubt about whether we were going to make it,” Odegard said. “But we’re making decent money, and we’re all very optimistic. We will definitely survive this stretch of time.”

Walk-up restaurants such as Bel-Fries and NoNo’s Pizzeria & Bar by Frankie on Miami Beach envisioned takeout and delivery from the start and have been able to adapt their fast-casual experience to an age of social distancing more easily than restaurants focused entirely on dining in.

“We are very lucky,” said Nono’s Pizzeria owner Michael Liebowitz. “I’ve always liked to open new businesses in challenging times, and our location draws good foot traffic.”

Burgers have also done well during this crisis, from Hayes Burger in San Diego to Best Burger in the Florence community of Omaha. Best Burger opened in April, bringing healthier and affordable comfort food to an area with high food insecurity. Its grass-fed beef patties, Thai black bean vegan burgers, and roasted sweet potato fries set it apart from the competition.

“We are aiming to build wealth for our family and still give back to the commu-

nity,” said co-owner Ashlei Spivey. She and her partner, Universal Allah, who is chef and co-owner, live a mile from their restaurant and are heavily involved in their tight-knit community, including donating meals to community-based meetings around racial justice. “We’ve had folks drive from 45 minutes away for a burger,” she said. “We’re a small local business from Omaha, and Omaha folks are really about Omaha folks.” Best Burger was denied a federal recovery loan, but for now, strong local support is keeping it afloat.

Around 95% of its orders are direct curbside pickup, with just a trickle coming in from Uber Eats. They originally planned to serve a late-night crowd, but with bars and live entertainment options closed, they began serving lunch and dinner instead.

“Being open just for dinner for a takeout restaurant is not sustainable,” Spivey said. “We wouldn’t have been able to break even, let alone have a profit. We really had to add in lunch in order to survive.”

While many have turned to comfort foods during the crisis, new restaurants focused on international cuisine and plant-based foods have also popped up, enticing those with more adventurous palates and a renewed commitment to healthy eating. Madar Street Food brings Afghan street food to Sacramento, and Mama Sesame is a new vegan falafel shop in Portland.

Unlike many restaurants, which delayed openings to sort through addition-

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Masks behind and in front of the counter at the new Bel-Fries in New York City.

al regulations and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sarah Haugen rushed to open Vitalist in Los Angeles a month earlier than expected, in April rather than May. Haugen spent the last decade in San Francisco as a private chef for Silicon Valley clients, and this is her first storefront in LA.

“I knew with such a crisis, my immune-boosting and rejuvenating foods were needed,” she said. “There were so few healthy food options available for delivery, especially at the caliber we were providing.” Her sustainably packaged grab-and-go meals incorporate organic ingredients in pine nut pesto pasta with zucchini noodles, superfood nachos, gluten-free, vegan paleo pizza, and quinoa hemp seed tabouli. While she’s not yet profitable, Haugen has seen most customers come back for more and is optimistic for the summer once foot traffic on Melrose Avenue ramps up.

“Our original strategy around samples, marketing, and partnerships dissolved overnight,” she explained. “We have a high return rate for clients, so it’s really about them trying the food.” Right now, she’s including samples of additional dishes in each order and plans to start

sampling at events and microki-
osks soon.

Pomella in Oakland opened a week after shelter-in-place orders went into effect. Chef Mica Talmor immigrated to the U.S. from Israel to attend culinary school, and at Pomella, she serves modern California-Israeli food, including colorful salads, vegetarian mezze, and harissa chicken. Right now, she’s selling everything pre-packaged for customers to take home. Masked employees swiftly pop bags in the trunk for curbside pickup, and delivery is available on Fridays. “All of our stews and tajines you can pop in the microwave, and you’ll get just as good of a result at home,” Talmor said.

As soon as she’s permitted by Alameda County, Talmor plans to open outdoor seating for guests to enjoy fresh items that don’t travel well, such as wraps made with freshly baked pita bread and fluffy hummus topped with grilled lamb, chicken, or falafel. “I hope that when people come here, they will

continue shopping for prepared foods as well as ordering food for here, so my average ticket will be greater and I’ll be able to survive.”

Right now, she’s losing money operating a kitchen with eight employees, each paid between \$16-25 an hour. “Carrying the payroll has been really hard since sales are not amazing,” she said. “We pay really fair wages, and there’s just a minimum of people you need in the house to get something done. We have a great customer base and people have been so generous, but these are difficult times for everyone.” Like other brand new businesses, Talmor didn’t qualify for the PPP loan.

“This is the Paycheck Protection Program, and I don’t have payroll to submit for 2019,” she explained. “I really need help, but I just kind of fall through the cracks. On the face of it, I should be getting help because I do have a business, and I am employing people. I’d appreciate some help here.” ★

Amber Gibson writes about travel, food, wine and wellness. Her work has appeared in Travel + Leisure, Conde Nast Traveler, Saveur, Robb Report, Forbes and Departures.