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EMBRACING THE
GREAT OUTDOORS IS A
SOLID FIRST STEP IN
ECONOMIC RECOVERY.

Outward BOUND

BY ELYSE GLICKMAN

As the country reopens, there will be an adjustment period for the new “business-as-usual” model, including an increased dependence on outdoor seating.

In other words, you’ll be venturing into a new frontier of hospitality. As with all treks, you’ll need some new gear for the journey, along with direction from establishments that have already blazed a trail into the brave new world of safe service with a smile.

With good weather nationwide, summer is the optimal time to navigate this new frontier. Bars with existing outdoor seating will have to reconfigure these spaces. Those without an outdoor area will have to figure out if it’s possible to take their indoor experience outside.

SETTING UP BASE CAMP

Although rethinking your venue’s layout can seem daunting, New York City-based hospitality designer Branko Poto nik, principal at the Interior Design Hall of Fame-winning firm CetraRuddy, believes making changes from the inside out (and vice versa) provides restaurant and bar owners an opportunity to develop better practices that will make them stronger.

“Over the next three to four months, some social distancing ideas you’ll adopt will also work well in your restaurant’s indoor areas. While I believe the original seating arrangements will eventually return, on the short term, everybody will be setting up fewer tables and increasing the required space per person,” says Poto nik. “Restaurant owners will also have greater incentive to rethink outdoor

and indoor spaces to help make cities greener, especially when their designers present them new plans to improve the way outdoor spaces are divided.”

Poto nik also stresses the need for one-way paths in and out of the kitchen, to and from the main bar, and in and out of the restroom to ensure staff and guests face the same direction. Spaces where food and drinks are prepared should be out of the customers’ view, and there should be no seating near kitchens or bars. Fresh ingredients used at the bar should be in closed containers, and management should also devise a contact-free way for guests to receive their bills and make payments. He also envisions serving stations, indoors and out, that are equipped with a washing or disinfecting section so staff can wash hands as needed

and point-of-sale waiting stations with wipes to keep all surfaces clean.

“When people enter a space at one point and exit at another point on the opposing side, it lessens the possibility of physical contact between staff members and guests,” he says. “When management takes proper precautions, it will build customer confidence. I see an increased use of disposable antibacterial surface [coverings] on tables and seats. [For those reasons,] management should encourage guests to book seating in advance, as it will free staff up to properly prepare and sanitize tabletops and chairs.”

Kenneth Danko, Owner/Chef of the Devilicious Eatery and Apparition Room cocktail bar in Temecula, just outside of San Diego, has put many of these ideas into practice as has the management of

the Tacolicious restaurant group in San Francisco. Danko says there is now six feet of table separation in the Devilicious patio area that was originally designed for a 40-guest capacity. Should Temecula’s city government allow street dining, he will take advantage of added sidewalk space and invest in some “inexpensive but sustainable partitioning made up of pallets or plants” so guests are not just sitting at a table on asphalt. The host station will be moved to be in view of the outdoor seating area, and extra staff will be added to guard customers’ credit cards until they settle their open tabs. The food truck part of the Devilicious business model, meanwhile, allows for positive collaborations with other local businesses to help them reopen in accordance with the governor’s guidelines.

“I think what helped us a lot is that [the city] allowed us to put some tables in the sidewalk,” says Lalo Durazo, who co-owns Bakan in Miami. “When we first built the restaurant, the city required us to make the sidewalk in front of it wider. It worked out great for us because the wider sidewalk allowed us to add three large tables and a line of cacti to separate the seating area. While we removed some tables from our original covered terrace to make it more spacious, bringing those moved tables to the sidewalk helped us make all of our spaces flow together in a more visually

seamless way while still operating under COVID-19 guidelines mandating we maintain a 50% capacity or less.”

Tacolicious’ Director of People Korey Reynolds says existing limitations on in-store capacity prompted management’s decision to repurpose indoor dining room tables for outdoor seating in a given location’s patio, adjoining sidewalk, parking lot, or middle of the street-seating. “We’re using plants to soften up the spatial divide between tables,” says Reynolds. “We’re designating specific entry and exits, and having hosts guide guests through the restaurant and squirting hand sanitizer on everyone, or at least making it available for self-application.”

“Most of our properties offer outdoor seating,” says Corporate Beverage Director Andrea Cornwell for Ohio-based national restaurant group Cameron Mitchell, including the upscale Ocean Prime steakhouses. “Beyond that, we have studied floor plans, marked exact distances, and posted those floor plans for anyone to review. We have bought Plexiglass dividers where applicable. Although we have always had high cleanliness standards, we sanitize the tables and chairs between each seating and keep cutlery off of the tables.”

According to Poto nik, a portable outdoor bar can be a good marketing tool as it is a conversation starter, can readily be customized and adapted for

OUTDOOR DESIGN



Photo: Evan Sung, courtesy CetraRuddy Architecture

Photos: Wipeout Bar & Grill at Pier 39, San Francisco, CA.



promotions, and instill guest confidence by eliminating eyesores such as stacks of dirty plates.

The Founder of Ultimate Bars Travis Crivaro enumerates on how those attributes helped win him an impressive roster of clients through the years, from Disneyland to Hilton Hotels to Princess Cruise Lines to Los Angeles Dodgers Stadium.

The shutdown prompted Crivaro to take his business in new, necessary directions. The Ultimate Bars range has since expanded to offer "Ultimate Shields" and "Bar Guards" as well

as event cubes, movable bar tables, and displays, which add an extra layer of social distancing in settings where crowds typically form—especially around the bar area itself. Another advantage of Crivaro's American-made mobile bars and shields is that they are made with acrylics and other materials that are easy to clean with common cleaning solutions and supplies.

"The great thing about portable and satellite bars and tables is that they will help reopening businesses set up outdoor areas that will prompt customers ordering drinks to keep the lines moving," says Crivaro. "Anybody out there who needs to prevent bar crowding can buy a few of our portable bars and put one of each on the end of a patio."

A BRIEF FIELD GUIDE TO NEW RULES & REGULATIONS

Keeping tabs on ever-changing local and regional government guidelines can go a long way.

Tacolicious' Reynolds is doing just that. "San Francisco is attempting to work something out tantamount to the Slow Streets program already in effect elsewhere around the Bay Area (like Berkeley), but there's no final action yet. The Valencia Corridor Merchants Association (or VCMA, serving San Francisco's Mission District) is fielding interest in an attempt to sway city supervisors to light up the streets to make them more appealing to foot traffic, but those streets are not ready for that at the moment. In the L.A. area, Manhattan Beach is working on a program to close off parking spaces to allow for additional seating. We'll have to wait to see if these are turned into public parklets or can be used as reserved seating for restaurants. So far, it is a game of, 'wait and see what others do.'"

Reynolds also says that while the restrictions on the sale of to-go cocktails have been loosened, local law enforcement has been cracking down on open-container issues. "To prevent fines and the dreaded Department of Health shutdown, we're policing the area directly in front of our restaurant to prevent crowds and impromptu block parties," he says.

Alexa Sol, co-owner of Quinto Sol in Redwood City and several other Bay Area eateries, says there's a lot involved in helping restaurants rebuild their businesses. "Cities need to figure out how to process business owners' permits to operate outdoors in spaces adjoining their premises more quickly, and it would be good if the temporary outdoor space they may use can be rent-free or have a low-cost rent," states Sol. "From my standpoint, successful recovery will ride on how well management coaches its staff to adapt to enhanced cleaning practices and the like. We have to enforce this in a way that reinforces habits to the point where they become second nature."

As the City of San Francisco actually owns the land the Downtown Yerba Buena Gardens location of Samovar Tea Lounge stands on, Owner Jesse Jacobs says that the local government supported the placement of outdoor tables throughout the park and gardens to offer six-foot-plus spacing between tables to facilitate Samovar's reopening.

"We have worked closely with the health department to implement their protocols and recommendations, including a super sanitation wipe down process," says Jacobs. "They will be sending us specifics with procedures clearly mapped out."

Although the Cameron Mitchell group has size and national

reach as advantages, some adaptations had to be considered more carefully given the differences in liquor laws and revised health codes from state to state and city to city. Cornwell has found that what her firm has done with the Columbus-area restaurants sets a good precedent for locations elsewhere.

"Although we have not shut down streets, restaurants in our shopping centers are allowed to provide to-go cocktails that patrons can enjoy in nearby parks," she says. "We also have a health and safety task force that stays at the forefront of any updated suggestions/requirements from our health officials. We update our training plans weekly."

"Most of the staff we let go when we closed came back, and this helped a lot because they make up an incredible team and communicate well with one another," says Bakan's Durazo. "We spent many hours making sure that everybody knew what needed to be done by going through all 42 different points of the guidelines (the state, county, and city governments contributed) that related to staff training to enforce social distancing, keep supplies sanitary, and provide customers guidance on what they needed to do to adhere to the rules. After we determined the entire staff was fully prepared to meet those requirements, we reopened, and so far, everything has run smoothly."

There are also other tools management can use. Hygiene prepares bespoke cleanliness protocols for restaurants. Services include spot testing of high-touch points at a client's restaurant to produce quantifiable data that can be applied to custom sanitation protocols for staff.

THE RIGHT GEAR

The sustainability-versus-sanitary debate has intensified. While restaurateurs like Alexa Sol and Miami-based Bakan owner Lalo Durazo say it is best to further enhance existing industrial dishwasher usage rather than use disposable items, Devilicious has also implemented disposable glassware and paper-lined metal trays to be more sustainable.

Lisa Bole, director of Sales for plastic drinkware manufacturer Tooters, says that local governments across the country now have a recycling facility that will pick up at no charge to the venue. And, with many

locales now allowing or working on legislation for cocktails to-go, she argues that "to-go" vessels may be the best way to serve beverages across the board.

"How often have you received a glass in a bar/restaurant that still had lipstick or food particles on it?" says Bole. "With plastic drinkware, the beverage is served in a single-serve vessel and disposed of after use or can go home with a 'buy the

drink/take the glass' arrangement. Plastic drinkware is not only safe from a sanitary point of view, but also is safer for use in outdoor seating areas. Dropping a glass beer mug will add danger and risk of injury. Drop a plastic beer mug and you simply have a mess to clean up. Furthermore, several insurance companies offer discounts to their premiums when plastic is utilized."

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