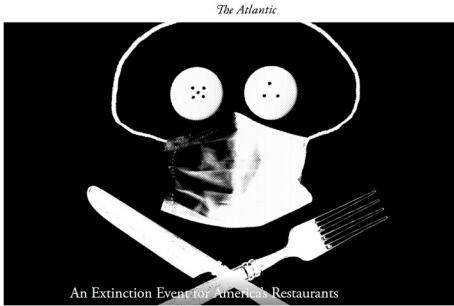


The Atlantic



Story by Matt Goulding

JUNE 19, 2020 | CULTURE

THE AMERICAN RESTAURANT as you knew it died on March 19. That's the day Governor Gavin Newsom issued a stay-in order to the citizens of California, the first in a 50-state cascade that brought to an end one of the most momentous and successful runs in the industry's history.

Sure, some of the restaurants you know and love will return. But anywhere from 20 to 80 percent will permanently close, according to the latest estimates. The wide range in projections underscores the wild uncertainty for an industry that generates \$900 billion a year and employs 15 million people—15 times the labor force of the airline industry. No one expects the Olive Gardens and Chick-fil-As to stop slinging hash, but as the chef and television star Andrew Zimmern says, "We're looking at an extinction event for independent restaurants."

Over 10 weeks in the spring, I spoke with dozens of people in and around the industry—chefs, sommeliers, bartenders, writers, politicians, tech executives, architects, and economists. They shared with me their anger ("COVID ripped the blanket off the haves and have-nots"); their fears ("we can control how we behave, but not how the customer does"); their cold calculations ("we should be talking about trillions in relief, not millions or billions"); their wildest ideas ("you turn the saltshaker and a hologram menu pops out").

What emerged from the nearly 50 hours of conversation was a consistent narrative about how restaurants can salvage their business—and how hard that will be. It will take rapid scientific advancement, strong local support, continued government relief, and industry-wide innovation. All of which is to say that the restaurants that make it will not be the same, and not just because your hostess will wield a thermometer and your server will wear a mask and the chef will struggle to taste and tweak her food while swaddled in PPE.

[Derek Thompson: America's restaurants will need a miracle]

Restaurants have always evolved to fit the societies they feed. From the fast-food boom of the 1950s and '60s to the surge of sit-down chains in the '90s to the farm-to-table movement of the past two decades, the price, taste, values, and aesthetics of our restaurants have constantly mutated. The difference now is that the change is happening so fast, I couldn't write quickly enough to capture it. Perhaps the most certain thing that can be said is that the transformation will be dramatic, and that it will take place in stages: the near-present, post-vaccine, and several years into the future.

Despite the disastrous impact of the government-mandated shutdowns, no one I spoke with complained about them, which says all you need to know about how seriously restaurant people take their role in the community. Everyone was united about something else, too: the belief that their industry, plagued by low wages, rampant sexual harassment, deep-rooted discrimination, abysmal working conditions, and razor-thin profit margins, was in trouble long before the virus appeared. So as perverse as it may sound, the pandemic could offer an opportunity for restaurants to remake themselves into something ... better.

July 17, 2020

It's Friday, 7:30 p.m., the time when the entire neighborhood used to converge on the corner of 13th and Maple. The wait was long back then ("back then," you catch yourself saying all the time, the constant comparison now as tedious as it is tragic), but that was the point of the no-reservations policy—to fashion the sidewalk into a cocktail-soaked advertisement for both the restaurant and the neighborhood.

But tonight, as you pull up, you see that it's quiet out front. You wait in your car, just in case any human clusters form, and at 7:47 p.m., a text arrives saying your table is ready.

The hostess welcomes you and takes your temperature. (No matter how many times you've done it, you still feel like an extra in a sci-fi movie.) You pass by the bar—once crowded elbow-to-elbow, now reserved exclusively as a staging area for delivery and takeout. The long communal tables where you used to meet your neighbors have been replaced by four-tops preloaded with single-use forks and knives, plates and glasses, salt and pepper.

A young man with a bottle of hydrogen peroxide circles the room, waiting for surfaces to cleanse; his presence puts you at ease and makes you tense in equal measure. When a server coughs into her arm, the pulse of the entire room quickens.

The menu has moved to a chalkboard on the wall, the wine service to the bar, where all bottles are opened and glasses poured. You have to repeat yourself a couple of times to make your order understood through a mask, but your server smiles patiently with her eyes.

You used to complain about the din of the dining room, but not tonight. As you wait for the appetizers, your girlfriend reaches across the table and grabs your hand: "Well, at least we can hear ourselves think."

ON MAY 18, a clutch of hand-picked industry leaders had a chance to address the future of restaurants with President Donald Trump and other administration officials at the White House. From the moment it was announced in April, the restaurant group was widely criticized for being a poor reflection of the industry—mostly white men, mostly representing major chains. The participants did what they had to do: They spent the majority of the time stroking the president's ego in hopes that he might throw them another bone.

Trump, for his part, did what Trump does. He told jokes, patted himself on the back, looked impatient when the participants tried to explain the enormous scope of their challenges. The biggest headline generated from the meeting? Trump's claim that he was taking hydroxychloroquine to keep from getting COVID-19.

The day afterward, I spoke with Elliot Nelson, who owns 20 restaurants in and around Tulsa, Oklahoma. He apologized for being late; he'd just gotten off a call with his attorney—discussing bankruptcy. Over the past 15 years, Nelson has built a diverse collection of restaurants, from a classic Irish pub to a three-story Mexican cantina, that helped breathe new life into the city's downtown.

[Read: How restaurants got so loud]

When he reopened most of his establishments on May 4, he was optimistic. Oklahoma's shutdown, announced on April 1, hadn't been as strict or encompassing as California's or New York's, and the combination of big, open restaurants; a young clientele; and perfect spring weather led him to believe that people would come back quicker than media reports were suggesting. But few diners have returned, Nelson told me, not even to his 4,000-square-foot outdoor beer garden. Revenue is down 81 percent from the same period last year. "It's a post-apocalyptic, *Walking Dead* vibe," he said.

Adding to the huge drop in revenue is the expense of keeping his restaurants safe: temperature checks and health questionnaires for employees, single-use tableware and condiments, personal protective equipment (\$12,000 in masks for his staff to date), plus more labor to implement the new policies. "So even though we're not serving as many people, we need more employees," he said. "The simple math I've run says that it will take two years of normal sales to balance the hit we took in those four weeks." Hence, the bankruptcy talk.

Historically, independent restaurateurs like Nelson have operated, well, independently, but a fledgling organization is trying to help him and his peers get some relief. The Independent Restaurant Coalition was formed in late March by some of the industry's top names and already has more than 60,000 members. The IRC's leaders meet daily over Zoom to outline policy points, and raise money to put people in D.C. to lobby on their behalf. That independent restaurants need a louder voice couldn't have been more apparent when the numbers for the first government aid package were released: Despite food-service employees making up more than 60 percent of early unemployment claims, restaurants received less than 9 percent of the overall small-business loans. With substantial input from the IRC, Representative Earl Blumenauer of Oregon has introduced a bill that would establish a \$120 billion independent-restaurant stabilization fund, though its chances for passage seem slim at the moment.

In any event, restaurants can't afford to wait to see what happens on Capitol Hill. "Adapt or die" is the favorite slogan of restaurateurs everywhere," says an IRC co-founder, Naomi Pomeroy, who runs Beast, which has long been considered one of Portland's best restaurants. Thousands of places across the United States have done the former. Fat Rice, a beloved Asian-fusion restaurant in Chicago, has morphed permanently into Super Fat Rice Mart, selling upscale takeaway meal kits. The Cambodian restaurant Nyum Bai in Oakland, California, is transitioning from a full-service restaurant to a fast-casual spot. Clyde Common, a 100-seat bistro in Portland's Ace Hotel known for fancy cocktails, reopened as part tavern, part marketplace.

Like most restaurant owners, Pomeroy has spent the past few months playing out alternative scenarios to stay afloat, but unlike many I spoke with, she says there's a limit to how much she's willing to change. Her restaurant specializes in the kind of meals that are uniquely challenging in a pandemic-stricken world: six-course tasting menus that cost nearly \$150 a person, served at two long communal tables. "If I had to turn my restaurant into a delivery factory where I roast chickens and put them into UberEats—I'd have to find something inside of it that fulfills my original dream," she said. "And if I can't achieve that, I'd rather switch completely what I do than lose the part I care about."

One of the hardest questions to answer is what the coronavirus's impact on fine dining will be. In some ways the top restaurants in the country, with their expansive, surgically clean dining rooms and measured service, are better equipped for this moment. But how long before people are ready to spend large sums of money to sit at a table for three hours?

"Let's face it: The only thing that's truly going to put a diner at ease is a vaccine," says Thomas Keller, who runs the three-Michelin star restaurants French Laundry and Per Se. "Going to a restaurant is the most intimate thing you can do besides being intimate with your partner. How do we do that without a vaccine?" Keller plans to take advantage of the French Laundry's outdoor space, in California's Napa Valley, to reopen in the early summer. But Per Se, one of the crown jewels in the Time Warner Center in Manhattan, relies on international guests and travelers to fill its tables, Keller says, so it will stay dark at least until the fall.

One of the more poignant, and frightening, moments of this existential crisis played out on Twitter. On April 16, David Chang, among America's most successful and high-profile restaurateurs, sent out a tweet asking people in places like Hong Kong and Taipei to share photos of reopened restaurants. The images that immediately flooded in were equal parts eye-opening and inspiring: from a Beijing McDonald's, where every bag of food came with a read-out of employee temperatures; from Shanghai, where diners passed through a full-body disinfectant machine; from across Asia, where people ate noodles and hot pot in plastic- and cardboard-partitioned cocoons. Less than a month later, Chang returned to social media to announce that he was shuttering two of his restaurants—Nishi in Manhattan and Momofuku CCDC in Washington, D.C.—and folding a third, the East Village Momofuku Ssäm Bar, into a shared space with Bar Wayō at Manhattan's South Street Seaport.

Every day brings more grim tidings. McCrady's in Charleston, South Carolina; Locanda in San Francisco; ThreadGill's in Austin, Texas—all top restaurants in their cities before the virus, all gone now. Just this week, Andy Ricker, the chef and owner of the popular Pok Pok restaurants, announced that he'd be closing four of his six locations in Portland. "People don't understand that if we don't figure this out, the result will be the homogenization of our foodscape," Pomeroy said, her voice hoarse from weeks of meetings, interviews, and rallying cries. "Choosing between Subway and Papa John's—that's what we should be afraid of."

March 23, 2021

The city feels smaller than ever these days. You've seen a lot of change in your neighborhood over the years, what with the shifting demographics, rising rents, and subtle tension between the old and the new. But the great urban buffet never wavered—the bustling bars, the 1 a.m. noodles and slices, the world at the end of your fork. Until now.

Some places did make it back, but walking the blocks is still like flipping through a photo album of your exes. The Thai place with the bad punny name and the good fiery larb has a FOR LEASE sign on the metal shutters. The Greek diner where you got your late-night party-melx fix emits an eerie stillness. Not just the mom-and-pop disappeared. The big-bus-chain location that tried to be everything for everyone lasted just two months after reopening, and the small, hip, hard-to-book chef's counter didn't see 2021.

You could snack on your memories all night, except for one thing: You need to eat. You loved nothing more than to spend half an hour arguing with your friends over "which country to visit tonight." A game that felt like a flex for the urban experiment. Now the game is "who survived?"

THE IDEA OF CHOICE is baked into America's DNA. Just look at the number of cereal and cola choices in your local supermarket. When the options for where to break bread narrows to a handful of deep-pocketed restaurants that manage to weather the COVID-19 catastrophe, how much fabric will we lose from the American quilt?

For people living in more rural, less built-up parts of the country, the new reality may not be all that different from the old one. But the great restaurant die-off will upend city dwellers' world. Not just because it will reduce the number of food options, but because it will limit the ways people come together to celebrate, contemplate, and release—to find meaning in lives otherwise circumscribed by small personal spaces.

The restaurants we love most are never just restaurants. They are mirrors, reflecting the interests and imperfections of the society they feed. They are libraries, repositories of tastes and stories and ideas that catalog our culture. They are power strips, where civilization goes to plug in.

Every time we eat out, we vote for a version of country or community that matters to us. Most of us do this unconsciously, but behind every bite is a matrix of economic, political, and cultural values. In some ways, our forks and our food dollars are the purest tools of democracy we have, and as we lose restaurants, we lose a vital piece of our voting rights.

For years, a diverse cross section of Harlem residents has voted for Red Rooster in Harlem, Marcus Samuelson's buzzy outpost of upscale comfort food. Since opening in 2010, the Swedish Ethiopian chef's restaurant has been a gathering spot for the community, that rare place that defines and is defined by its immediate surroundings. And when those surroundings became overwhelmed by COVID-19 in the late days of March, Samuelson refashioned Red Rooster into a community kitchen. "Part of being a chef is doing things people don't think is possible," he told me.

Now, instead of fighting for a reservation to eat Sugarhill Salmon and the Obama Short Rib, people line up for the meal of the day. Working under the umbrella of José Andrés's World Central Kitchen, Samuelson and his team have served more than 70,000 free meals—to the homeless, the newly unemployed, even a busload of prisoners that shows up every day around lunchtime. "They're my new regulars," he said.

While Samuelson is uncertain about the future of Red Rooster, he said this experience had deepened his desire to feed more people, and he plans to keep a piece of the community kitchen going forward. "Just because the pandemic is gone doesn't mean that these neighborhoods haven't been run down to the bone," he said. "What does it mean to be a restaurant? It means to restore your community."

Black and brown communities, which have been disproportionately hit by COVID-19, will need the most restoring coming out of the pandemic. Chefs like Samuelson, who has 11 other restaurants and a massive social-media presence, face the same daunting math as everyone else, but they have greater ability to tweak and adapt. The bigger challenge will be for the small shops—the young entrepreneur's sandwich joint, the immigrant family's ode to its native cuisine, places that don't have the space or the resources or the culinary wherewithal to quickly pivot. How many different ways can you tweak a taqueria?

Take the Big Apple Inn in Jackson, Mississippi. Opened in 1939 in the heart of the racially segregated Deep South, the pocket-size purveyor of pig-ear sandwiches played a pivotal role in the civil-rights movement. Those sandwiches, with their rib-sticking meatiness and gentle cartilaginous crunch, fed the Freedom Riders, fed blues musicians, and have been feeding this neighborhood ever since. "When you have a black business, you know how to handle crisis a bit better," Geno Lee, the fourth-generation owner of Big Apple Inn, told me. "We're used to operating under crisis at all times."

Crisis in Jackson means crushing poverty, inadequate structural support, and high crime rates. "Big Apple is like Switzerland," he said, a safe zone for locals—young and old—that makes it all the more vital in an underserved neighborhood.

Because most of its business is takeaway, Big Apple Inn has remained open through the pandemic. But even so, Lee reported that orders have dropped by about 40 percent. I asked if he thought about raising the price of the ear sandwich or the smoked sausage—each \$1.60—or any of the small handful of other items on his menu. "Not a possibility," he said, sounding scandalized by the suggestion. "The last time we raised the price, from \$1.50, was like Armageddon."

June 17, 2022

For a while you wondered whether life would ever taste the same. Eating out felt like stepping into the '90s, returning to the days when the options were mostly really fast or really big. There were casualties, lots of them, and each stung for a different reason: because you loved the texture of those hand-pulled noodles. Because the staff at the diner helped expand your kids' horizons. Because that kind family from Oaxaca with the magical mole may never get a second chance.

The vaccine eventually came, and the masks and partitions and oceans of sanitizer faded slowly like a bad hangover. Other changes—the restaurants that feel more like markets, the dominance of delivery—are so normal, it's hard to remember life before them.

Prices at most places are a little higher, and portions a little smaller, but on the bright side, you can see where the money goes. Notes on menus and social media explain new wage distribution, health-care initiatives, and relationships with the supply chain. But plenty of people—your friend the server, the growing coalition of female and minority chefs, the Twittersphere—remind you about how much work remains to be done.

FEW CHEFS have done as much for a community as Ashley Christensen has done for Raleigh, North Carolina. I know—I went to high school in the city, worked in kitchens across the so-called Research Triangle, and suffered through years of chain-restaurant monotony. Christensen's first venture, Poole's Diner, not only brought the tastes and ambitions of "new southern" cuisine to the city, but served as an incubator for young talent who helped build the area's restaurant scene into one of the best in the region.

The highlights of Christensen's mini-revolution in Raleigh could be turned into a bingo card for American food culture in the 21st century: upscale comfort food, wood-fired feasts, cheffy burgers, a speakeasy-style cocktail bar, local everything. Her gains have been all of ours—and are a reminder of what we stand to lose.

Things came toppling down fast for Christensen. Within 24 hours in mid-March, she went from 280 employees to 28. Two weeks later, she was down to two, herself and her wife and executive director, Kaitlyn Goalen. On May 5, Christensen announced that she'd be closing one of her six restaurants, the burger bar Chuck's, and converting it into extra space for Beasley's, her fried-chicken place next door.

At the same time, however, Christensen reached out to politicians, colleagues, local business leaders—not just to figure out tactics to protect her establishments, but in an effort to chart a better future for her small slice of the industry. "Every day we come up with one idea to make lives better for our employees," she says. The plans include leveling the pay between kitchen and service staff, weekly management meetings to address mental-health issues, and a new form of block scheduling, with two isolated teams to help maximize safety and organization while giving employees more time off.

Behind Christensen's push for reform in Raleigh is the larger truth, that the virus has exposed and exacerbated fundamental flaws in the restaurant business. "We have a history of abusing the shit out of our workers across the food industry," Andrew Zimmern, who divides his time between attending to his Bizarre Foods TV franchise and running Lucky Cricket, in Minneapolis, told me. For him, success will be gauged not by how many restaurants emerge from the pandemic, but by how the industry addresses its failures. "There needs to be a new understanding between diners and the restaurants about the real cost of dining out," he said. "From that stems everything."

Americans spend less money on food than any other developed nation in the world. Barely 10 percent of our disposable income is dedicated to feeding ourselves, roughly half of what residents of comparable countries spend. If a restaurant charges too little for its food, then it needs to cut costs elsewhere to scratch out a profit—industry margins are typically as low as 5 percent. That means cheaper ingredients, cheaper labor, grueling hours—which, as Zimmern pointed out, are "things we know contribute to mental-health issues." (In a [2017 survey](#) of 17,000 workers in 19 industries conducted by the nonprofit Mental Health America, the food-and-beverage sector was among the three most unhealthy—a situation blamed on high stress, low pay, and heavy substance abuse.)

Granted, this isn't the time to talk higher prices, but sooner rather than later, independent restaurants will need to charge more, Zimmern said. He pointed to coffee as a model: "I'm old enough to remember when a cup of coffee cost 50 cents." But then the fair-trade movement came along, and consumers proved willing to pay more for a better way. Today, people routinely spend \$5 for their morning caffeine fix. "What has to happen to change our culture to where we're okay to pay the fair trade cost of food in a restaurant?"

RELATED STORIES



The Pandemic Shows Us the Genius of Supermarkets

The Dumbing Down of the American Restaurant

Listen: Will the Restaurants Come Back?

For better or worse, the tech world will play a central role in the new restaurant economy. Delivery will continue to evolve as ghost kitchens become more popular and high-end places find permanent ways to do what Alinea, the modernist Chicago restaurant consistently ranked among the country's best, has done during the pandemic: serve hundreds of elaborate, multicourse takeaway meals a day. As demand for delivery grows, restaurants will also need to either forge a better relationship with third-party services like Uber Eats and Door Dash, which have come under intense scrutiny for charging restaurants heavy fees to deliver their food, or cut out the middlemen entirely.

Other tech innovations, whether contactless ordering through QR-code-based menus or contactless service through an army of robots, have found new relevance during the pandemic. Since the nationwide shutdowns began in mid-March, Resy, the online-reservation service owned by American Express, has unveiled a few products to help restaurants cope: a mobile waitlist that helps keep crowds from gathering in front of establishments, and a capacity regulator, an app that deactivates reservations and sends notifications to the restaurant once it reaches a preset capacity.

"The big question is what will restaurants look like in five years," says Resy CEO Ben Leventhal. "Chefs have been in the weeds since the beginning of time. And this is an incredibly unique moment where the industry has time to take a breath."

Clare Reichenbach, the CEO of the James Beard Foundation, told me that restaurants will need to take more of a "portfolio approach" moving forward. She ticked off the organization's diversification ideas: increased takeout and delivery, market concepts whereby restaurants sell groceries, elevated home-dining options, and more catering. But, she said, that's only the start: "What are the health-care provisions? What is sick leave? What is wage equity? How do we build in child care? How can we build an economic model to accommodate that better way of working?"

José Andrés is a man with a talent for seeing the bigger picture, and he says the problem goes much deeper than restaurants. The true cost of food, the labyrinth of labor issues, the lack of a safety net for undocumented workers (who make up 9 percent of the hospitality industry), the jarring juxtaposition of food shortages and surpluses we've seen throughout the pandemic—all are signs of a broken food system.

The bad news is that these are among the most complex issues in modern society. The good news is that we have a clear occasion to right the wrongs that made the industry and its 15 million employees so vulnerable in the first place. "The pandemic burned this house to the ground for us," Zimmern said. "Now we have to build it back up. To do it the same way would be the definition of insanity."

MATT GOULDING is a New York Times best-selling author and four-time James Beard Award winner.