

Long Island Business News

<https://libn.com/2020/09/08/restaurants-facing-a-winter-of-discontent/>

Restaurants facing a winter of discontent

By: [Julianne Mosher](#) September 8, 2020

With fall on the horizon, and cooler temperatures creeping in, restaurants are trying to figure what's on the menu to keep customers coming back.

After struggling much of the year to stay open, smaller restaurants have gotten creative with curbside pickup, takeout, delivery options, and eventually, outdoor dining that began in Phase 2. They've pitched tents in parking lots and lined sidewalks with tables. But indoor dining is still only allowed at 50-percent capacity. And the cold weather looms.

Eric Alexander, director of Vision Long Island, a regional planning organization, said that filling just half of a restaurant simply does not work.

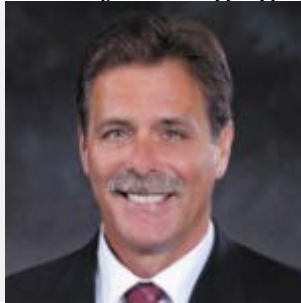
"They spent a lot of money, and lost a lot of money, to abide by the regulations," he said.

"There really has to be a sensitivity to these businesses, and a flexibility to stay open...

There are things that can be arranged, but when you get down to it, you need indoor dining."

Alexander said that as the seasons begin to change, there is going to be more of a push for indoor dining.

"Restaurants are trying to get as much as they can with outdoor dining while the weather is still warm," he added. "But places with smaller margins need seats in order to keep up a profit in their operations... they're hanging by a thread."



Louis Biscotti

And places are already seeing doors of small businesses shut for good. **Louis Biscotti, CPA and national leader of Marcum LLP's food and beverage services group**, said one-third of restaurants will never come back.

"If a restaurant is operating at 50 percent or less, there is absolutely no way they will make a profit," he said.

"During the cool weather, there will be a second wave and profits will drop again," he said. "When we lose outdoor dining, I'll really be concerned."

He said that if a second wave hits when the season changes, 90 percent of establishments will not be profitable.

“Out of all the sectors in food and beverage that I’ve seen, restaurants have been hit the hardest,” Biscotti said.

And this hardship then can trigger a domino effect within the region.

“Distributors who deliver to restaurants are getting killed,” he said. “Cafeterias, catering halls, hotels... the impact goes beyond just a restaurant.”

Without the ability to open up to full capacity at indoor dining rooms, Alexander said more needs to be done.

“The government should be partnering with businesses because those businesses pay the bills,” he said. “They create jobs.”

Going forward, he said, “I hope there’s flexibility with indoor dining that will be a bridge go get us to next spring.”

Alexander went on to say that “the new rules need to line up with the season change.” Biscotti pointed out that he advises that restaurants continue delivery and takeout options.

“I think if companies don’t focus on the innovative stuff, they’ll be in real trouble,” he said.

Lisa Harris, owner of several eateries in Port Jefferson, has been embracing outdoor seating – and will continue to as long as she can.

“Right now we’re trying to accommodate our customers and utilize outdoor dining for as long as possible,” she said.

Her restaurant, Prohibition Kitchen, has become a favorite in the village since opening its doors in 2019.

But since the pandemic hit, the restaurant’s small space has expanded onto the sidewalk, with several picnic tables stretching out to the corner.

However as the weather ultimately grows cool, Harris is still undecided as to how she will approach the winter.

“A lot of places are talking about putting portable heaters outside, but for small restaurants that’s hard and could be a huge liability,” she said.

Yet for now, there is only so much that business owners can do while guidelines from the state continue to evolve amid the unprecedented coronavirus.

Alexander said that restaurants that are re-examining their business models and adjusting them as needed might actually provide some benefits despite the suffering, loss and uncertainty that’s already occurred ever since the virus’ onset.

One positive, he said, is that navigating the virus is “forcing businesses to get online and be in the 21st century,” he said.

But if they don’t, people can expect to see more “closed” signs around. Alexander said that while some Long Islander’s may never go out to eat, there is a percentage that always supports their local eatery.

“We’ve been blessed with a very low vacancy rate compared to the city. Long Islanders are loyal to their businesses,” he said. “And no Long Islander wants to see empty vacancies.”