



THE NEW GO-TO

Powered by to-go packaging, new signage, and a dose of social media, restaurants like Route 66 in Manhattan shifted gears to stay open after the dine-in shutdown.

THE ON-PREMISE



PIVOT

FINE DINING TURNS TO TAKEOUT TO SAVE (SOME) JOBS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS SHUTDOWN

BY KATHLEEN WILLCOX

Forced into survival mode by the coronavirus pandemic, many restaurants and bars shuttered. Those that stayed open have had to drastically rework their businesses, many pivoting to takeout and delivery for the first time. Menus were scaled down and revamped, pricing was adjusted, and beverage service was completely reimaged.

Canlis in Seattle was an early adopter, making the switch on March 12 from a \$140 prix-fixe menu to \$12 burgers-to-go in order to retain their entire 115-person staff. The menu has since evolved to more elaborate fare, and word has quickly spread that the restaurant is now offering elevated family meals for curbside pickup and “no-contact” delivery along with sommelier-paired bottles of wine.

“We already have a waitlist 1,000-1,700 people long for every night next week,” shared co-owner Brian Canlis. “The enchilada night is the most popular. Clearly people need comfort, but they also need for it to be special. We’ve been getting pictures from guests who dress up, open our box and then open up our livestream, where we have our in-house piano players performing. They’re recreating Canlis at home and bringing just a moment of joy during this terrible time of uncertainty and stress.”

UNDERSTANDING THE COST OF DELIVERY APPS

Third-party delivery services, such as ChowNow, Seamless, Instacart, GrubHub, Caviar, DoorDash, and UberEats, charge as much as 35 percent per order. (Under pressure from mayors in major cities, many providers dropped the steep fees for non-chain restaurants during the pandemic.) “We experimented with UberEats and a few others, but the 33 percent cut they want is insane,” says Matt Stamp, Master Sommelier and co-owner of Complaine Wine Bar in Napa. “It shows a complete lack of understanding about a restaurant’s revenue structure. I’d rather just handle



the deliveries myself, even if that means a lower volume.”

Besides, keeping deliveries in-house can mean retaining jobs. By shifting front-of-house staff to drivers, Colorado’s I.E. Hospitality Group, with Dry Storage, Basta, Bruto, and The Wolf’s Tailor, was able to keep most staff employed. Other operators use some delivery services, while encouraging customers to order directly as much as possible. Stacey Sosa, who has owned Argentinian Estancia 460 since 1995 in New York City, listed with Seamless years ago, in order to retain one of her biggest clients, CitiGroup. But she incentivizes customers to order directly: “We offer customers a 25

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– Chef Anthony Alaimo, 101 North Eatery & Bar



percent discount on orders over \$40 if they order through us, and for orders over \$75 we include a free bottle of wine.”

RESTRUCTURING MENUS & PRICES

New emergency rules in some states have made temporary exceptions that allow restaurants to deliver alcohol during the shutdown period, providing a window of opportunity to increase profitability, and get creative. Sosa reported offering cocktails in coffee cups at happy hour prices from 12 to 7pm has led to an impressive “uptick in orders.” Some restaurants are offering bottled cocktails.

In general, at restaurants that already leaned toward upscale comfort, like Compline and Estancia, the menu shifts have been subtle: replacing fish entrées with sturdier proteins and pastas which hold up better while traveling.

In Los Angeles, the Michelin Star-winning chef Anthony Alaimo’s 101 North Eatery & Bar is also offering a slightly condensed and discounted version of its regu-

lar menu. “We want to accommodate the masses and ensure our food is accessible to all during these times,” Alaimo says. The menu is diverse, with \$12 short rib sliders and an array of salads and pizzas for \$14 to \$22, and cumin-rubbed rack of lamb for \$31. When Alaimo and his team added beer, wine and cocktail kits to their menu, he says, “business and revenue picked up.”

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Forgoing delivery apps puts the marketing burden on restaurants, but many restaurants are finding that their customers are eager to help spread the word.

In Colorado, Dry Storage is relying on social media as an informal advertising vehicle. “We’ve been using social media to promote our takeout and delivery, and our community has been very helpful in spreading the word on social media themselves,” says Colton Steiner, head miller. “This has been a huge learning experience for us, and it has made me realize how much we rely on each other, and our community.”

While no one can predict when the shutdown will end, or what the restaurant landscape will look like when it does, one thing is certain: The key ingredient for survival now is flexibility. ■

BEST PRACTICES FOR DELIVERY/TAKEOUT AMID CORONAVIRUS



- Safe food handling is paramount; a free video primer can be found at [servsafe.com](https://www.servsafe.com).
- Be prepared to accept electronic payment for all orders, over the phone or online if possible; and have protective gloves and masks for all employees.
- Set-up clear procedures for contact-free curbside pickup, including signage and tape or pylons to mark safe social distance.
- Make sure your social media and website are up-to-date and clear about your menu, hours, policies, and ways to be contacted.