

'Feast or famine' - On the frontline in restaurants during Covid

Pubs, restaurants and cafés have faced some of the most restrictive rules since the pandemic started. And that turbulence has hit every area of businesses. **Lauren Cope** reports.



Since March last year, the hospitality industry has had to weather three lockdowns, a 10pm curfew, a substantial meal rule and significant limits on capacity.

Thousands of workers have lost their jobs, many more have faced the uncertainty of furlough and owners have bounced from empty restaurants to queues outside their doors.

We spoke to those in different areas of the industry to find out their story.

The employee

"The first lockdown came suddenly, and it was a shock," said

one man, who has worked in a Norfolk pub and restaurant since 2017.

"We have quite a few young members staff who have responsibilities and don't have a lot of money to throw around and the job is really important to them.

"No-one really knew what length it was going to be, that was the main concern. Our owners were really good and helped people before furlough started."

When they reopened, the government's Eat Out to Help Out scheme began.

"The restaurant went ballistic," he said. "We were doing double



Restaurants have said 2020 was feast or famine in terms of demand

settings, working extra shifts. The amount of holidaymakers was incredible, it's never been so busy."

The strong summer helped the industry through a more

challenging autumn, which culminated in a lockdown in November until the start of December.

Norfolk and Suffolk emerged in Tier 2, under which people were only able to drink alcohol with a 'substantial meal', and mixed households were only allowed to eat together outside.

"We had to make sure when people phoned up and booked we were asking all the right questions. It was very stressful," he said. "There were tears. We completely lost the custom. Staff in Norfolk restaurants rely on tips and for people working in the hospitality industry that was a body blow."

He was quick to praise customers, in particular regulars, who he said had been "brilliant" with their support.

The owner

"It was a strange year for us, because March time was really concerning," Eric Snaith, chef and owner at Titchwell Manor Hotel, Eric's Fish and Chips and Eric's Pizza, said.

"It was the worst I've ever known it and realistically we were thinking there's a chance we could not survive it.

"We had just come out of a rubbish winter anyway and the

Job losses hit industry hard

Job losses in the hospitality sector neared 30,000 in 2020 as the pandemic unfolded.

Figures from the Norwich-based Centre for Retail Research found 29,684 jobs were lost across fine dining, independent businesses and large casual dining chains last year, up 163pc on the figure for 2019. Branch closures rose by 75.8pc, including at familiar names such as Pizza Express, the Restaurant Group and Pret A Manger.

Professor Joshua Bamfield, the centre's director, said the pandemic had accelerated changes that were already taking place within the sector. In Norfolk and Waveney, many restaurants are living off a strong summer. But they have warned that without greater support some businesses will not reopen their doors when they are allowed once lockdown eases.

Others have said staying closed until May, with support in place, would be better than reopening under difficult restrictions in March.



Eric Snaith preparing pizza in The Yurt at Drove Orchards, Thornham, near Hunstanton

Picture: CHRIS BISHOP

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Picture: GETTY IMAGES



Many people have relied on a takeaway during lockdown

Picture: GETTY IMAGES

How you can support your favourite restaurant in lockdown

Takeaways - While more places have opted to stay closed for the next few weeks, plenty are still open and offering takeaway meals for delivery or collection.

Vouchers - A valuable way to help businesses, you can buy

yourself - or a loved one, as a gift - a voucher now to enjoy when it's safe to do so down the line.

Shop local - Make sure to support restaurant and pub suppliers, including beer,

cheese and fruit and vegetables, by shopping local.

Social media - It's not an easy time for many people financially. A simple like on Facebook or follow on Instagram shows support for

traders, though, and can help them build exposure.

Don't forget them when they reopen - It might feel like it, but this lockdown isn't forever, and our support should be consistent.



People in the restaurant industry have spoken about the challenges of 2020

Picture: ARCHANT

How the industry has changed



Norwich Urban Collective

Picture: BRITTANY WOODMAN

With their doors closed for long spells over the last year, businesses in the food and drink industry have been forced to adapt.

Many have turned to takeaways, deliveries and click and collect orders to stay afloat and engaged with customers.

And plenty, including fine dining restaurants, have gone beyond the traditional takeaway, offering at-home and do-it-yourself meal kits, where diners heat up or assemble

their dishes.

And the demand for meals at home has also seen growth for delivery platforms, including creation of the Norwich Urban Collective, a local alternative to big names including Just Eat and Deliveroo.

One of its aims is to make sure local restaurants keep as much of their money as possible, with bigger platforms often taking considerable figures in commission.

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nature of our business is in the seasons. We were at our worst point in March almost to the day, and just about to have a really busy weekend.”

At the other extreme, the summer brought “four record months”.

“We have been on the coast 30 years and I have never known it like it, it was almost breaking point,” he said. “It’s felt like all of last year you were just surviving - worried about surviving, or trying to get through day to day.”

In summer, they opened Eric’s Pizza in Thornham, which got off to a “fantastic” start.

But Mr Snaith said it had been tough since November, with the hotel now shut under lockdown rules.

“It’s a strange, emotional feeling shutting the hotel, and we have done it three times now,” he said. “We have been there 32 years, I have grown up there and we have never shut.

“Going into this winter we had a good enough summer that we’ll get through it.”

The supplier

The industry’s repeated closures and limited capacity has had a knock-on impact.

Anglia Culinary Suppliers, based in Hellesdon, supplies business in the east with food, drinks, packaging, cleaning goods and more.

Managing director Nick Wells said: “The biggest impact is the market place has been taken away from us. If you supply cafés, restaurants, social clubs and community centres, it’s not easy.”

He also supplies local train



Many people have missed heading out for a tea or coffee

Picture: GETTY IMAGES

services and employers.

Currently, compared to 2019, business is roughly 60pc down.

“It never quite returned to normal levels for two reasons - the trains never really were at capacity and County Hall was closed,” he said. “But in terms of seasonal business, it was excellent. Really strong.”

During summer, with

international travel still advised against, many people enjoyed a staycation instead, with tourists flocking to the north Norfolk coast. It was, he said, “feast or famine”.

The last year has seen the business adapt.

“In the first lockdown we did a very successful click and collect service, you could go online and

order our products,” he said.

“Then, there was a lot of panic and supermarkets weren’t prepared, and that did force people to panic buy. But in lockdowns two and three supermarkets are much better, and there have been no shortages.” For now, existing work is keeping them ticking over. But

Mr Wells said the impact went further, including to factories and firms making the products and packaging he uses, as well delivery drivers.

The chef

Jordan Bayes had only started as head chef at The Chequers Inn at Thornham, on the north Norfolk coast, five months before the pandemic started.

“We felt like we hadn’t really had a run at it,” he said. “The first lockdown happened and in spring we missed the first Norfolk asparagus. It’s only one thing, but we missed that completely which was a shame because the seasonality is so important.”

Their return in summer was a busy one.

“The hotel was full other than about two days for 10 weeks, which was fantastic,” he said. “It dropped off at the start of December, the coast in general was really, really quiet.” They, along with hospitality colleagues, have adapted as best they can, offering at home New Year’s Eve and Christmas meals and outdoor seating.

But for now, they are batten down the hatches and laying low until they can return in spring.

“For me, the first lockdown came out of the blue, and we were locked down so long that it was stressful,” he said. “Now it’s almost expected, and we are more used to it. There’s just no timing of when we will be back, but hopefully we will have the same sort of summer.”

He said a return in time for Mother’s Day, usually a busy weekend for restaurants, would be “crucial”.



A busy Chequers Inn at Thornham, and chef Jordan Bayes, right



Pictures: JORDAN BAYES/ANT JONES PHOTOGRAPHY