

# AUSTIN'S INDEPENDENT RESTAURANTS STRUGGLE WITH TRANSITION TO TAKE-OUT

A UT UNDERGRADUATE ARTICLE ON THE EARLY  
IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE FOOD INDUSTRY

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## AUSTIN'S INDEPENDENT RESTAURANTS STRUGGLE WITH TRANSITION TO TAKE-OUT

So much of the service industry is about saying 'yes' that it's almost bizarre when the correct response is 'no', said Foreign & Domestic Chef and Owner, Sarah Heard, as she described her immediate reaction to the newly installed health and safety measures in Austin restaurants.

For the first time, restaurants across the city are telling guests to stay back and don't open the door. They'll come to you.

In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, the food and service industry has been among the first to feel the effects of recent social distancing orders, instructing individuals not to organize in groups larger than ten as well as maintain a distance of at least six feet from one another.

As a response, many independent restaurants throughout Austin were suddenly forced to make quick decisions concerning the fate of their establishments and the consequences of indefinite closure. For restaurants that chose to remain open, the tough decisions didn't stop there. Gone were the days of full bars and bustling kitchens, instead replaced with dining chairs flipped on tabletops and signs requesting customers to remain in their cars for a curbside delivery.

From preparation to plating, remaining restaurants were required to adjust practices to accommodate new rules in the food service world. Heard described the modifications of her New American cuisine as an 'ever-changing experiment.'

"Lettuce doesn't make a great garnish after it's been sitting in a to-go box with hot food," said Heard, describing how food presentation has shifted in the transition from plate to box.

"We're making changes. We've begun to sous-vide [a culinary method involving placing the food in a plastic pouch and cooking in a water bath] our meats as it helps the meats to retain moisture. We're also keeping in mind that customers may want to re-heat these meals later, so changing how we prepare these meals is essential in some cases."

# OVERVIEW:

This undergraduate feature story explores the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on restaurants in Austin, Texas through the lens of the chefs and owners managing these establishments.

As social distancing and large group gathering limitation fell into place across the country, the Austin restaurants that chose to remain open were inundated with new challenges and forced to find ways to quickly adapt in order to meet the needs of their communities and support those working in their kitchens.

Other restaurants are beginning to respond to different community requests, such as locals request's for food they can prepare at home with the help of these restaurant's recipes and ingredients.

Owner of locally-sourced Lenoir, Todd Duplechan, and his team are currently working on preparing dishes that start in their kitchen but are intended to be completed at a customer's home.

"It's a recipe for disaster if we just tell people how to do it. And this isn't the time for that," said Duplechan. "But if we can create a meal that people can then finish off themselves, they still get to do something interactive and quite literally have something to pass the time."

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In an attempt to counter restaurants' lost revenue amid restrictions, Governor Greg Abbott signed a waiver on March 18th authorizing restaurants to sell alcohol with food delivery orders. While at first glance the waiver may appear as a win, many restaurant owners have seen little to no difference in increased revenue.

Buzz Mill Chief of Culture and Exploration, Jason Sabala, stated that alcohol delivery sales in response to the waiver represented 'a fraction of a fraction' of what was needed to sustain their business. However, Peached Tortilla Director of Operations, Beto Solis, says this waiver has presented an opportunity to get creative in his 'Asian meets Southern' restaurant.

"Texas currently has the highest percentage of alcohol consumption in the country," said Solis. "That's something we want to work with. Right now we're selling a type of DIY cocktail set where we give them everything they'd need to make the cocktail – whether it's the lime, the simple syrup, the mixer, whatever it is to make their cocktails just like we do here."

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When asked where their thoughts drifted while driving to work during the past two weeks, the responses of the various restaurant owners and leaders were almost unanimous – survival. Not just for themselves, but for their restaurant and all those who had worked under that roof and become known as family. In this time of uncertainty, they say they are doing everything they could to support their previous staff members who are now without jobs.

"We're lucky. A lot of vendors have been giving us extra food," said Solis of Peached Tortilla. "It helps us ensure that everyone can keep food on the table. We make staff meals where people can come by during the day and pick up what they need."

It's clear that COVID-19 has brought one of the greatest challenges of many restaurant owners' careers and many often expressed sadness knowing that not every restaurant would be able to reopen once restrictions were lifted.



*Caption: Austin's downtown area boards up business's amid Covid-19 related closures. Photo courtesy Aaron Montez*

"Our thoughts are with our fellow restaurant-running friends that may not reopen," said Heard, her voice cracking as she fought back emotion. "And we know how hard they've worked to get where they are. And to think that something completely out of their control could cause them to close– it's the scariest thought."

For now, Austin's independent restaurants are doing all they can to stay in their community while simultaneously adjusting to new obstacles discovered each day.

Although there are challenges, restaurants also say they have found rewards. On the days where to-go orders flood their kitchens and ticket times are nearly an hour, they say the message is clear – their community is still there. Still supportive. And still determined to help them stay afloat. It is through these observed acts of solidarity that Beto Solis says he's able to find the inspiration to continue firing up the grill in the uncertain days to come.