

Volume 17 | Special Edition

# FOCUS**ED**

Special Edition  
**RESTAURANTS**  
POST-COVID-19



## **RE-OPENING** **YOUR RESTAURANT**

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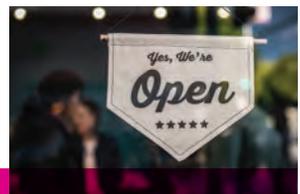
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FocusED is published by UniFocus and highlights topics of interest to labor-intensive, service-oriented businesses. For comments, suggestions for future articles, or additional copies of this publication, contact us at [info@unifocus.com](mailto:info@unifocus.com).

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# From the AUTHORS

In this edition of FocusEd, we will recap many of the key issues that operators need to focus on as they re-open and then operate during these unique conditions. Unlike other downturns, where once opened there weren't any operating constraints regarding getting back to full business volumes, we find ourselves confronted with new rules, regulations and customer expectations that limit opening the faucet fully.

Besides local and/or state constraints as to volumes at any specific time, customer expectations and therefore confidence needs to be at the forefront of operational decisions. As part of this confidence challenge, customers have different perceptions of safety which creates different demands on the business. Depending on which end of the pendulum you operate under, full occupancy or limited occupancy, with all the CDC guidelines businesses run the risk of losing customers due to these varying expectations.

Coupled with this and depending on where an operation is located, enforcement can become an issue that needs to be addressed. Recently I heard of some bar enterprises having their liquor license suspended because they didn't follow guidelines with respect to occupancy levels. A very costly mistake.

With all this said, this issue recaps our thoughts on considerations from deciding to open through day-to-day business operations. Our primary focus is to propose ideas and actions that will help move a business up the profit scale more quickly. There surely is a great deal of uncertainty in the economic environment that we all find ourselves experiencing now, but by clearly recognizing these issues and challenges, many can be addressed systematically to assist in creating a more stable operation.

We surely hope that you enjoy the readings and come away with at least a few ideas to help you as you open and operate in the COVID-19 environment.



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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark".

Mark

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Elliott

# OPERATING RESTAURANTS

## in a COVID-19 Environment

**A**s we slowly inch forward to our “new normal”, it is worth stating the obvious: the re-opening of our business world will create demands significantly different from those of the world we left just a couple of months ago. Everything is going to be different, from the way we shop, to the way we travel, to the way we eat. The restaurant industry has changed in many ways and you will need to make some adjustments if you are going to operate profitably while making sure your guests are comfortable and confident in the experience your operation delivers.

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*The prospect of getting your restaurant re-opened is going to be daunting.*

- The prospect of getting your restaurant re-opened is going to be daunting, not only because it may feel like going through a condensed version of a full restaurant opening, but it will also require a completely new way of looking at your operation. In essence, a change of mindset.

The effects from the coronavirus pandemic and the psychological impacts of social distancing are going to be far-reaching and will touch all businesses where human-to-human interaction is central to success of the service delivered. Clearly, the food service and hospitality industries are right at the top of that list. Restaurants, even with pent up demand, will see fewer total diners served for a number of reasons: your restaurant will have to follow some type of state-mandated social distancing guidelines, some people may be reticent to be in crowded spaces, and your operation will have fewer total seats available at any point in time to meet these requirements and perceptions.

One of the main keys to successful operations, besides strong cost management, will be table turns. If for example, your restaurant now has 50% of the seats it has historically operated with, you will need to increase the revenue per seat statistic that you have been used to achieving. This will require a paradigm shift in how you operate, starting with looking at your menu, your menu mix, and what items work best for your kitchen and are most profitable. The speed of kitchen

production has a direct impact on time at the table for your customer. Additionally, you need to determine what your staffing needs will be both in the kitchen and on the floor of your restaurant. It is entirely possible that as you effectively manage these challenges and needs, your staffing guidelines may well have to change to impact time at table.

Further, you will also have to ensure that you are maintaining a higher level of cleanliness, and doing so not only in a conscientious manner, but in a highly visible one as well. What does that mean for your staff and for your guests? Does it mean that your entire FOH staff wear face shields? Does it mean that you use paper (and more importantly disposable) menus? Or do you return to the days with a large menu under a piece of plexiglass on every table? Are you going to go back to having restroom attendants?

From the customer standpoint, are there actions you can take to minimize the chance that guests are coming to your restaurant at a time when they can infect others? Will you install an automatic door so that no one entering has to touch the door handle? Will you need automatic paper towel dispensers in the bathrooms, new non-touch hand dryers, or individual single-use condiments on the tables?

As noted above, you will be operating with fewer seats. Just look at some of the recent pictures of restaurants that are already trying to open. Some metrics that will be key to success will be: revenue per available seat, total time at table of the customer group, average wait time to get seated, and total demand (not just serviced). Flattening and spreading your peaks where possible will make a great contribution to the bottom line. 🏠



# PRE-OPENING

## — Considerations



**T**hink back to when you first opened your restaurant. It was probably a long and arduous process filled with sleepless nights and several trips to the proverbial drawing board as you discounted old ideas for new ones. In this pandemic moment, if you've decided to re-open when your state or local municipality deems it appropriate, then you're about to go through a similar process all over again but with a few added twists. You now need to account for the psychological effects of COVID-19 on your guests and staff. This is not going to be easy, just like it wasn't simple the first time around—your actions need to be meticulously planned and executed.

Let's look at the "pre-opening" process. And let's be clear, this is not about simply re-opening. In the plainest terms, re-opening is turning the lights and stoves back on Tuesday morning if you're closed on Mondays, or following a fumigation that required your closure for 48 hours. Instead, you have a much more complex set of things to take into account before opening your doors following this forced closure. It is also important to note that unlike past re-openings, the added health and safety concerns of your staff and customers will play a key role in how you approach getting ready to open. Health and safety have always been issues that need to be dealt with but the advent of social distancing and the heightened focus on sanitized items makes the planning process even more critical. And of course, the CDC guidelines must also be accounted for.

## > Considering Your Staff

As you get started with the pre-opening processes, one of the first and most important questions you should ask yourself is: how are you going to bring back your staff? Everyone wants things to return to a sense of normalcy, and most people want to get back to work as soon as possible. However, you will likely have some members of the staff who are more hesitant than others to return to work. These employees might live in multi-generational homes with someone who is immunocompromised, or they may now have additional childcare issues without external resources.

Your employees are going to want to know that you considered their health and safety, because they will be working not just with each other but also interacting with the general

public. Communication will be key in getting a team back to work. You may want to call your employees individually and assess their level of tolerance for returning to work. But prior to making those calls, take time to consider what you will say to put each person's mind at ease. Since you will not be starting with 100% staff capacity, these conversations can help you develop a plan for bringing employees back in waves and in a manner that is respectful of each staff member's unique situation. More importantly, it will go a long way towards demonstrating to your staff that you care. It may seem like a big task in the midst of everything else, but we have seen some of our very large clients undertake this effort, and the goodwill and insights they received were invaluable.

Whatever safety measures you implement, it is important to communicate with your staff. For



> example, a quick update to your employee manual can state that there will be temperature checks for all employees entering the premises. You should also communicate plans for personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff so they see you are making every effort to keep them safe and healthy. Additionally, clarifying new cleaning and sanitizing procedures will be helpful both from the reality of the changes, as well as the perception of your staff.

Providing this reassurance means you will, of course, have to invest in PPEs for all of your staff. This will manifest in different ways depending on their level of potential exposure as well as the perception of safety you want to convey to your guests. For example, the members of your kitchen staff may only need face masks, but you may want to invest in both face masks and face shields for your FOH staff, as they will have more direct exposure to a larger number of people. In making this decision, the perception of the guest also needs to be accounted for.

## Preparing the Front of House

Because your FOH is where staff interacts with guests – and guests navigate social distancing from

other guests – there are a number of complexities that require forethought.

Your restrooms must be addressed in pre-opening because this is the one space shared by guests from different parties. How do you manage traffic into and out of the restroom? How do you address opening and closing doors? Do you need an automatic door or do you install a door that can swing both inward and outward? Do you hire an attendant who can also ensure that other fixtures in the restroom are wiped down? Do you approve capital expenditures to ensure that everything in your restrooms are automated: toilets, sinks, soap dispensers, paper towel dispensers, and hand-dryers? And, do you change the cleaning frequency of the restrooms if you don't have an attendant?

As you consider the work of your FOH staff, you may need to revisit your service stations. Most service stations are in cramped corners out of the sightline of guests. Unfortunately, these do not allow for much in the way of social distancing. Do you add side stations to facilitate social distancing by your staff? Additionally, in the past, you may have left a bus bin filled with dishes in your service station but from the psychological standpoint of the guest and employee, removing used tableware to the kitchen immediately may be the best course of action. Another thing to consider is the impact on work standards with these and other adjustments.

Eating utensils are a highly sensitive element in your post-quarantine restaurant experience. If you did not previously utilize roll-ups, you probably want to start now. A roll-up on a table or handed to a guest with a gloved hand will put their mind at ease more so than utensils simply left on a table. Committing to roll-ups means determining not only how to get the work done in a sanitary



- > manner, but also how you will store the bundles—you'll probably need a system with covered bus bins or Lexan so the roll-ups are not exposed to open air. If your FOH staff are required to use gloves, you will need to ensure you include guidelines for accessing your roll-up bins when you are training staff on glove and service protocols.

Once you've determined your solution for eating utensils, you will have to turn your attention to glassware. Will you give your guests water and wine glasses upon sitting down or will you have your staff set the tables beforehand with the glasses? Will you deliver a carafe or pitcher of water that your guests can pour themselves or will they still be comfortable with a busser pouring water for them? If you decide to use a pitcher or carafe, your staff must be trained to properly clean and sterilize the vessel when guests get up from the table. We've probably all witnessed FOH staff dump a carafe of water after clearing it from a table, only to watch them immediately refill it for new guests.

It should not have been acceptable before, and it certainly won't be permitted moving forward. Vigilance and training will be the keys to success.

One more thing to consider before we turn our attention to the back of house, is your menu. Not simply what will be on it, although this is of utmost importance, but the form it will take. Your menu could be printed on paper and easily disposable. Alternatively, it could be placed on every table underneath a piece of plexiglass for your guests to read. This second option would significantly reduce the amount of paper waste generated by your business, which is worthy of consideration when expenses will almost assuredly be higher. A third option is to eliminate physical menus by switching to an online platform. With almost 80% of Americans using smartphones almost every guest will have one, so you could consider having your entire menu available online if you don't already. This would then entail clearly communicating to your guests that they can refer to your menu online while in your restaurant. You may even be able to use a



*Social distancing is incredibly difficult in a restaurant kitchen on a good day. The fact more people aren't constantly bumping into each other is a testament to the dance that is the kitchen. To promote social distancing you can stagger in-times and define work patterns.*

> geotagged QR Code so a guest can place an order directly from their phone; this order would then only have to be confirmed by a server. This is a concept worth further exploration, but for now, let us turn our attention to the kitchen.

## Managing the Back of House

Social distancing is incredibly difficult in a restaurant kitchen on a good day. The fact more people aren't constantly bumping into each other is a testament to the dance that is the kitchen. So, in an effort to keep members of your kitchen staff—and by extension the general public—safe, there are some things that can be changed and improved in a post-pandemic kitchen.

One relatively quick fix is to stagger in-times for prep cooks. If you previously had four or six cooks who all arrived for their shift at 10am, consider bringing half in at 8am and the other half at 10am. Additionally, you will have to define work patterns that enable your cooks to maintain

social distancing. This is probably easier during prep hours but could be incredibly difficult during service and may require certain menu adjustments. Our next article will dive more deeply into menu engineering, but it should definitely be on your radar during pre-opening.

This is also a perfect time to think about efficient consolidation of your kitchen operations and even a review of service delivery processes, looking for ways to distance or even reduce staff at certain times. This could be especially important as you will be opening at reduced capacity. If spacing considerations need to be taken into account, a team of fully cross-trained staff can be very effective in handling multiple responsibilities without the need for work “silos”. A smaller team of people will allow you to save on labor while adhering to social distancing.

In addition to the social distancing in your kitchens, you may want to make sure you have a dedicated expeditor who never leaves the pass-through. In the past, some restaurants have





*The pre-opening process and strategies may appear to be complex, but an effective plan that is executed meticulously can spell the difference between success and failure.*

> employed a runner who also functioned as the expeditor, but this maximizes the potential exposure of that person and by extension everyone they come into contact with. If instead you treat your expeditor like he or she is in a fine dining restaurant, then that person would execute the standards by wiping down every plate and potentially putting a cloche on it before it left the kitchen.

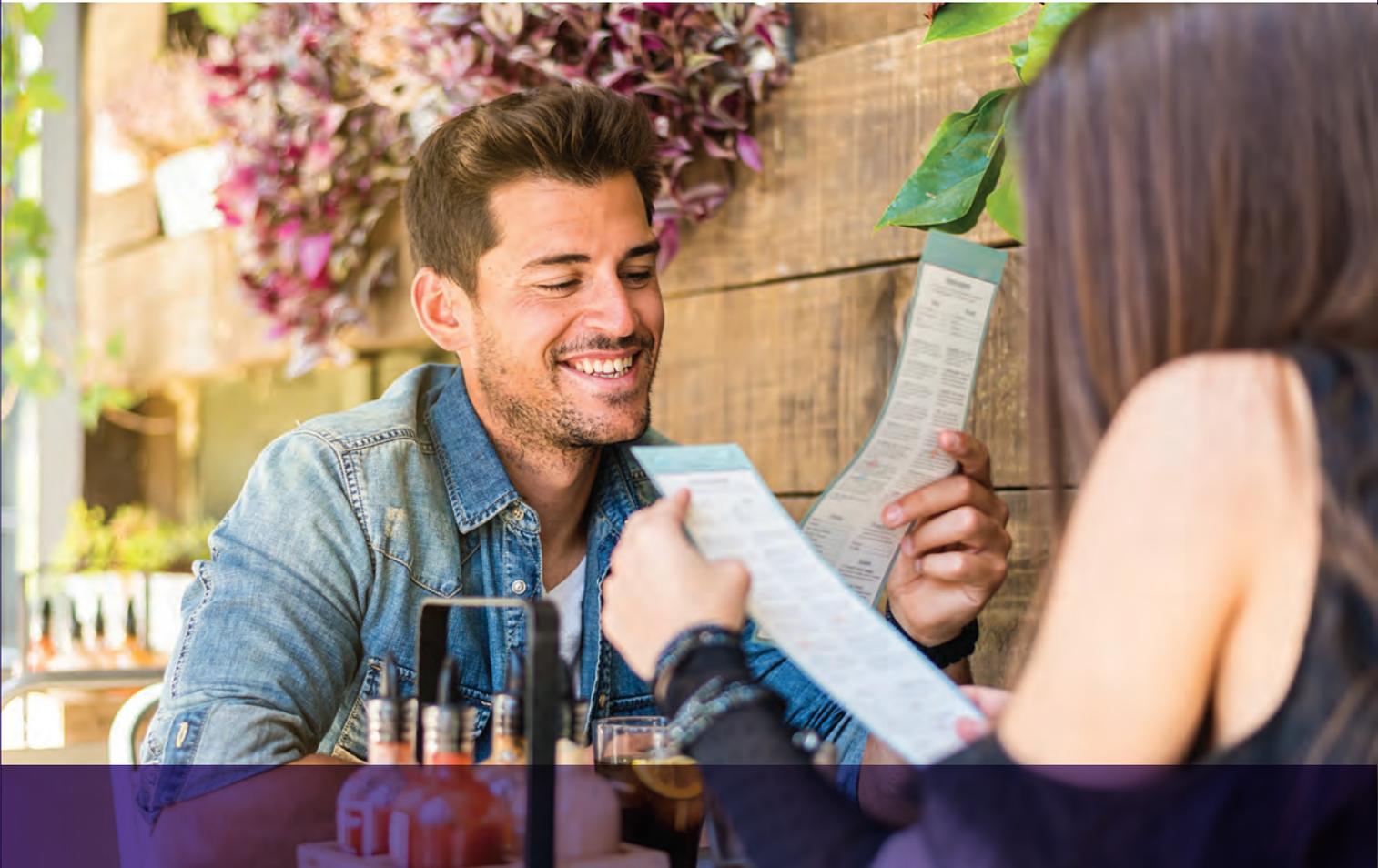
A cloche is a great example of a way to demonstrate to your guests that you are taking their safety seriously. If every plate of food leaves your kitchen covered and is only uncovered by a server or runner with a gloved hand when it reaches a table,

the psychological impact from the guest perspective could be enormous.

The pre-opening process and strategies may appear to be complex, but an effective plan that is executed meticulously can spell the difference between success and failure. Taking the time to think through all the details and follow all the lines of inquiry is the best way to ensure the most successful and smooth re-opening as well as sustainability. Effective staff training in all of the new processes and procedures, both from the employee and guest perspective, will be key. And remember that while you can plan for almost any eventuality, it is still the restaurant industry and you have to be ready for anything. 🍷

# MENU

Engineering and Planning





**G**uest satisfaction and food costs, coupled with positioning, are often key factors in menu design. You have probably even kept some items on your menu that did not sell particularly well because you felt they were important to your brand or audience. Some of these items may have added production complexity that at high volumes you were able to justify. This is not a luxury you will be able to afford when you re-open your restaurant. With fewer diners, every single dish will need to be carefully considered for a myriad of factors including how well the components can be cross-utilized, what the prep time will be, how easily the dish can be picked up (take out), what the “saleability” of the item is, and many others.

Looking at your sales for July 2019 is not going to provide you with the indicators you need to properly design a post-COVID menu. This will be a multi-step process that should start with pulling your menu mix for several periods of time. As part of the process of understanding your food sales, you need to assess items on a yearly or monthly basis, and evaluate fluctuations in the frequency and types of items sold based upon busy versus slow meal periods and different times of year. These factors are important because unless you are changing your menu on a seasonal basis, you are likely to have some menu items that perform better than others at certain times of the year. The short rib pasta which is a high seller from November to April, might not be a dish you want on your reduced menu in July.



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With fewer diners, every single dish will need to be carefully considered for a myriad of factors.

➤ Another factor to be considered is the actual size of your menu. While high levels of variety worked in the past, you will get more out of a streamlined menu that is built for not only success but also speed, than you will a menu that is bloated with the favorites of a small group of regulars or the Chef’s passion project dish. As such, once you have pulled your menu mix and have compared your sales across several meal periods you should develop a list of “rock stars.”

Rock stars are dishes that sell regardless of the time of year or the time of day. They are general crowd-pleasers, have solid contribution margins and frequently do not require much labor. Or, more plainly put, they are the menu item or items that allow you to bring in the more expensive ingredients to experiment with. Essentially, the burger or the steak frites on your menu help pay for the Australian finger limes your chef has been asking for. Obviously moving forward, you will probably not be bringing in finger limes, but you want to lean heavily on the dishes that would normally provide you the financial cushion to do so.

Once you have an understanding of what items you want on your menu, you need to review them for their ability to

be cross-utilized. If you are inclined to put Iceberg on your burger, then you should probably serve a wedge salad. If Romaine is more your style, then it makes sense to have a Caesar. Even beyond the type of lettuce, you want to make sure that there is as little waste as possible. If you are bringing in whole chickens, then you need to be making stock. House-made ricotta on a dish? Then you need to find a place for the leftover whey other than the bottom of a drain. Your ability to cross-utilize items on your menu will drive down costs because you will be bringing in less overall product and these lower costs will go a long way in helping you keep your food costs in line. We’re not saying that you can’t have an item of *mise en place* only show up once on your menu, but if it does it needs to really count. As part of this process you need to assess the raw products you are using and ensure there is not a comparable product at a lower cost.

Additionally, what considerations do you need to give to the cooking and preparation of the items on your new menu? If you are going to bring back your staff at reduced capacity, then you need to be cognizant of the way in which you utilize their hours. Paying four prep cooks for 20 hours of overtime each defeats the purpose of having

- > reduced labor and does not effectively utilize their time. Instead, consider our previous recommendation of staggering the in-times of your prep staff and couple this with a menu that has the right amount of prep on it.

For many items on your menu, there may be cost points where pre-prepped product is less expensive than raw product with the labor cost associated with the same end product. In planning your re-opening, your prep cooks need to execute the lion's share of the work so that your line cooks can focus solely on service. In some cases, the same person may be doing both, but line production time should be kept to a minimum to address speed of table turns.

Depending on your establishment, you may want to consider only running with one staff team. If you were previously not open for breakfast and you maybe broke even for lunch, then you may want to re-open initially only with dinner service. Based on your newly engineered menu, this would allow you to bring your staff in at the applicable starting time ensuring there is enough prep time before opening for service. You could then adjust kitchen staff accordingly or explore whether shift pay works better for this particular model than hourly pay. Typically for a single meal period you can use shift pay to offset potential overtime hours, by pitching it to your staff as a fixed wage they can rely on. One needs to still be concerned with overtime rules, even in this situation.

You also need to think about the kinds of prep your staff will be doing – and then, how this prep can be streamlined for service in such a way that the line cooks producing the food can be set up for success. In many cases this may mean cooking certain items sous vide, or under vacuum. Many of you are no

doubt familiar with “sandbagging” a piece of food to reduce the fire time on the pick-up, think of sous vide like the ultimate sandbagging device that also insures your protein or veg will never dry out or overcook. A chicken breast can be held in a vacuum sealed bag, already cooked, just waiting for a line cook to remove it from the bag, sear it in a pan and put it on a plate. All of this can be done ahead of time and will significantly reduce overall fire times. Reduced fire times translate into less time your guests are waiting for food and, in turn, less time they're spending at the table which as we have noted before will be of the utmost importance when you are trying to operate at reduced capacity.

It is worth noting that serving food cooked using an immersion circulator will probably require a HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) Plan, and the process of writing one and getting certified can be a long and arduous one. Before you embark on it, you should weigh the associated costs – the circulator, bags, vacuum sealer, and plan itself – against the added time a guest will sit at table waiting for a line cook to take that aforementioned piece of chicken from raw and cook it thoroughly. Then compound that time over hundreds of



> potential guests and you may find that the upfront costs are recouped in time gained later.

One last aspect of menu engineering worth discussing here is a prix fixe menu. With fewer diners in your restaurant and a greater emphasis on table turns, being able to better tailor and guide your guest's experience is going to take on an even bigger role than before. A prix fixe menu is a great way to guide your guests. Not only is the timing more built in than a standard meal, which makes it much easier to time your tables, but you will have a more consistent revenue stream because every guest that orders the prix fixe will be paying the exact same amount, which translates to guaranteed dollars. Think of it like Restaurant Week in most major cities across the country. Your guests pay a set price for an appetizer, entrée, and dessert, with some all-important opportunities for upselling in the form of wine, coffee, or an after-dinner drink. The majority of these prix fixe menus utilize preexisting mise en place and can usually

be executed at a lower cost to the restaurant. This approach though, will potentially require more menu changes depending on the number of items associated with the prix fixe. Additional variety could help increase guest returns.

A relentless focus on lower cost will be all important as you try to find a way forward. The contribution margin of each item (food cost plus production costs) will be critical. Your dollars will matter more than ever: how you spend them, what you spend them on, and the way in which they are spent. We have spent some time talking about the "new normal", and part of that discussion should include a drive to attain and maintain a lower food cost percentage. As everything in your restaurant is linked, a well thought out menu can lead not only to streamlined labor but also to quicker table turns, which could lead to more guests, and in turn more revenue. All things we now need to be more aware of than ever before. 🍷



*A relentless focus on lower cost will be all important as you try to find a way forward. Your dollars will matter more than ever: how you spend them, what you spend them on, and the way in which they are spent.*



Taking Full

# ADVANTAGE

of Available Demand with  
Restricted Restaurant Capacity

**A**s you open, you have to specifically look at the impact on revenue of having a “smaller” restaurant to operate. In this regard, a key issue immediately jumps to the forefront — fewer seats can translate to lower revenues, especially during peak operating times. The operations that successfully address this issue will achieve profitability and sustainability at a faster pace than the market in general.



> Unlike a manufacturing environment where the pace of product production can be internally controlled, the restaurant market has peaks and valleys that can be difficult to control. There are some things that can be done to reduce the height of the peaks and spread out the business, such as:

- Early bird specials
- Incentives for early catering / take-out orders
- Off peak discounted dining
- Special fast production menus

Even with these tactics in place, operations will still be confronted with

some degree of peaks and valleys, maybe not as extreme but they will be present. Addressing these conditions while operating profitably has always been a challenge.

Managers work to address this by considering shift length or total required shifts at peak times, and adjusting service structure, such as using runners or bussers or some other hybrid model. As people begin to venture back into restaurants, volume fluctuations will initially be harder to forecast and trying to meet total customer demand will only be exacerbated by a reduction in seat capacity.

At the end of the day, the primary metric that needs to be evaluated is table turns during a meal period — especially at peak times. In looking at this metric, length of time a party sits at a table has an inverse relationship to turns. The shorter the at-table time is, the higher the turns are and therefore the higher the revenue.

In analyzing this operational need, we built a lunch period model, with the assumptions (*See Table Turn Analysis on the next page*):

What this shows is that as demand returns, a key focus needs to be on reasonably reducing a patron’s time at

> your table. In the past, a 50-minute meal duration would have cost the operation 105 covers which anyone can easily convert to dollars lost. At normal capacity, all of the guests, assuming a 400-cover demand would have been served. Another aspect to consider when working with this model is that many restaurants are opening at less than 50% capacity, making it even more important to focus on service style, structure and standards to be ready to take full advantage of demand as it begins to grow.

customers a server can efficiently attend to at a point in time. In our work with restaurants over many years, it is quite common to have lunch staffing parameters that use a ratio of 15 or 16 customers to one server at a point in time. In the environment facing the industry now, that ratio should probably be more like 12 to 1. And bus staff at 2.5 servers to 1 busser historically, might make more sense at 2 to 1.

These parameters are designed for peak

lunch periods. Other parameters would be needed for other meal periods, which is another aspect of returning faster to profitability. Many operations account for volume in one of three ways. Breakfast, lunch, dinner operations: 3 cover counts. Lunch, dinner operations: 2 cover counts. Dinner only: 1 cover count.

Our suggestion here is to increase the number of meal periods you account for and if you are open in the afternoon between

lunch and dinner, create a separate count for that 2pm to 5:30pm period. For operations who are open until 11pm or later, add a late-night cover count from 9pm to closing. While you are doing this, you may also want to use covers for bar lunch business and beverage sales as your indicator for evening bar operations.

### TABLE TURN ANALYSIS

**ASSUMPTIONS:**

Total restaurant seating - 250	Regulated seating capacity - 125 (50%)
Total demand for lunch - 400 people	Relatively flat pattern within 5-minute increments

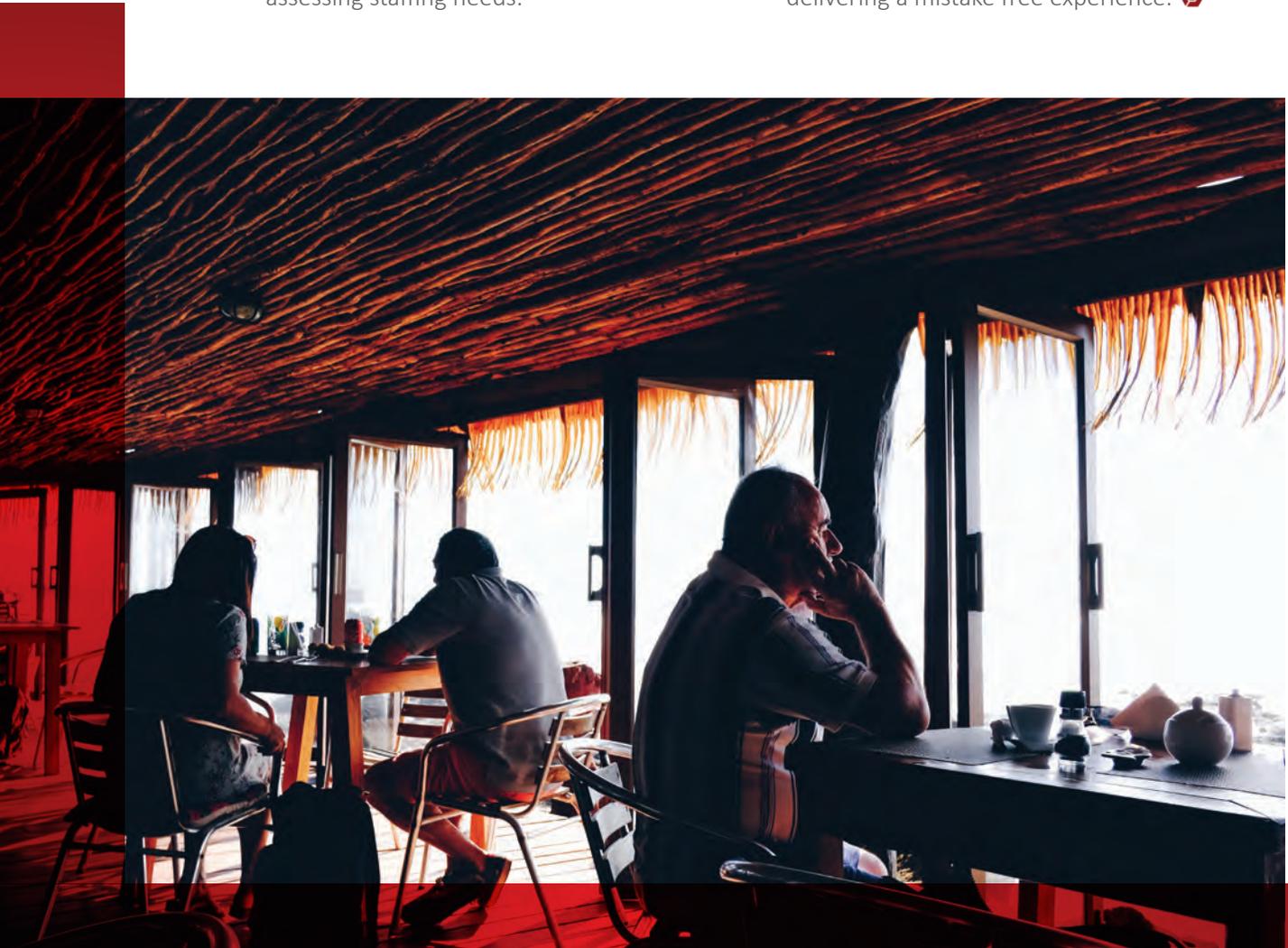
**RESULTS:**

Meal Duration	Demand Met (covers served)	Demand Not Met (lost business)
60 Minutes	146	254
55 Minutes	175	225
50 Minutes	295	105
45 Minutes	353	47
40 Minutes	400	0
35 Minutes	400	0
30 Minutes	400	0

There will be various things that an operation can do to impact at-table time. Some have been discussed in relation to back of the house / kitchen operations. When turning to the direct customer facing staff, new considerations need to be given to not only the size of one's station but more importantly the number of seated

> While this probably sounds like some extra work, there is good reason to do this. First and foremost, the off-peak period between lunch and dinner can use different staffing parameters as table turns will probably not be as critical during this period. Late night business will probably follow the same pattern and will be able to use less labor for the same amount of covers over the period. Additionally, and especially for late night, the meal composition of a person eating at 10:00pm is lighter than the peak dinner patron which converts to needing less staff in the kitchen also for an equivalent cover count. Menu abstracts, as discussed in a previous article, can be very helpful here in assessing staffing needs.

Taking full advantage of all demand opportunities will be key as business starts on the path to recovery. Anticipating demand for each meal period will be more difficult than it was historically. It is hard to project when consumer confidence will return and within some customer groups, such as seniors, how quickly their confidence will increase enough to begin dining-in at restaurants. Forecasting will still be critical in helping operations plan for operations. The likelihood is that overstaffing will occur in the short run until some patterns emerge. But success will absolutely come to the businesses that shave minutes off their time-at-the-table statistics while still delivering a mistake free experience. 📍



# MANAGING



Back of the House  
Re-Opening



**P**re-pandemic, a 250-seat restaurant probably would have employed roughly 50 people in the back of house, including the kitchen staff, stewards, porters, and receivers. This small army probably worked in tight quarters and seamlessly shared space utilizing the same tools, left handwritten notes with prep lists, shared family meal together, and did many other things that are not aligned with employee safety recommendations for post-COVID operations.

As restaurateurs start to re-open their businesses, the kitchen is going to present some unique challenges. We mentioned above a very common aspect of kitchen interaction that needs to be addressed: communication of prep lists between the different shifts. A simple option is to purchase a white board, post it in a common area of the kitchen, and distribute dry erase markers to every member of the kitchen staff and use the board for communications. Information can be easily conveyed in this way and giving every cook his or her own marker is a cost-effective way to operate safely.

A more challenging issue is the fact that social distancing is nearly impossible in many kitchens. While a larger restaurant has more overall space, that larger space is usually staffed by more people to keep up with the higher demand, which means space is often still at a premium. Menu engineering will be critical. Proper attention, not only to the items on the menu but also the required food preparation for those items, is necessary to allow for greater social distancing.

Staggering staff arrival times can also help kitchens practice social distancing, yet function with a semblance of normalcy because it allows for smaller teams of people in the space. This will also put a greater emphasis on communication in a kitchen because as teams rotate in and out, team members coming in later will need to pick up where another left off. Kitchens may also want to consider creating a system of specific groups that work together consistently, so contact can be easily traced if a team member becomes ill.

- A schedule that employs these groupings will not only allow the same people to work together and develop their own systems, but can mitigate the potential of illness transfer. For example, if one of the four members of your 10am shift presents with symptoms, you can pull all members of that shift and replace just those impacted members while continuing operations with minimal disruption.

This model may work better in a larger restaurant with a larger kitchen staff to draw from, but there are ways for a smaller operation to set up minimum staff groups and then add staff as business increases. This approach can keep a core production team together and, with the right technology, schedule staff more efficiently while accounting for the personal needs of each team member. Other schedule configurations may also be needed in the early days of re-opening. Rotating shifts of 10 hours in length, four and then three days a week is an approach we have recommended to a number of clients. These shifts can be alternated to ensure that hours are being evenly

distributed. Additionally, depending upon operating hours, 12-hour shifts can also be useful. This limits the number of different staff interactions during operating hours. It may also prove to be helpful to staff who have childcare, elder care or other external issues, because it enables them to be home full days each week consistently. Clearly overtime laws have to be adhered to on a state-by-state basis, but re-thinking traditional scheduling assumptions is one strategy restaurants will need for success in this environment.

There will not be a one-size-fits-all solution that works for every kitchen; you will have to experiment to determine what works best for your specific kitchen. Part of this experimentation will come about naturally when it is time to re-open.

You can test your ideas by treating this time as though you are opening your restaurant for the first time, and part of that process should include mock service.

A mock service will help your front staff, but will also be incredibly important for your kitchen staff to familiarize themselves with new routines.

These new routines that include staggered in-times for staff will mean periods of time when your coverage on the line is lighter and cooks will have to make sure they are setting themselves up for success regardless of the number of cooks. Cross-training team members as you prepare to re-open will pay significant dividends as your operations open and slowly increase business volumes. We have seen with restaurants that have already begun to re-open in parts





*Cross-training team members as you prepare to re-open will pay significant dividends.*

> of the country that business volumes fluctuate unpredictably, and cross-training has been critical to getting kitchens staffed when business is unexpectedly heavy.

It is a well-loved tradition in many restaurants for the staff to gather before service for family meal which is usually served buffet style, with staff serving themselves using the same utensils. Social distancing will require this approach to change. While some restaurants may do away with it entirely, many municipalities require some type of staff meal. Smaller restaurants could allow their staffs to order food off the menu, but this quickly becomes expensive and negatively impacts food cost percentages. A model of this sort would probably be unthinkable in a larger restaurant.

There are a number of alternatives to addressing this. You might provide staff with three or four menu options for a plated meal, allowing no substitutions.

Another option would be to maintain a buffet-style family meal with one cook serving – and obviously wearing the proper PPE's. This alternative makes social distancing more challenging and available space for staff to distance when eating at the same time will be a consideration for management.

Clearly there are many things to consider, and no easy answers for the challenges we face today. You will need to take things slowly and understand that the principal axiom of restaurants has not changed: there are things outside of your control than you cannot plan for, but it is how you deal with those bumps in the road that truly test your mettle.

We all hope for a return to normalcy as quickly as possible, but the fact remains that it will be quite some time before that is once again a reality and even more likely, there will be a “new normal”. In the interim, we must be cognizant of the factors we are unable to control while focusing on the things that we can. 

# CHECKLIST

## for Operating in the “New Normal”

**O**ur objective with this series was to bring insights from our team’s work with thousands of restaurants and F&B operations, providing helpful prompts as you work through all of the details of re-opening and operating in the “new normal” with COVID-19 still prevalent.

What follows is a brief recap of the most important points and issues that will need to be dealt with – from pre-opening planning to operational adjustments for both front and back-of-house staffing, all of which are designed to bring your operation to profitability more quickly.

To start, there are many things to consider pertaining to guest and staff satisfaction while you transition back to profitability.

- How will you handle social distancing for guests and staff?
- What are your policies regarding PPE and how will you implement them?
- What products and processes will you use to sanitize and make cleanliness visible?
- What steps will you take to minimize physical contact with shared items by guests and staff?
- What steps will you take to maximize table turns while your capacity is restricted?

Let’s now turn to some of the key points that were raised in each phase of our discussions.

### Pre-Opening Considerations

Re-opening your restaurant will be a lot like the process you went through when you first opened. While your building and equipment are already in place, there are a lot of unique issues that will change the way you operate in this post-pandemic environment. The key actions that need to be taken are:

- Communicate frequently and clearly with staff as they come back to work.
- Provide staff training in safety measures that need to be observed upon arrival and during operation.
- Determine how customers will access your menu: paper, digital (QR Code).
- Take steps to enable social distancing: remove tables or mark them as out of service; make necessary changes to restrooms.

- >  Establish procedures for handling silverware and glassware to demonstrate safe practices to guests.
- Establish procedures for safe handling of food from the kitchen to the table to make it visible to the guest that their safety is paramount.
- Assess which meal periods you should be open for in the early stages of re-opening.
- Determine what cross-training is needed to optimize labor costs, then conduct the actual training as staff returns.

Also, as part of pre-opening planning, your menu will need to be reviewed and effective menu planning will be key when the operation re-opens.

## Menu Engineering and Planning

Your menu plays a big role, both in managing costs and supporting social distancing in the kitchen during the operation of your restaurant. Sustainability in this environment means your dollars will matter more than ever: how you spend them, what you spend them on, and the way in which they are spent.

- Review your menu abstract to help determine how many menu items you actually need to provide, ensuring enough variety for your brand and customer base.

- Include considerations of contribution margin for each selected item in your menu review.
- Assess the number of ingredients needed across the selected items.
- Consider a Prix Fixe menu to help control costs and production time.
- Define a daily production schedule based on your revised menu to assist in social distancing during prep time as well as assisting in production time during peak periods. (e.g., sous vide).
- Review all new menu and food prep plans to determine if you need an HACCP Plan

## Taking Full Advantage of Available Demand with Restricted Restaurant Capacity

We've reached the point where the operation is ready to open the doors. Now the challenge is to move from planning to day-to-day business management.

Restaurants will be opening with restricted capacity to enable social distancing, which means you will be operating a "smaller" restaurant. Fewer seats can translate to lower revenues, specifically at peak operating times. Operations that successfully address this issue will achieve profitability and sustainability at a faster pace than the market in general.

- Align staffing parameters with customer demand and table turn goals.
- Ensure the sanitation plan that was developed during pre-opening is in place and clearly visible to the customers.
- Focus on how to reduce peaks while still taking advantage of total demand. This can be done with early bird specials, off-peak discounts, continued promotion of takeout business (get creative!).





*The road to success will have many pitfalls, but a systematic approach to planning, coupled with timely operating tools & data will help as we all get used to this “new normal.”*



- >  Drive total revenue by determining ways to reduce guest times at the table, or simply increase table turns while delivering a positive dining perception. Experience tells us that if your lunch meal period was historically 45 minutes, you can shave 5 to 8 minutes off without a backlash. For dinner, reducing table time by about 15% is feasible.

## Managing Back of the House Re-Opening

The kitchen presents unique challenges as restaurants contend with post-COVID-19 requirements. Social distancing and communicating from one shift to the next without requiring several people to handle the same paper will require adjustments to long-held work practices. Some of the key issues and actions are:

- Determine how to feed staff affordably while accommodating social distancing.
- Configure schedules to have the least possible number of people in the kitchen at the same time, yet get the work done to serve guests efficiently.

- Design staffing timelines based on a logistics assessment, determining the minimum number of staff needed to ensure service is not slowed down, while possibly getting some production in other areas.
- Cross-train team members to give you greater flexibility in scheduling and getting work done.

As restaurants re-enter the business world, operating considerations regarding COVID-19 concerns and restrictions combined with external issues will play a key role in determining the path to profitability. Restaurants will be opening before the full availability of some support services, such as childcare, which will create the need to accommodate staff availability issues. Ingenuity in scheduling to enable valuable team members to return to work is going to be a priority. The road to success will have many pitfalls, but a systematic approach to planning, coupled with timely operating tools and data will help as we all get used to this “new normal.”

While there is not a one-size-fits-all approach, we hope you have found this series of articles helpful in shining a light on potential issues and providing some ideas for addressing these challenges. 



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