

Car Hopping: Dine-in restaurants grapple with turning to takeout



At this point, your favorite restaurant has done one of two things. Either they've closed for the foreseeable future, or they've gone to curbside/takeout/delivery. Among those offering takeout, some are working to leverage inventory they built up or had in reserve, and you can expect them to stop offering takeout in the next few weeks when they run out of supplies. Others are making a pointed effort to keep as many of their workers employed as possible with sustainable takeout options - but still, going from dine-in to takeout means using a skeleton staff.

Off the record, we heard from quite a few operations that are seeing slower business than usual, even when measured against typical recent takeout business. With the economic uncertainty spreading at least as quickly as germs and the supermarkets getting a heavy work-out, many who might have typically eaten out are conserving either their funds or their exposure and cooking at home - but there may be enough activity during this bridge period to keep some of our favorite food shops alive. Here's what a few of the eateries we talked to told us:

Sicilia's Pizza, which normally does a brisk takeout and delivery trade with a more modest dine-in base is continuing takeout at their Federal Hill location:

"Things have been steady, but slower than usual," said the manager on duty. "The biggest surprise is we have a lot of people who don't know we're still doing takeout. We've gotten so many calls just asking if we're still open. I think once the word gets out, we'll get back close to normal."

GPub and the **Rooftop G**, which also manage **Sarto** restaurant in downtown PVD, have ceased operations for the duration of the quarantine:

"We took the steps on the Monday prior to the mandate, focusing on our employees, artists and partners and their safety. It's absolutely heartbreaking to lay off the majority of our really hard working employees. Right now, we're mostly thinking forward about how we can bring everyone back. When we do reopen, whenever that may be, how can we get the tourism and hospitality industry and live music

up and successful again. We had to cancel 45 events in March and the beginning of April. I'm still going a week at a time - it's a day-by-day situation. I'm thinking about the summer now, and it's definitely going to take a while for our industry to recover. Sports is also what the GPub is known for, and without any sports, if we can bring something back we'll be focusing on our other community activities - like retro video games and our comedy night that launched right before all this started.

"It's going to be hard, but one silver lining: I love to see so many people out there buying gift cards and supporting their local businesses as they can. It can't compare to being open for business, but there is a spirit of us all being in this together that's reassuring." - Brendan Chipley Roane, director of marketing and communications

Mike Delehanty, one of the owners of Providence's **Union Station**, **Barnaby's Public House** and **What Cheer? Tavern**, all known for their food but primarily for their libations, said it was a very difficult decision to close up shop temporarily at each location. What Cheer? is really, first, a neighborhood bar. Barnaby's has a top-tier chef they felt wouldn't make sense working on just a few takeout orders a night, and both Barnaby's and Union Station, while they have substantial local support, are really sustained by hotel customers. "The hotels are at about 10% of their usual occupancy. They have no customers for us right now. We had to make the decision to wait this out," he said [Note: In the time between that statement and publication, many have closed down completely for the time being].

Matunuck Oyster Bar in Wakefield has converted to takeout. We spoke to Perry Raso, owner of the renowned dine-in establishment.

"It's different. We've converted our dining area into a mission control center where we process orders. And we're down to a very reduced staff, so my GM is doing the dishes right now, My chef's cleaning the blower and I'm wrapping fish. It's like starting a new business. Everything's changed and we're trying to figure it out." How are their customers reacting? "It's not very busy yet, but it's something we're hoping to be able to build on. It's mostly curbside pickup. We've always offered that."

Even the **Capital Grille** is experimenting with takeout and is open for pickup orders. Staff are prohibited from talking to the press and spokespeople for the corporation could not be reached for comment, but fine dining staff have been furloughed. One who spoke with us off the record was finding a silver lining in an enforced vacation, making plans to go backwoods for a while and "get away from all this."

Revival's and **Troop's** (in Cranston and Providence, respectively) Sean Larkin spoke with *Motif* right before all dine-in restaurants were ordered closed. At that time, they were carefully weighing their commitment to keeping employees employed and their commitment to be as safe as possible for everyone. Their plan was to let each worker make their own decision about whether to work, so no one was cut off. Then the mandate went into place and they switched to full takeout. We asked how takeout was going so far:

"It's modest at best - it's not super busy, because we're not a takeout restaurant, but we came together with a takeout menu pretty quickly and we're going to do the best that we can to keep it going." Do you think people know you have takeout as an option? "I think our followers know we have takeout, especially through social media, but I think a lot of people have to consider their economic situation now. Takeout is really a way for us to keep the restaurant open and keep some of our employees working and earning a living. As long as we're not losing money, we will keep this going as long as we can." Larkin is most interested in knowing how the state plans to repeal the ban - what's the plan to get

people back out safely?

What about the most mobile members of our culinary scene, the food trucks? We asked Eric Weiner of **PVD Food Truck Events** and **FoodTrucksIn**. We learned that some with regular spots are still trucking along. “They’re trying to figure it out. Some of them are trying to figure out if they can do delivery. But those conversations are just starting out. Those with trucks and physical locations are definitely moving to curbside and using their trucks to do that.

“For [PVD Food Truck Events], we don’t sell tickets or have contracts with talent or pay rent in advance. So we can be really flexible. Right now, we’re looking 10 to 14 days out and canceling as we go. I haven’t canceled April events yet. I think the next two weeks will really make clear what those decisions need to be. All the events food trucks were servicing. They’re taking it with humility - they know their season doesn’t usually start until May. But many of those big events they’re typically a part of require a lot of planning, and they’re calling those off for April and May, so the trucks will lose a lot of their events, even if the mandates are removed.”

How all this will continue to evolve is anyone’s guess, and of course it depends on how long measures stay in place. But if your taste buds are aching for some culinary treats, don’t forget to look to the curb.

Eat Drink RI is attempting to maintain a list of restaurants open for takeout - it’s sure to be changing fast. Check it out at eatdrinkri.com/2020/03/18/restaurants-with-online-ordering-and-take-out