

True North: The story of North restaurant's response to COVID

"As a restaurant, we've never made any money ... ever. So [the pandemic's financial strain] is less scary because we're used to the task of running at the edge of a broken system. I don't want to exploit people or put up financial barriers for customers to access the experience/culture we're creating. And that's always been my choice."

James Mark, the owner of **north** restaurant and **big king** tells the story of the year 2020. He took action before the state required it and remained steadfast in his resolve to remain take-out only, even when the state opened again (and then closed again). I recently spoke with him about how his values and his business coexisted in the midst of a pandemic.

"The year 2020 started really, really well for us. January and February had much better sales than in years past. We've spent the last eight years building and expanding — each year it was something new — so it felt like *finally* it was going to be a good year.

"We were paying attention to what was happening in Europe and Asia, and the severity caught me off guard. We all kind of thought, 'Yeah, that would suck, but I'm not too worried about it.'

"Then you start seeing the death tolls, and it becomes serious.

"Three days before the state shut everything down, I was working at big king on the floor. I remember talking to guests — students at Brown — who were interested in sake. Then later that night I was looking on the computer at the news and saw confirmed cases at Brown University — and that's when it hit."

Mark's restaurant model is built around face-to-face seating. "That's intentional," he explained, "because we believe in human connections. But this is an airborne virus and it's incredibly dangerous for myself and my staff. That night we shut everything down. We did double our normal business that night, but there was no other choice.

"We took a week to decompress and think about what being closed means. I immediately got everyone into unemployment before the system got overloaded.

"After a week, Andrew, my chef at north, asked, 'How do you feel about takeout?' We knew we wanted to do takeout, and there was a ton of support [in the community] for it, but it was scary because around town you'd see lines of people forming. We didn't want that, so we scheduled pick-ups so there was only one pick-up every 15 minutes. This helped us feel more comfortable from a community safety standpoint.

"This approach also let us run the restaurant with fewer people — not so we could save costs, but so we could spread people out. It just made sense on a whole bunch of safety levels."

They started their takeout format with a small menu for big king. "After we realized it was working," Mark said, "we started the same system at north. We rehired about 80% of our full-time staff, keeping

them at pre-COVID wages or higher. That's huge for us, and we're proud of that."

Regarding future plans, James Mark says, "Fifty percent of our staff is vaccinated. By summer, hopefully 100% will be. But it's still tricky, indoor dining. I have questions surrounding community spread. Do I want to be responsible if a spread event happens among guests, even if my staff are safe? It seems unlikely that big king can open, but north, maybe in the summer we can take over the parking spots in front [on Fountain St.] That will allow us to do a lot."

In addition, north has always included a financial contribution as part of their business model. When their sales decreased due to COVID, the north and big king team still found ways to give back.

"In 2013 I read a book by the original owner of Mission Chinese Food in San Francisco, Anthony Myint, and his wife, Karen. Part of what Mission did was collect 25 cents on every dish they sold, and they donated it to the local food bank. He talked about using his business to affect the community in a positive way — that it could be more than just a transaction between customer and business owner. I found it eye opening. So from the beginning, a portion of sales from each plate went to the Amos House or the food bank.

"During COVID I got involved with activist groups in the city, and learned that there are hungry people downtown every weekend who aren't benefiting from non-profits. It got me thinking: There are multiple levels of hunger that need to be addressed, and it inspired me to do something. For the last eight months, we've been cooking 50 to 60 meals every Monday and walking them down to Kennedy Plaza. This doesn't address *underlying* problems and conditions, but if the work we do is a Band-Aid, people still need a Band-Aid."

When I asked Mark if he's accepting donations for the Monday meals, he said yes, but his most important suggestion was to "organize yourselves. Meet your neighbors. If you band together with your neighbors, can you address an issue in your neighborhood? Learn to talk to your neighbors. We're simultaneously more connected and less connected than ever before."

At the end of the story, it all comes down to values. Here are James Mark's top three.

"It's important to not devalue the work that people do in the restaurant industry. Paying our staff a real wage has always been important to me.

"Second is the culture, and the work that produces culture: food that facilitates conversation, inspires new things, opens people up to try new things and leaves them feeling happy.

"But we value, number one, the people who work for us. They give their time and their life to the restaurant. The first thing in my head when deciding how to do takeout was, 'How do we keep ourselves safe?' If no one dies, no one's family gets sick, then I've won. I've beat this pandemic. There's no dollar value to assign to someone's life, and I will always put them first."