

Surviving and Thriving: Vegan, vegetarian eateries face the pandemic in PVD and Pawtucket



Prior to the pandemic, you could often find Rob and Uschi Yaffe seated at the end of a long, reclaimed wood table in the middle of their casual fine dining restaurant, the Grange. The brunch rush bustling around them; mason jars filled with sweet tea and tart lemon wedges or strawberry and peanut butter smoothies are delivered on trays to each table of the dining room. Servers slip through the archway to the kitchen, carrying out hot plates filled with spicy home fries and vibrant green avocado toast. The Grange presents each diner with a down home, farm-to-table vegetarian meal in a comfortable, nostalgic environment.

The Grange is just one of three storefronts owned by Rob and Uschi. Along with vegetarian food spot Garden Grille and vegan bakery Wildflour, they support the ever-growing group of people with vegan and vegetarian lifestyles in Providence and Pawtucket. At the heart of the Yaffes' businesses is their desire to foster the beliefs and values of the people of Rhode Island. "It's always about the community. It's always around the core value of what does the community want? What do they need? What's not being done?" Rob said. All three of their restaurant spaces are full of soul and spirit, each one welcoming and nostalgic. Rob and Uschi hope to continue to foster this growing community, but the COVID-19 pandemic has created a whole new world of challenges in carrying on this vision.

When whispers of a virus afflicting China reached the East Coast, it was easy to feel the problem was far away. That was until early March, when managers first starting hearing about employees feeling unsafe coming to work. Prior to the official shutdown of dine-in restaurants and bars, Rob held a meeting to discuss next steps; it was obvious the virus was spreading. "It was a Monday, we were having a meeting of what are we doing? What's the best thing for safety of staff and customers?" Rob said. "And we were like shut them all down." That same day, March 16, 2020, Governor Raimondo officially announced the closing of bars and restaurants.

The food service industry as a whole has been hit hard by the pandemic, but the Yaffes' businesses are finding their way through the challenges. They've supported their employees, helping feed them and their families as well as covering health insurance through the first month of the pandemic. They also received assistance from grant money, and fortunately are still making a profit amidst reopening. "Both Wildflour and Garden Grille are still strong enough to make a little bit of profit during COVID," Rob said. "Right there that's something I'm unbelievably grateful for. If you can make money during a pandemic, that's quite a business that we've all created." But Rob says every day is still a challenge.

In addition to financial struggles, the pandemic has taken an emotional toll on restaurant owners. "There is no coming together as community anymore, we don't have gathering places anymore," Rob said. "For me it was all about bringing people together, connection, creativity, just that buzz of human activity and community building."

Prior to the pandemic, it was incredibly common to see Rob and Uschi bouncing about their eateries, greeting customers with hugs and handshakes, warm smiles and easy conversation. For a while Rob tried to maintain this relational aspect, standing outside the restaurants during business hours each day to greet customers coming and going. "My connection to the businesses were always relational. When you go for a pickup it becomes transactional. So I had this need to add some kind of relational aspect to it, and I did that for six or seven weeks ... but not having that initial facial recognition and contact, no shaking hands or giving a hug, you lose that sense of bonding that makes the conversation flow," Rob said.

By the end of April, early May, Rob hit his breaking point. "All my passion, all my vision, all my

everything, just vaporized," Rob said. While the Yaffes' still own their businesses, they have largely stepped away from operations, leaving the restaurants to their reliable managers Jon Dille and Deanna Lockhard. "I'm very grateful for the staff and Jon and Deanna for what they are doing," Rob said. "We had a core group of people that really came in with the intention of let's come together and make this work, and I'm very grateful for the people who came in with that frame of mind."

The businesses continue to find ways to reach their customers and foster community, though challenges still arise. "Customers coming in for the most part are fine, they're good, but everyday you're dealing with people who don't accept the rules and the new way of procedures on how to keep things safe. Then you've also got staff that don't feel safe working." The restaurants require customers wear masks and encourage frequent handwashing. For employees, masks, frequent handwashing and health checks are in place.

The Grange, Garden Grille and Wildflour are serving the community as best they can given the times. Currently, all three restaurants are open for takeout, and the Grange and Garden Grille offer outdoor dining options. As far as indoor dining and delivery, the restaurants don't currently see these options becoming available anytime soon. "We're not going to open up, at least not now. I don't think it's cool, I don't think it's safe," Rob said. "I think this period that we're in, it's going to pass in a year or two. The whole emergency crisis part of it will be over." Until then, the restaurants will continue with social distancing measures, so remember to wash your hands and wear your mask on your next trip to the Grange, Garden Grille, or Wildflour.