

The Dine-In Revival

[Music]

With the recent easing of North Carolina's stay-at-home orders, restaurants across our state are reopening their dining rooms.

What will it take for these restaurants to right themselves? What are they doing to watch out for their customers and their employees as they reopen? And what can *you* do to help keep yourself and your community stay safe and healthy should you go out?

These are the questions we'll explore in this episode of Farms, Food and You, a podcast from NC State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

I'm Dee Shore, and in this episode, we'll hear from a successful Raleigh restaurant owner, a leading North Carolina economist, and two NC State Extension food safety experts. They all agree that successful and sustainable restaurant reopening will mean change – change on the part of restaurants, and change on the part of their customers.

[Music]

Back in February, Greg Hatem suspected something wasn't right, but he didn't know yet how bad it would become.

The World Health Organization had named that thing COVID-19, and Hatem, the founding force behind The Pit and several other Raleigh restaurants, had taken notice.

[Greg Hatem]

We actually reconfigured our restaurant seating after the first week in March and took out a bunch of tables and chairs. We put up posters from the W-H-O, guidelines about handwashing and so forth, thinking that that would be the new norm.

His uncle had once been an epidemiologist in China, and maybe that's what dialed Hatem into the looming threat. Whatever the reason, he took it seriously.

[Hatem]

St. Patrick's Day weekend, we limited people coming into the restaurant because we wanted to stem the tide of this thing that was coming. So we were trying to be responsible there, and then by the 17th, you know, everything just shut down.

That was when North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper ordered bars and dine-in restaurants to close. Looking back, Mike Walden, a distinguished professor and NC State economist, calls the effect traumatic.

[Mike Walden]

They have imposed a shutdown for restaurants because of the concern, the very valid concern, about wanting to limit the ability of people to gather in rather close spaces and stay in that gathering for a long period of time. When you shut those down, that creates a big trauma in the food distribution system.

As Walden explains, dining out had become a much more significant part of our nation's food system than it was when he was growing up in the 1950s. Back then, you only went out to eat when it came time to celebrate life's milestones. However, in coming years, the economist saw eating out gradually become part of our everyday routine – and an increasingly integral part of our economy.

[Walden]

In North Carolina ... we've seen restaurants growing and growing. We think that younger generations, Millennials – the Generation Z behind them – probably are even more prone to eat out rather than fix things at home. So, the whole way that people obtain their food ... changed dramatically in just the last two or three decades.

So much so that, over the past 10 years, we've been spending more than half of our food dollars for eating away from home, and by 2019, an estimated one in 10 working Americans held restaurant jobs.

The growth of the restaurant industry didn't happen suddenly. However, changes forced by COVID-19 did. In late April, the National Restaurant Association reported that two-thirds of the nation's restaurant employees had lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

North Carolina's industry has been gradually coming back to life since May 22. That's when the state moved from "Stay-at-Home" orders to "Safer-at-Home" guidelines. Restaurants were allowed to reopen to dine-in customers, but they had to limit their dining rooms to 50% of their capacity.

Last week, at The Pit, hosts, waiters, and managers – all wearing masks – practiced protocols for reopening the restaurant.

[Exchange]

Adam: "Welcome in, you guys. Glad you all could join us today. My name is Adam, and I'll be serving you guys. Can I get you guys started with some drinks?"

Dee: "Yeah, we'll have some water, please."

Adam: "Can I grab you guys some bags while I'm over here for your masks?"

Male: "That's a great idea. Thank you."

Adam: "Certainly, I'll be right back with that."

In the lead-up to its restaurants' reopening, Hatem's company has taken part in a voluntary public health initiative called Count on Me NC.

North Carolina State Extension's Natalie Seymour, Mary Yavelak and Ben Chapman played a big role in establishing and carrying out the effort. Seymour explains that Count on Me evolved as a partnership.

[Natalie Seymour]

... North Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association went to North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and asked for funding for a program that would provide training for businesses so they know best practices in reopening when you have relaxed restrictions, but then also part of the program is to educate guests or customers on what they can do to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 as well.

Extension's food safety team and information technology experts developed and manage the training, built an interactive website and issue certificates.

[Seymour]

So far we've had over 7,389 certificates issued. These are personalized certificates generated based off the participant, and those folks account for over 6,000 unique businesses. The response has been really encouraging to see – that there are this many business owners who want to protect their customers.

Count on Me NC touches not just restaurants but also the lodging and tourism industries. Chapman, a nationally known food safety expert at NC State, explains what customers can expect when they see the certificate or the program logo in a restaurant.

[Chapman]

Number one is really thinking very closely about their employees' health and how their employees' health impacts their patrons' health: Evaluating temperatures. Making sure that any staff members who have been in contact with someone with COVID-19 as a positive case, that that information is passed directly to the health department, that those individuals aren't in the businesses. Encouraging their employees to practice good hand hygiene, whether that be hand washing or hand sanitizing. And really focusing on the number one risk that we have in this pandemic, which is being around other people and focusing on their employees' role in reducing that.

The next part of the pledge, I think, comes to social and physical distancing – really evaluating their site for practical ways to reduce the collision points for individuals. And we talk, in academia and I think in the corporate world, about trying to create these collision spaces so

ideas can happen. What we're really trying to do in social distancing and physical distancing is avoid that at all costs. In some cases, that means removing booths and tables, reducing the seating. In other cases, changing how service happens.

Another big bucket in the pledge is cleaning and disinfecting high-touch surfaces and really understanding what the right compounds are that will reduce risks around COVID-19 and how to use them, and the difference between cleaning, and sanitizing and disinfection.

And then I guess, the last part of the pledge is the communication and sharing information about, "Hey, as a business operator, this is what I'm doing. And here are the expectations that we have for you as a patron; here's what you can expect from us."

I've gone over sort of those business expectations, but the expectations from a patron's standpoint is along the same lines of, if you're ill, if you're displaying symptoms, there are other ways for us to get you food. Really encouraging cloth face coverings and other masks, for both patrons as well as staff, as a hurdle for transmission of the virus.

Chapman has a few other recommendations for restaurant patrons.

[Chapman]

And I guess I'm a little bit biased being part of the team on Count On Me NC, but I think the first thing that diners can do is look for the sticker, look for the certificate. Look for the information that the business they're going to has taken the courses that we've developed, that they've really taken the pledge to follow best practices ... If they're going to a business and they don't see that – the marketing materials, and the Count On Me NC badge – to really encourage those businesses to investigate it and go take that training.

Beyond that, I think as I mentioned before, really the importance of hand hygiene, hand sanitizing. If people do have symptoms, that they're staying out of public. And if they're in a public setting, even if they're symptom-free, knowing that asymptomatic carriers of this virus are a problem that we understand more and more as the outbreak continues; that they're doing what they can to protect others by wearing cloth face masks and capturing virus particles that might be in moisture droplets as they talk or laugh. ... And so doing all they can to follow social distancing and physical distancing guidance, but also wearing masks and making sure their hands are clean and sanitized.

Mike Walden says that such practices are fundamental to economic recovery. How soon that recovery occurs will depend on two things, he says.

[Walden]

One is, do people behave when the recommendation is you wear masks and you keep social distancing, et cetera – are people going to follow those rules? And what if they don't? We need to have people behave, follow rules. ...

Number two, we need to have people feel safe. People are going to have to be convinced that they can go out to restaurants, they can go out to other things, go out to stores, and they need to feel safe. And I know businesses are working very, very hard in doing that.

Hatem says that the latter is especially important for The Pit and its sister restaurants, including Sitti, Gravy, the Mecca Restaurant, the Raleigh Times and the Morning Times.

However, instilling a sense of safety is just a beginning step toward a larger goal.

[Hatem]

It's not just about delivering food. We can do that at the door. But it's about giving people this mini-vacation from all that they're going through right now. Providing them the hospitality that we normally provide, and doing it in a safe way. And not just a safe way, but a safe way that they're very comfortable with. So that's the goal.

Getting there won't be easy or quick, he adds.

[Hatem]

The biggest issue – or an important issue – is that this is going to take a long time. This is a marathon. We're in here for months and months and months. And if we do this properly, and we engage each other properly, we can stay open.

If we don't, then we're going to have these spikes again, and we may have to start going backwards. And nobody wants that.

And we can control this. If we do what we're supposed to do with distancing, face coverings and washing our hands, we can get through this and minimize the impact.

[Hatem]

The fascinating thing about this disease is, it doesn't have legs. It's not even alive; it's a virus. So we have to, in some way, go get it – or have someone bring it to us. So if we stick to these measures, social distancing, small crowds, wash our hands, wear a mask or face covering, we are going to do a lot towards making this go away. And that's what we need to do – stem the tide until we can get a vaccine and start the healing process of creating some sense of normalcy over the next few years.

[Music]

Thanks for listening to this episode of Farms, Food and You, brought to you by North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Learn more about the college and our podcast at go.ncsu.edu/farms. And share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like us to explore in the future.

[Music]
