

How Small Town Restaurants Have Survived The Pandemic

By Jack Waller

According to [Pr News Wire](#) as of March 29th, 2021 “Of the 778,807 food establishments in operation since the onset of COVID-19, 79,438 have closed for good,” indicating that around ten percent of restaurants nationally shut down in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020.

Over the course of the year ORLA ([Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association](#)) made updates, this is their most recent update (it was made in April of 2021) “On top of last year’s closings, ORLA said 200 dining establishments have closed in 2021 so far, including 190 in March”

The Dalles, Oregon also had to weather the storms of COVID-19, but did they do it more successfully than places like Hood River, Oregon or White Salmon, Washington?

Many restaurants in The Dalles have been able to navigate the pandemic and stay open through a range of strategies, however, that doesn’t mean all of The Dalles survived. Places like [Clock Tower Ales](#) have not been able to reopen until January of 2021, however, the majority of restaurants locally have been able to survive so far.

Lisa Farquharson, the Business Developer for [The Dalles Chamber of Commerce](#), talked about how the Chamber of Commerce has tried to support local restaurants “During the pandemic one of the biggest things that we (The Dalles Chamber of Commerce) did was trying to raise the awareness and get our locals to support (local businesses) by creating ... social media” said Farquharson.

“First, we did it on our website. ‘These are all the businesses that are open; here’s the phone numbers to call them; here’s their menus for curbside pickup or takeout;’ and trying to remind people that they were here and how they could support those through this.”

Some places though, like [Cousins'](#), took advantage of people being cautious, said Farquharson. They added outdoor seating in their barn and now it's part of their country theme.

Two more places took advantage of outdoor seating; [Bargeway](#) and [Momma Jane's Pancake House](#). Momma Jane's added tents and heating so people could eat outside but remain warm, and Bargeway added fire pits so people could stay warm.

According to Farquharson, "There was some ordinances and they were saying 'You can regulate who can come into your restaurant by who's vaccinated and not vaccinated.' That put our frontline (workers) in a position you do not want to put (them in), and that's a lot of liability and lawsuits waiting to happen. So the chamber went to bat, all of our chambers across the state went to bat, to the Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association along with the Oregon State Chamber. And then we talked to all our legislations saying 'That is not a good one, you need to do something different and protect our restaurants.'"

Marten Boyden is the owner of [Kainos Coffee](#) and had to adapt to the challenges of COVID, including dealing with only having 1-2 people working at a time due to financial restrictions. Some of the challenges he had to face are included, running out of sixteen ounce cups, coffee, and meat. Additionally, he had to deal with paying his employees which became difficult, because he didn't have the money to pay himself.

During the pandemic Boyden lost seventy percent of his daily customers. His overall loss for the year was \$160,000, which made the pandemic even scarier for him.

"In a lot of ways the coffee industry wasn't hit as hard as some others though," stated Boyden, "because coffee is already so commonly served to-go."

Noah Blakely is the owner of [The Riv](#), and had to adapt to the same challenges as Boyden. A strategy he used was using the pandemic as an

excuse to improve the café. “We renovated we didn’t intend to, we just had water damage. So we ended up remodeling the entire café, putting a new espresso bar in, putting a new floor in, and we’re hoping to do some outside stuff.” During the remodeling his employees were paid, due to his insurance paying for three months of cost. Blakely also had to adapt to food only being available through takeout, but did it in a clever way. “When we first found out that it was going to be only takeout we thought ‘Okay let’s offer free delivery so that people are incentivized to use us compared to other restaurants that don’t offer delivery at all and if they do offer delivery it’s expensive.’ So [...] that was our biggest adaptation, cause we’re kinda known as a take-out lunch spot already for the working class in The Dalles.”

Blakely’s restaurant survived the pandemic, but it may have been because of an ability that The Dalles has that Hood River doesn’t “Actually I know a lot of the restaurant owners in The Dalles and something that the majority of restaurant owners here compared to other places bank on is regulars and other places specifically like Hood River, they bank on tourism during the summer. So that’s their peak and it kinda floats the rest of the year. As where we don’t really bank on a bunch of people coming for the summer, so I think The Dalles has a special ability to kind of weather these storms.”

“There are a lot of good things happening. The community has really come together in a lot of ways to support local businesses, I think they realized how quickly they could lose them.” continued Boyden “Being in a small town like this for so many years they realize, if we don’t support them they won’t be here, and yet they want them here, so they have to be the ones to step up and support us. Luckily we had a lot of people who were willing to do that.”

