

Virus Orders Leave Restaurants, Retailers Scrambling

*Takeout Options Could Serve Customers,
Retain Sales*

Colin A. Young 3/16/20 4:54 PM

BOSTON, MARCH 16, 2020.....Across Massachusetts, restaurateurs are swapping dining room china and silverware for to-go containers and plastic cutlery as they

prepare to transform their restaurants into take-out and delivery-only operations for about the next three weeks as the state tries to block the spread of the coronavirus.

With the highly-contagious virus now spreading without a trace back to an original source in seven counties of the state, Gov. Charlie Baker on Sunday banned gatherings of 25 people or more and mandated that all restaurants and bars transition to takeout- or delivery-only until April 6 to prevent the congregation of people.

Since that announcement, restaurant and business owners have been adjusting to the reality that restaurant dining is going away and consumers won't be shopping as much as they would be if it weren't for the pandemic. In a newsletter Monday morning, the Kendall Square Association said that a survey of its members found that "the restaurant and retail community has seen as much as a 75% drop in sales."

The Mass. Restaurant Association said the last few days "have been some of the most stressful and anxiety-ridden days our industry has faced in recent memory and possibly ever," and that restaurants are using Monday to streamline operations and maximize take-out and delivery options once Baker's ban on on-premises consumption takes effect Tuesday.

The association has made a webpage with [information and resources](#) for restaurants available and is working with operators as they navigate the uncertainty.

"There is no blueprint for what we are all dealing with, but I am confident that we are the most resilient industry regardless of the challenges thrown at us and I know we will all come out on the other side of this," association vice president of government affairs Stephen Clark said. "Operators are streamlining operations, menus and dining rooms to maximize delivery and take out, both in an effort to stay open, but also meet the critical need of feeding customers."

Rep. Aaron Michlewitz, the House Ways and Means chairman who represents Boston's North End, said he agrees with Baker's decision to ban restaurant dining and pledged that the House will work to support workers in the food service industry.

"Representing the restaurant capital of the Commonwealth, I agree w/ @MassGovernor's difficult decision to restrict bars/restaurants to take out & deliveries..public safety must come first



in these difficult times..my heart goes out to all those in the service industry," [Michlewitz tweeted](#) Sunday.

The South End Buttery, a coffee shop and bakery in Boston's South End that also serves a sit-down dinner, [announced](#) how it plans to adapt over the next few weeks: by shifting servers into other roles to limit job losses, making its dinner menu available for pick-up each night and agreeing to bring take-out orders out to the curb so customers don't have to come into the restaurant.

"As a significant employer in the South End we feel we have a responsibility to keep the Buttery as fully operational as possible without exposing anyone to unnecessary risk. By redeploying our front-of-house team members towards delivery and take-home offerings we hope to minimize staffing level cuts," owners Andrew Barker and Richard Gordon wrote to customers. "Many of our employees earn a significant proportion of their household income from their work at the Buttery and losing that income in the current environment would be devastating."

For retailers, it's "feast or famine," said Jon Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts. Hurst said some businesses like convenience stores and food sellers will make do, but that clothing retailers and small businesses that rely on impulse buys saw their sales go "right off a cliff" in recent days.

"These small businesses, they have high commercial rents and they have mandated payroll and insurance coverages and the like that aren't going away, and at the same time they're getting no sales," Hurst said. "I'm concerned the longer this thing goes the more -- particularly with small businesses -- we are going to see failure rates come summertime."

Hurst said he expects consumers will continue to spend some money, "but a lot of it is getting shipped to the front doorstep" by large box stores or giant internet sellers.

"Don't get me wrong, I think no matter if you're a big seller or a small seller you've got to get into that world now," he said. "But not every particularly small business has that app on their customer's smartphone and the ability for delivery. Ultimately, they need to get there."

Trident Booksellers & Cafe on Boston's Newbury Street straddles the line of restaurateur and retailer. The [bookstore and cafe announced](#) that it will remain open for delivery and takeout, and that it will include a free book with every order.

"Remember to take care of yourself during this time of isolation. We are here to help you eat well and escape in the pages of a book," the company wrote on Twitter. Trident said it will try to match the book to the customer's taste if they write a note about what they look for in a book when they place an order.

Hingham Lumber Company told customers in an email that it is "temporarily lowering our minimum order for free delivery to \$100 to help in moments where smaller orders may be required to satisfy a need. To help us meet the higher demand for deliveries, we will utilize additional vehicles to maintain quick turn-around time."

Hurst suggested that state lawmakers consider moving up the state's sales tax holiday from August to sometime in the next few months to spur more consumer spending to help businesses affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

"When we're starting to come out of this -- I don't know if that's April or May or whatever -- but that's something to think about," he said. "I think that is something we should consider for whatever is the right time, whenever consumers feel comfortable going back out and spending and the stores are all open."

He added, "that would be a good message from government."

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