

Coronavirus Could Change Restaurants Forever — Here's What Chefs and Owners Have to Say

Industry leaders predict what we'll see in a post-coronavirus dining landscape.

BY REGAN STEPHENS / FOODANDWINE.COM | APRIL 24, 2020



The coronavirus touched down in the U.S. early this year, and by mid-March, restaurants across the country were suddenly and almost entirely shuttered. The pandemic decimated, in one cruel swoop, an industry that employs more than 15 million people, and was projected to do \$899 billion in sales this year. Chefs, who are ordinarily consumed by the relentless pace of restaurant work, suddenly have the time to think about what the industry might look like after all of this when it's safe to reopen.

We spoke with dozens of chefs and restaurant owners about what comes next. Thoughts ranged from the practical—disposable menus, added cleaning protocols, increased takeout options—to bigger picture revisions, like enhanced safety nets for restaurant workers and broader acceptance of no-tipping policies. Jon Nodler, chef and co-owner of Cadence, *Food & Wine*'s Best New Restaurant of 2019, is among those who hopes the crisis sparks an industry-wide change.

“We can't keep running this traditional model, the food and labor costs, and the pressure put on people,” he says. “I hope that restaurant owners, and everyone working in restaurants, is using this as a time to evaluate how to come back to it.”

With Americans longing to dine in restaurants again and eager to support their favorite spots, now might be the best time to reset the rules. Read on for what these industry insiders predict (and hope, and fear) might come when restaurants re-open.

Enhanced sanitary measures and safety protocols

“It won't be a huge flow, but a trickle back into dining out or being around large groups of people in small spaces. We'll probably be opening at 50% capacity, and then people getting used to going out again, and being okay with being around other people and in the restaurant, and you're gonna have to adapt to that. And that may look like **single-use menus, silverware being sealed in some sort of pouch, maybe a sign saying that tables have been sanitized** before and after people sit down. Maybe servers are wearing gloves and masks at the table.” – *Kwame Onwuachi, executive chef of Kith/Kin in Washington, DC*

More protections for workers

“To predict how the industry is going to look after this is all over is a tough feat. But it reminds me of when I first started culinary school. It was 2008 and the recession was at full speed. It was so difficult to think about job searching and how a career in culinary would look. Jobs all around us started to close. Pay was reduced to unlivable wages and so many folks were displaced. I think the grandeur of our industry will now be stripped away just like it was in ‘08. And quite frankly, pastry will be put into a corner yet again like it was during the recession. My hope is, though, that through this major event we can now see our mistakes from ‘08, where we went wrong and how we failed our cooks, our stewards and our industry family. In 2008 we should have set up failsafes to protect staff and give an honorable and living wage to our workers, the true backbone of our industry. Today, **I hope that we learn from our mistakes and make sure to provide and equitably take care of the folks that really make our dreams possible.** Rebuilding will be hard, but not impossible. But this time let’s do it the right way.” –Paola Velez, executive pastry chef of [Kith/Kin](#) in Washington, DC