Restaurants in the Time of COVID-19

Adaptations & increased social responsibility

Andrea Zick, OXO Tower Restaurant, Bar and Brasserie, London, and **Sue Reeves,** University of Roehampton, London, UK

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected individuals and businesses, including those in the restaurant and hospitality industry. This situation has revealed issues of food poverty and highlighted a role where restaurants can consider their social responsibilities and work alongside communities and the wider food network. Knowledge newly gleaned about the food systems in the UK can now be used to help ensure that even the most vulnerable have access to a secure and affordable food supply.

Background

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is caused by the virus strain known as SARS-COV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome cornonavirus-2) and is an infectious disease that causes respiratory illness and a whole range of symptoms including a dry cough, difficulty breathing, temperature, loss of taste and smell.[1] The World Health Organization[2] declared it was a public health emergency of international concern and officially characterised it as a pandemic on the 11 March 2020.[3] COVID-19 is primarily spread through droplets of saliva or nasal discharge from coughs and sneezes in infected people. Whilst trials for a vaccine are still on going the main aim is to prevent and slow down transmission, by avoiding close contact with other people and frequent hand washing for a minimum of 20 seconds.[4]

The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 appeared in the UK on the 31 January 2020.[5] By the 16 March the Prime Minister of the UK advised everyone in the UK against non-essential travel and suggested people avoid pubs and restaurants. On the 20 March, cafés, pubs and restaurants were told to close with the exception of takeaways,[6] and on the 23 March the nation was told to stay at home except for very limited purposes, such as for food, medicine and exercise.[7]

Government data suggested a third of private sector employees have been furloughed[8] and the closure of businesses is likely driving an economic downturn, with many industries unable to reclaim lost revenue as their profits are transient and driven by occupancy and frequency of usage (i.e. hotels, leisure parks, rental companies, events businesses, restaurants, canteens).

The most badly affected sectors were reported as being accommodation and food services, followed by retail and transport.[9] The lockdown also affected markets, wholesalers and the workforce needed to produce, distribute and sell foods; this had a direct knock-on effect on the food system, and there were even reports of vegetables rotting in the fields and milk being thrown away.[10]

At the same time, families in the UK were experiencing the most severe economic contraction in more than a century.[8] Some early studies indicated the economic crisis associated with COVID-19 was driving food insecurity,[11] poor mental health, affecting wellbeing,[12] and is likely to lead to higher levels of unemployment.[9] Power *et al*.[13] argue that COVID-19 has exposed inequalities in the UK food system and exacerbated health inequalities.

The restaurant industry response

The lockdown of the UK obviously took a huge toll on many, including those who work in the food, hospitality and restaurant industry who needed to adapt and, in many cases, change their whole business model. Many started to respond to the local context and their clients.[14] A number of businesses switched to takeaways and deliveries, others connected suppliers directly to customers with seasonal vegetable boxes and or recipe kits. Other restaurants turned into shops, selling ingredients and/or refrigerated ready-meals,[15] or became online shops.[16] In addition, many proactively engaged with corporate social responsibility.[17] To ensure food was not wasted, some donated their supplies to distribution charities and community kitchens.[18]

Other examples included providing discounts for key workers and delivering hot meals directly to hospitals.[21] Many restaurants began fundraising to be able to keep their staff employed, or engaged on a voluntary basis, whilst creating meals that could be delivered to NHS staff or to vulnerable people.[18] For example, those with suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19 who were in isolation in their homes for two weeks quarantine, older adults, and those with underlying health conditions and whom were immunosuppressed and needed to be shielded, as well as those whose livelihoods had been affected and had difficulties accessing food.[22] In some cases food was being directly distributed to households, as well as facilities such as schools, libraries and food collection hubs or food banks. London, for example, strengthened the food aid system and coordinated a decentralised approach through the London Food Alliance.[23] In this way it was possible to provide meals through the school meals programme and at dedicated food kitchens in local neighbourhoods, to help feed those on low incomes and/or unable to work.

A central London restaurant turned itself into a community kitchen. This large restaurant based in Southwark, London, employs around 200 people, however during the height of the pandemic around 95% of the team were put on the government furlough scheme. Employees were permitted to volunteer their time and so were able to support community initiatives with some colleagues working in local community kitchens/projects. Furthermore, although normally serving anything between 3,000 and 5,000 meals per week, for the first few weeks of the lockdown the kitchens were lying idle. In an attempt to rectify this, initially a food box delivery scheme was set up. However, the General Manager asked his director if the kitchens could be used to cook meals for vulnerable people in the community. After approval to use the space and equipment, the search for funding and people in need began. Through the Corporate Social Responsibility Lead, a number of charities, community contacts and council representatives were contacted. The first trial shift to cook 30 meals (starter, main and dessert) was completed on the 30 May 2020. A further trial was implemented to increase this to 120 meals three times a week, and from then on, the numbers grew each week.

Ingredients were predominately donated, and a few organisations were able to purchase additional ingredients from grants for these purposes. Packaging was donated or paid for by the benefiting organisations. The team were able to donate and work alongside charities, including Streetskitchen, Feast with Us, Coin Street Community, Tennis2Be and Foodcycle Lewisham. 2,290 meals were being cooked and distributed to local charities per week and by the 19 July 2020 the restaurant had cooked over 10,000 meals.

Through schemes such as this, restaurants and their teams have been able to utilise their skills and work together with community groups and charities whilst avoiding food waste.

Now and in the future

It has been claimed that restaurants may never be the same after coronavirus.[22] As of the 4 July – 'Super Saturday' as it was dubbed – restaurants and pubs were allowed to reopen in the UK. During August, Monday to Wednesday, the Government reduced the price of restaurant food and non-alcoholic drinks by 50%, up to a value of £10, in a bid to encourage people to 'eat out to help out' and support the hospitality industry.[23]

Restaurants still need to consider how they can operate safely – for example, requesting contact details from diners, hand gels on tables, disposable condiments, increased distances between tables, improved ventilation and outdoor seating.[24, 25]

However, this pandemic has highlighted the importance of community and the role that restaurants and the hospitality industry can play. Food hubs are currently reviewing the community food distribution network and assessing future need and capacity, and new start-ups are trying to ensure this can be used as a future model for restaurants.[26, 27] It will be important to investigate not only how these projects were scaled but also how the learning can be shared with other community groups who may in the future fill the gaps left now those who work in the hospitality businesses are returning back to full-time work. Now and in the future, some businesses are considering continuing to feed the community either as part of their corporate social responsibility activities or as public restaurants. This pandemic has taught us much about the food systems in the UK and this knowledge should now be used to ensure even the most vulnerable have access to a secure and affordable food supply.

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