

Monterey County **The Herald**

Cautious optimism as Monterey County restaurants poised to reopen indoor dining

Hiring for resumption of limited dining room seating a top concern



Diners enjoy the outdoor setup at Rosine's as no indoor dining has been allowed during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Jim Culcasi)

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MONTEREY – As Monterey County eyes entering the red tier and being able to, among other things, reopen indoor dining, restaurants will face ongoing challenges to get cooking again.

“Staffing will be difficult because many good people left the area last year when the pandemic hit,” said Frank Geisler, Monterey Peninsula Chamber of Commerce president.

Surviving on take-out and outdoor dining for a majority of the last year, restaurants will now need to focus on making the best of indoor dining that will still have restrictions in place to keep workers and patrons safe from an ongoing threat from COVID-19.

Jim Culcasi, owner of Rosine’s Restaurant in downtown Monterey, said much of the staff was able to be retained during the last year but with the addition of outdoor dining and the prospect of reopening the indoor dining area, the restaurant is looking to hire more.



Esteban Magallanes cleans the booths at Old Fisherman’s Grotto in anticipation of the restaurant reopening soon. (Photo courtesy of Old Fisherman’s Grotto)

“The back is set but the front of the house will need more people,” said Culcasi.

The restaurant owner said he sees this as a turning point and is “very optimistic” about the future. “It has been a learning experience, maneuvering through this crisis, but we are stronger for it.”

“We survived with the help of locals. We made the year mark with the tremendous support of our customers,” said Culcasi.

Moving from the purple to red tier means restaurants can reopen indoor operations but must limit it to 25% of occupancy and continue to follow health and safety guidelines including adequate ventilation, physical distancing, face coverings, frequent handwashing, regular cleaning and disinfecting, and keeping workers trained on the practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“Our team has been busy the last few days with the news that we could possibly be reopening for inside dining on Wednesday with readjusting work schedules, touch up painting, dusting the walls and ceilings and getting the dining rooms ready for the inside dining social distancing protocols,” said Chris Shake, owner of The Old Fisherman’s Grotto and The Peninsula Fish Market, both on the Fisherman’s Wharf; and co-owner of The Fish Hopper in Monterey.

Kevin Phillips, the owner of Abalonetti Bar and Grill, The Beach House at Lovers Point, and Whaling Station Steakhouse, said that he and his staff have been “cautiously planning to reopen at 25%.”

Phillips said it was important to him to keep as much of his staff together as possible citing it as part of the culture of his restaurants and the most difficult thing to create.

“My sense is we’re moving in a positive direction and have a good chance of moving to the orange and yellow tier fairly quickly,” said Phillips.

A move into the orange tier would allow indoor seating at 50% capacity and increase the need for even more employees.

“With the recent unpredictable winter weather, outdoor dining has been especially challenging,” said Erik Uppman, Cannery Row Company vice president of marketing. “Thankfully, a return to indoor dining allows us to welcome our guests back to The Sardine Factory in the setting they are most familiar with.”

Uppman said the requirements for limited seating capacity and social distancing will reduce the restaurant’s normal operations and have brought some changes in the layout of its dining rooms.

The Sardine Factory has retained the majority of its staff through the last year.

Last week, the restaurant announced the reopening of its Outdoor Pavilion consisting of two large tents complete with carpeting and chandelier lighting with a capacity of about 138.

Chamber president Geisler said that even with the resumption of indoor dining, there will continue to be a need for the outdoor dining option. Restaurants have made a tremendous investment in trying to keep afloat during the absence of indoor dining operations, including the purchase of outdoor dining tables, chairs, umbrellas, heaters, and the creation of parklets.

People like it during good weather and it's more comfortable, safety-wise, for those still concerned about enclosed spaces, said Geisler.

He said restaurants will want to hold onto the additional serving space outdoor dining has provided and will be looking for it to be continued for as long as possible even after there is a return to what was normal operations before COVID-19.

But hiring remains a concern and most likely the number one challenge for restaurants as reopening approaches.

"The current job market availability is very limited in the hospitality industry because everyone is hiring in all positions and need more staff to operate at past capacities and that puts an enormous amount of pressure on employers who have been closed for the last 12 months with the disconnect with former employees and trying to hire new ones," explained Shake.

The immediate future of Shake's restaurant business is to "ensure that its more than 300 employees are all working and earning a paycheck so that they can provide for their families in a safe and healthy environment for them and customers alike," he said.

"At this point, I feel very calloused from the last 12 months of the pandemic," Shake said, "and prepared should we encounter another surge that could close indoor dining again."