

Designing Restaurants

in a Post-Pandemic World

By Amelia Levin

After the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of thousands of restaurants and other foodservice operations nationwide, many businesses had to quickly shift gears and figure out if revenues from takeout and delivery would be enough to sustain the company through stay-at-home orders or if it made better financial sense to close completely. Some did both to see which worked.

As of mid-April, most restaurant dining rooms across the country remained closed without a clear indication of when they would reopen. And no one knows what the industry landscape will look like when they do.





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One thing seems to be certain: Off-premises dining was becoming a big deal before the pandemic, and it will likely be an even bigger deal after.

“Off-premises — meaning preparing food for pickup, delivery and catering through internal platforms and through our third-party delivery providers — is something we have been working on and something that’s been part of our culture since Day One,” says Al Hank, senior vice president of operations for Famous Dave’s, a 20-year-old Minnetonka, Minn.-based barbecue chain with 120 locations. “Five years ago, off-premises sales made up 30% of our revenue, and last year that figure was nearing 50%.”

Of course, in the wake of mandated dining room closures intended to slow the spread of COVID-19, that number accelerated to 100%. Famous Dave’s quickly rolled out its curbside delivery program after testing it at six locations. Extra parking spaces were designated for curbside pickup; parking lot attendants — practicing social distancing — were set up with walkie-talkies to communicate with staff inside; the online ordering platform was updated so customers could input car details and pay for their meals ahead of time; and the to-go menu was adjusted



In the wake of COVID-19, Famous Dave's quickly added curbside pickup and made improvements to its online ordering platforms. Image courtesy of Famous Dave's

to offer bulk meals and larger family platters that the chain would otherwise route through its catering program.

“I feel like we were well-positioned for what will become standard operating procedure for many restaurants in the future,” Hank says.

Like many restaurants, Starbird Chicken capitalized on the off-premises upswing at the start of the pandemic.

“Having a strategy for off-premises is critically important now and will be in the future,” says Aaron Noveshen, founder of the six-unit fast-casual chain that serves the San Francisco area. Noveshen is also the founder and CEO of The Culinary Edge, a restaurant consultancy.

But designing for off-premises dining isn’t just about curbside pickups. These operators tell us that the pandemic has already had other effects on their operations and the ways they will work with architects, designers, consultants and other players in the future.

Experts Weigh In on the Future of Restaurant Design

Griz Dwight

founder and principal, GrizForm Design Architects



Social distancing is here for now, and it looks like we will be practicing it for a while. In terms of restaurant design, we might see more loose tables and fewer banquettes and booths. Or it could be that we see restaurants including more intimate, secluded spaces by incorporating more four-top booths or private areas. As for bars, many may also opt for fewer barstools to give patrons more space to spread out. Regarding the back of the house, the need to change restaurant protocols will be much greater than the need to change design. The back of the house is like a well-oiled machine, and if there’s a kink in the chain — say, someone out sick — there are usually major repercussions.

There needs to be a change of internal protocols for those working in the back. Also, it doesn’t functionally make sense to make BOH spaces bigger in the sense of social distancing. For example, an extra two steps for a line cook can really harm speed and efficiency.

Double Make Lines and Pickup Stations

Many restaurants, like Starbird Chicken, already had double food production line setups before the pandemic, but this could become a staple in most kitchens as off-premises business continues to grow.

“With two lines, we can break up our production in a lot of ways, whether we designate one line just for dine-in and the other for takeout, or one for takeout and dine-in and the other for delivery only,” says Noveshen.

Before the pandemic, Starbird had begun to build pickup cubbies at the

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end of one of the production lines near the takeout-only door. Don't be surprised, though, if these cubbies become more elaborate in the future with temperature controls or passcode-enabled locks.

Famous Dave's likewise already had two production lines. The chain designates its rapid pickup station to handle off-premises and catering orders. Staff sort prepaid orders alphabetically by name on a heated shelf at the end of the line.

Separate Entrances and Drive-Thru

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, separate entrances for pickup and dine-in already helped manage traffic flow and reduce bottlenecks at both Famous Dave's and Starbird. Now, in the age of social distancing, these will be imperative.

At Starbird, the entrance for pickup orders sits closer to the front of the building so customers and drivers can easily come in, grab their bags and go. Starbird's dine-in door is set off to the side toward the rear of the restaurant, limiting the commingling between dine-in and off-premises customers. During the forced dining room closure, Noveshen says the restaurant has used the closed dining space to set bags on 6-foot-long

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Dwayne MacEwen

founder and principal, DMAC Architecture

I think we'll be taking a closer look at the functional aspect of air purification systems, as well as materials and coatings that reduce surface transmission of bacteria and viruses — all of which will become more important. This especially relates to menus and their design. Will the material change? What will they be made of in the future to be better cleaned between each use, similar to silverware? More efficiently planned BOH areas will yield more FOH square footage and therefore more space between seats. Adjacencies matter more than ever in terms of where the kitchen is and where servers bring the food out to the tables. It's important to avoid redundant circulation, which makes for better service because the fewer the steps, the better the service and customer experience. While new controls may be put in place to address the spread of contagions, I don't think we'll see restaurant employees wearing masks in most venues — particularly if the restaurant has an open kitchen. However, sanitation will remain paramount. Additional solutions will include not just stacking equipment but sourcing more custom equipment with a smaller footprint.



tables and have runners bring the food to customers in cars or waiting outside. "We play music outside while they wait for their name to be called," he says.

During dine-in closures, the Famous Dave's team had to rewire POS stations and install plexiglass closer to the doorway for any walk-ins. Hank says he

wouldn't be surprised by the use of more of this separation between restaurant staff and customers in the future.

The Famous Dave's team has also begun testing a makeshift drive-thru setup, with five locations using cones and signs to manage curbside pickup traffic. "In the future, I think the external design of the restaurant will become more important; we will see more parking spaces designated for curbside pickup," Hank says. Don't rule out more restaurants, including those in the casual-dining segment, adding a drive-thru or a hybrid drive-thru/curbside pickup option.

Integrated, Contactless Ordering and Digital Real Estate

Before the pandemic, many restaurants were beginning to enhance their online ordering platforms and integrate them with their POS systems. Here again, the pandemic seems to have dramatically sped up this trend. Almost immediately when restaurants closed, Hank says he went to Famous Dave's integrated ordering and delivery platform provider to add extra features for curbside pickup. Now



Based in the San Francisco Bay area, Starbird has used its dining room as a staging area for curbside delivery during the mandated dining room closures. Image courtesy of Starbird

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