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Take out trade will be a tall order for restaurants to recover lost business

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Mustafa Dakroub could tell his business prospects for his Markook Authentic Mediterranean Eats were suddenly very different this week when he looked down the hill from his place at the Street at the Meadows.

The immediate bellwether for his restaurant business: the neighboring Primanti Bros. restaurant in front of it.

"Normally, their parking lot is pretty packed during the lunch hour," he said. "Right now, they have one car in their parking lot."

Given the parking lot of a neighboring restaurant was all but empty only a little more than a day after Gov. Tom Wolf ordered all the bars and restaurants in Allegheny County closed over the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, Dakroub had little reason to be surprised.

But after five years of building a stable and successful business out of Markook, he, along with restaurants virtually everywhere else, now faces only one real option to keep his restaurant going: orders for take out and delivery, as decreed by the Wolf administration, in an effort to limit the potential spread of COVID-19 by eliminating dine-in gatherings within restaurants.

"We're hoping and praying that things will get better," said Dakroub, noting the how the sources of business traffic for Markook are drying up around him: the neighboring Meadows casino, closed; the hotels, closed; neighboring office buildings, closed; the Tanger Outlets nearby, closed.

It all leads to a pretty grim assessment by Dakroub: "Right now, it doesn't look very bright."

Dakroub is gearing up to try and increase take out and delivery business, marketing for it on social media, negotiating with delivery services, and rejiggering his menu, operation and staffing to better pursue take out and delivery.

"We have to be flexible," he said. "We have to make sure that we are producing and providing the right amount of food," he said.

Yet for Markook, with a menu of hummus, baba ghanoush, tabouli and chicken and beef shawarma all made fresh in-house each day, the question becomes how much sales potential there is versus the cost of operations.

Dakroub estimated that take out and delivery business represents about 20 percent of his overall sales now, and hopes to basically keep up with some of his costs.

Just as Wolf's two-week closing order may not prove so temporary for many restaurants, the prospects for restaurants of all kinds to be able to easily shift their business operations to a take out and delivery approach isn't necessarily that easy, say a number of local restaurant operators.

Richard DeShantz was considering such an option for his Meat & Potatoes Downtown, only to decide it wouldn't work for the highly popular restaurant.

Terri Sokoloff, a principal of Ross-based Specialty Group, a restaurant services firm, expects fine dining restaurants to be the least adaptable to a delivery and take out business model, noting their dishes aren't necessarily appropriate for it.



MARKOOK AUTHENTIC MEDITERRANEAN EATS
Mustafa Dakroub, owner of Markook Authentic Mediterranean Eats, in Southpointe.

"Finer dining, in my opinion, is the type of food that should be enjoyed at the restaurant," said Sokoloff, suggesting those who want to support Pittsburgh's fine dining establishments should buy gift cards for them. "The finer dining category is definitely harder hit."

The nature of fine dining too often makes it logistically improbable and can undermine the quality of the product.

"You're not going to get a seafood tower to go. How does that even work?" she said. "Some restaurants just aren't conducive to it."

For the big Burrito Restaurant Group, the ownership and management have been forced to decide which of their 15 restaurants are and aren't conducive to it for a company negotiating an organization with upwards of 1,100 employees right now.

So far, the company has opted to pursue take out business for its nine Mad Mex locations along with single location restaurants Alta Via and Kaya, closing its others, Eleven, Casbah, Soba and Umi.

All the company's locations are undergoing a deep cleaning right now and big Burrito has decided to pay all its hourly staff for one week and its managers for two weeks, said Bill Fuller, the corporate chef for the company.

Make no mistake, Fuller had pretty muted expectations for how much take out business there is to be had while acknowledging broader goals of feeding the public and keeping staff involved as much as possible.

"It gives us a reason to keep people around and reason to pay them and see what the take out (business) is going to look like and if it means anything," he said.

For Fuller and Big Burrito, the strategy is to pursue the most productive and useful way to lose money as little money as possible right now, understanding that losing money is a certainty in a local industry yanked into a quickly precarious business void.

"We're not going to make any money on this to-go stuff," he said. "We're still losing money."

Yet he added the important role restaurants may need to play right now in just feeding people, noting that half of the American food dollar now is spent outside the home, and that grocery stores are being challenged by volatile pandemic-related demand.

Fuller acknowledged the limits of any approach his company takes right now, noting that starting next week there will be hundreds of hourly Big Burrito employees out of work.

"We're just trying to get by and take care of our people as much as we can," he said. "It's really very sad."

Martin Bolanos, owner of five Patron Mexican Grill restaurants in the area, with a sixth to come on Craig Street in Oakland, also generates a small fraction of his sales from take out and delivery business, estimating it represents 10 percent to 15 percent of overall revenue.

He expects to soldier on with take out trade to serve his customers and to keep his people working, describing it as a money loser overall.

"My hope is that we can keep our people working," he said. "You know, everybody needs a check."

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