

# Remembering the Pittsburgh-area restaurants that closed in 2020

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been ruthless to the restaurant industry, shutting down big and small operations across the country.

More than 110,000 restaurants have closed permanently or long-term across the country, according to the National Restaurant Association in a survey it released in December. According to The Atlantic, anywhere from 20% to 80% of restaurants nationwide will permanently close.

Pennsylvania ordered restaurants to shut down temporarily twice for indoor dining — once in March and then in December. After the March shutdown, the state opened the indoor dining service slowly on a county-by-county basis. The December shutdown was lifted on Monday.

Allegheny County saw a fair share of restaurants close down permanently last year. Some closed because of COVID-19-related reasons. Some hit the pause button, hoping to resume operations this year. Some kept the business open but cut short the days and hours of operation. Some others closed for business reasons unrelated to the pandemic.

“I have never seen anything like this in my lifetime,” said Terri Sokoloff, president of Specialty Group, a bar and restaurant brokerage company. “I could have never ever ever imagined this scenario. Unbelievable.”

The O is gone. So are Union Standard, The Twisted Frenchman and Smallman Galley. Alexander’s Italian Bistro, which opened as Alto’s in 1958, closed in May. And that is just a few of the restaurants we lost. Here’s a sampling of the casualties of 2020:

**Original Hot Dog Shop, Oakland:** “The O” closed quietly and abruptly in April, donating 35,000 pounds of potatoes to charity. Although its name came from its wieners, it was arguably more famous for its french fries.

Brothers Sydney and Morris Simon opened Original Hot Dog in 1960. When Morris took over the business in 2000, he renamed it Essie's Original Hot Dog Shop. The ownership then changed hands to Sydney's children, Bruce and his sister, Terry Campasano.

The restaurant was featured in WQED documentarian Rick Sebak's "A Hot Dog Program," which aired nationally on PBS. It also was a favorite of author Michael Chabon, a University of Pittsburgh grad.

**Alexander's Italian Bistro, Bloomfield:** On May 1, the restaurant announced that it was closing down.

"It's with a heavy heart that we, the Alexander's family, will be closing our doors, and saying goodbye to Alexander's Italian Bistro," wrote owner Kimberly Colaizzi Ifft on Facebook. "As the chapter closes on Alexander's, we take with us the most full heart. A heart full of memories, and laughter, and now tears. We are blessed to call every one of our customers our friends, and we thank you for keeping us at the heart of Bloomfield for all of these years. But most importantly we, the Colaizzis, need to thank our amazing staff. Many of whom we have had for 20-plus years. Many who have come and gone, but always returned, no matter what side of the bar they sat on. These are the relationships that hurt the most."

The restaurant went through a change in names. It started as Alto's in 1958 and then was renamed Bobby C's in 1968. When Ms. Colaizzi Ifft's dad, Alex, [took over the business in 1977](#), it became Alexander's.

**Pizza Taglio, East Liberty:** The Neapolitan-style pizza restaurant, which opened in early 2015, closed on July 11.

Owner Anthony Giaramita said the closure was for business reasons and not related to the pandemic or "lack of support from Pittsburgh."

"We're not struggling. This has been a lot of fun. I've loved having a pizzeria in Pittsburgh. We brought Jidori egg yolks and guanciale to Pittsburgh pizza. My goal was to stay here and help build a new generation of pizza makers," [he told the PG](#), but he said that he's decided to step away for now.

His family still owns La Tavola on Mount Washington.

**Brugge on North, North Side:** After two years at the Alphabet City development, the ground-level tenant closed in June.

In a Facebook post on June 25, the restaurant said it wasn't planning to close, but "the crowd restrictions as a result of the pandemic have limited our ability to operate a sustainable business as much of the concept relied on large performances and private events."

Point Brugge's locations in Point Breeze and Highland Park remain open.

**Spoon, East Liberty:** In a Facebook post in July, the restaurant stated that it was closing its business after 10 years.

“Due to the many unprecedented challenges our industry continues to experience and the expiration of our lease, we have decided it is best to close this chapter and look towards the future. During this uncertain time, we will spend time with our loved ones, taking a step back to better prepare us for our next adventure!”

Rick Stern and Brian Pekarcik opened Spoon in 2010, and it became the anchor of S+P Restaurant Group.

The group also closed its BRGR restaurants in Downtown and East Liberty.

**Coca Cafe, Lawrenceville:** The popular weekend brunch spot went up for sale in May after being in business for 17 years. It offered takeouts off and on during the pandemic.

Co-partner Carrie Rudolph [told the PG](#) that it wasn't an easy decision to come to, but it was time to move on. In 2003, she and partners Melanie Ritchey and Jared Marran took over what was a coffee shop/gallery in Lower Lawrenceville. They expanded Coca Cafe to become a full-service restaurant. In addition to the brunches, it offered daily breakfasts and small plate dinners on the weekends.

Ms. Rudolph said the pandemic was not the deciding factor to sell the place, but that it did not help. “I love owning my own business and being an entrepreneur, and it's well worth it, but there was definitely a realization recently that I was happier not going to work, and that maybe we stayed a little too long,” she said.

**Union Standard, Downtown:** On June 1, four days before Allegheny County moved into the green zone, the restaurant posted on Facebook that it was busy prepping to open for dine-in service the following week.

Then on June 4, chef-owner Derek Stevens said he was closing the restaurant permanently. The sprawling two-story restaurant opened in the renovated Union Trust Building in 2017. In July, the landlord, The Davis Companies, sued Union Standard for back rent and other damages.

**Brillobox, Bloomfield:** “15 years!!!!” That's how owners Lou Ickes and Janessa Walter started their Facebook post on Aug. 3 to announce that the bar/restaurant/music venue was closing.

The post went on to say, “But it's time to say ‘Good-bye’ and more importantly: ‘THANK-YOU!!!!’ We are wrapping it up. We appreciate everyone that has been a part of Brillo, over the years. It's been a

great ride, but it's time to move on. We love you all. Thank you again!!!”

Mr. Ickes told the PG that the pandemic was the reason. The place relied on people coming for shows, events and parties and hanging out with other patrons. “When that is gone, the soul was sucked out. There's just zero chance to keep it going. It's like driving a car, running out of gas ... on a road you don't know ... and praying there's a gas station near,” he said.

**The Twisted Frenchman, East Liberty:** Months after Andrew Garbarino opened the second-floor restaurant in May 2015, a PG review called it “a fun, tailored spot with an ambitious chef who is confident, yet eager to please.”

The Twisted Frenchman closed in July. The space has now been morphed into an upscale chop house and renamed Grazing Rights.

**NOLA on the Square, Downtown:** Market Square's New Orleans-inspired NOLA closed in July. Owner Bob Wolfinger told WTAE-TV that the decision was months in the making, and that the state's first shutdown caused by the pandemic put a “severe strain” on the business. He told the TV station that he didn't open up when Allegheny County moved to the green phase purposely to see what would happen. “I know there are a lot of businesses that spent a lot of money to reopen, and now they're sitting on that product.”

**Smallman Galley, Strip District:** Pittsburgh's first food hall closed in July. In an email, CEO Chad Ellingboe said it closed initially because of the COVID-19 restrictions. But then the Galley Group chose not to reopen the food hall prior to the end of its lease once a decision was made to move to Bakery Square in East Liberty.

Galley — Bakery Square is slated to open in May.

**Shiloh Grill, Mount Washington:** The sister establishment to Shadyside's Harris Grill closed on July 28 after its last “Bacon Night.”

Co-owners Rodney Swartz and Alex Fruzynski opted not to renew the Shiloh Grill lease because the cost of doing business during the pandemic became too steep.

“It's been a hard 2020,” [Mr. Swartz told the PG](#). “The stars aligned, and it wasn't a good alignment. That's where we are.”

Known for its expansive outdoor patio, boozy drinks, cheekily written menu and Tuesday “Bacon Night,” Shiloh Grill opened on Shiloh Street in 2010.

**Supper on Penn, Strip District:** Chef Vincent Perri opened the restaurant in August 2019 in the space formerly occupied by Crystal. In early July, the restaurant made a plea to its customers in an Instagram post.

“As I’m sure you all know, Allegheny County issued a mandate closing all restaurants and bars once again. While we are just as frustrated as everyone else, we will be doing our best to continue serving our customers. Please consider ordering takeout or delivery over the next week. We are a very small business, and every order helps,” it said. “We will be here, wearing our masks, waiting for ya!”

The restaurant closed in October.

**Mixtape, Garfield:** The eclectic bar, which quietly opened in September 2015, closed on July 20. In social media posts, owners Katie Molchan and Elaine Holko said it was one of the hardest decisions they had to make.

“Our model simply could not be molded to meet the new, challenging landscape of the service industry in a way that we found sustainable or meaningful,” the statement read.

**Slice on Broadway — PNC Park, North Shore:** On July 27, the Pirates’ season home opener against Milwaukee, owner Rico Lunardi announced that the shop was closing on July 31.

“As our lease ended, we reviewed the current climate and have decided that now is the best time to leave. With the current conditions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including no fans for baseball games and most offices on the North Shore being either empty or only partially full, it has been a difficult last few months,” the Facebook post read.

Its first day at PNC Park was Opening Day 2016. Its locations in Beechview, Carnegie and East Liberty continue to operate.

**Larder of East End, Larimer:** The collaborative venture between Justin Severino of Morcilla and Scott Smith of East End Brewing Co. lasted for just over a year. Opened as a separate business inside the brewery, the counter-service restaurant closed on Aug. 21.

“We have no potential for Larder: There’s no opportunity for us to make any money, period,” Mr. Severino told the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

**The Fairlane, Mt. Lebanon:** Named for the midcentury Ford sedan, Fairlane, the restaurant closed on Aug. 22.

Owners Lauren Zanardelli Foster and Graham Lee Foster said it was because of the economic plight brought on by the pandemic via a social media post.

“It’s with a broken heart that we announce the permanent closure of our little restaurant,” it said. “Over the last several months we have tirelessly stretched ourselves creatively, financially, and physically to find a way to adapt our restaurant for a post-COVID world.”

It opened in December 2018 in the space previously occupied by Block 292.

**Pork and Beans, Downtown:** DeShantz Restaurant Group’s Texas-style barbecue restaurant closed in September.

“We’ve made the difficult decision to retire Pork & Beans, but all the wonderful friends and memories made will last a lifetime. Thank you so much for everything,” the group posted a statement on social media.

The restaurant opened in October 2016, and it was the group’s third restaurant on the same two-block stretch of Sixth Street.

**Sharp Edge Bistro, Downtown:** When it came time to renew his lease on the 5,600-square-foot restaurant, owner Jeff Walewski didn’t think twice about closing the business. The pandemic was choking the operation with shutdowns and capacity restrictions.

After a 10-year run, the bistro closed around November.

**Colony Cafe, Strip District:** Pittsburgh’s first cat cafe, which opened in 2017, closed in May because of the pandemic.

In a post on social media, owners Sue and Erik Hendrickson said, “Like many small businesses, Colony Cafe operated on thin margins, and the state-mandated closure in March proved to be something from which we couldn’t financially recover.”

[They told the PG](#) that even after social-distancing orders are lifted, the environment might not be particularly hospitable to a business like Colony.

**Zorba’s, Downtown:** After 29 years, the Market Square restaurant known for its grilled chicken salad and gyros closed on Sept. 10.

In a social media post in early June, the restaurant said it was going “to most likely open on July 6 to see if we can make it work again. We won’t be able to do it without you.” But owner Mary Floulis could not sustain its business.

**Green Forest Brazilian Restaurant and Lounge, Penn Hills:** Owner Flavia Naccarato shared the news that the restaurant was closing in a live Facebook video on Father’s Day.

“The pandemic hit us in the middle of a time, like exactly when we are starting to make more money,” she told the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

The restaurant was to have celebrated its 20th anniversary in fall.

**Molinaro Ristorante, Downtown:** The 8,000-square-foot restaurant closed in the first weekend of January. Just on Jan. 3, a Facebook post stated: “We’re excited to continue bringing you the freshest ingredients and classic dishes!”

General manager Sean Fitzpatrick told the PG that Molinaro closed for “strictly financial reasons.” The restaurant, he said, opened as a high-end concept that did not work out. Customers “were intimidated by the pricing at first.”

It opened in June 2018 in the former Poros space in Market Square.

**The Whitfield, East Liberty:** The ground-floor restaurant at Ace Hotel Pittsburgh closed when the pandemic hit in mid-March. The boutique hotel is now up for sale, and calls to the restaurant are greeted with a recorded message saying the number is not in service.

A PG review in 2017 called the tavern-style restaurant a destination for a quiet breakfast, not-so-quiet brunch, quick lunch or meat-heavy dinner, and glamorous desserts.

**Village Tavern & Trattoria, West End:** On Nov. 17, the family restaurant on Main Street, known for its huge portions, pastas and pizzas, announced that it was calling it quits on Nov. 29 after 10 years and seven months.

But it closed a day earlier because owners Ray and Terry Hanis said the kitchen ran out of food and because the Steelers game was rescheduled.

**Ka Mei Chinese Restaurant, Squirrel Hill:** Open for 14 years, it was known for its Hong Kong/Cantonese-style cuisine.

Owners Carol Cheng and Kwok-Wah Cheng featured dumplings, stir-fry, fish, vegetables, salted meats, a few fried dishes and the ever comforting congee on their menu.

The restaurant’s last day was Aug. 2.

**Coffee Buddha, Ross:** After almost nine years in business, the coffeehouse closed after providing lunch from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and featuring an evening of entertainment. In a social media post, owner Mike Witherel said: “We closed for 100 different reasons, COVID-19 WAS NOT one of them. 2/29/2020 was the last day, a couple weeks before shutdown.”

He and his wife, Cassandra, bid farewell in a poignant [YouTube video](#).

**Mantsch Blue Bonnet Bakery, Homestead:** The neighborhood's last independent bakery closed on Christmas Eve.

After 47 years, Mike Mantsch [told the PG](#) that he was closing the family-run bakery because he could not find bakers to take over. He has no children to pass the bakery onto, and his sister didn't want to take it over either.

"If we could find someone to open for us, we would," he said. "But I haven't been able to."

**Howlers, Bloomfield:** The bar and music venue was supposed to have closed in August, but it shut down in late April instead because of the pandemic.

Owner Mary Jo Coll, who started as a bartender at the venue in 2004, told the PG: "I'll continue to do a little cooking at Hambone's if they ever get reopened after the quarantine. Book some smaller stuff here and there. As to the future plans, I haven't decided."

Howlers' last post on Facebook was about a giveaway. "Any of our customers who want a free 6 pack of pbr [Pabst Blue Ribbon] please stop by the bar today!!!! Liquidation giveaway," it said.

**Arnold's Tea, North Side:** Toward the end of 2019, the restaurant got the news that it was being evicted for failure to pay rent and water bills. But it kept its doors open through the first five months of 2020 after reaching an agreement with its landlord.

On June 11, it announced that it was shutting its doors. "As you know, the coronavirus has threatened our daily way of life and how we run our small businesses. Times were challenging prior to, and the pandemic has not made things any easier," it stated on Facebook.

**Kaffeehaus Cafe, North Side:** The corner coffeeshop closed on its third-year anniversary on June 10.

"We don't feel it's feasible to re-open in these uncertain times with the limited capacity as we already are pretty limited with our small shop. We tossed around just doing take out; but that truly is not what Kaffeehaus is all about," it posted on Facebook. "We strived for the community interaction and a place where everyone feels welcome and treated with respect as if it was their own home."

**Enix Brewing Co., Homestead:** Located in the former Levine Bros. Hardware building, the Mediterranean-flavored brewery and restaurant opened in August 2018 and housed a bowling alley. It featured tapas, flatbreads, slow-roasted meats, and operated a 15-barrel German brewhouse. The brewery closed in January.

**Hambone's, Lawrenceville:** The longtime bar on Butler Street closed on Oct. 10 after 35 years in business. Owner Jeff Holt's death in late September and a mounting debt led to the closure. "We tried, we really did ... but with the death of Jeff, the bank has made the decision to not continue business with his estate ... and the debt is insurmountable. Therefore it's over," the staff posted on Facebook.

**Park House, North Side:** Pittsburgh's oldest tavern closed on Dec. 31 after 17 years. Owner Zamir Zahavi said that closure was not pandemic or street related. In a letter to his patrons on Park House's website he wrote: "It is simply time for me to take my falafels and hummus ... and move on to another adventure!"

Housed in a 1890s building, the bar was in business continuously from the beginning until Prohibition, when it was a bakery and candy store. When Prohibition ended in 1933, the bar became known as the Park House.