



Left: Dakota Junction's Matt Bolles handed orders through car windows March 21, following the "6-foot" protocol of social distancing whenever he could. The restaurant, already known for its to-go food, has been lucky so far and hasn't had to lay off any of its 30 employees. (Elizabeth Hustad/Laker Pioneer); Right: the Leddys at Back Channel Brewing in Spring Park worked overtime to package more than 1,000 crowlers and lock down the ability to deliver its craft beers to doorsteps. (Back Channel Brewing/Submitted photo)



A NEW 'BUSINESS AS USUAL'

Within days, restaurants and taprooms scramble to adjust to impact of COVID-19 closures

BY ELIZABETH HUSTAD

laker.reporter@ecm-inc.com

A lot can change in 48 hours: restaurant staff laid off and hired back, more than 1,000 crowlers of beer packaged in one day, a common scramble to setup online ordering.

Gov. Tim Walz's March 16 order to restaurants and bars statewide to close their doors to dine-in service in an effort to stymie the spread of COVID-19 and the coronavirus upended an industry that has quickly found itself in a freefall and which has put its most vulnerable sector – the local mom-and-pops – in a position of creative fast thinking.

Within two days, many area restaurants had announced they were switching to curbside pickup; a few soon expanded to delivery service, and at least one local brewery lost no time in working through the necessary red tape to obtain the legal go-ahead for delivering its craft beers to neighborhood doorsteps.

Walz's directive put an end to in-house dining starting at 5 p.m. St. Patrick's Day, to last at least through Friday, March 27 – but many restaurant owners are thinking longer term than that.

"We're going to get by, but we're going to have to seek assistance," said Tony Ostlund, who owns Primo Plates & Pours in Long Lake. "You're going to see a lot of places that aren't going to make it."

Ostlund said he initially had to cut his staff of 15 down to three. "I saw it coming but didn't expect it to happen so suddenly," he said of Walz's order, saying that he had heard rumblings "through the grapevine" but had no immediate plans when that order finally did come.

But by day two of curbside pickup, Ostlund said he was able to bring back another employee, that he

DINING OPTIONS

Note that many restaurants are still establishing their new service options and changes may be happening almost daily; their social media pages will be the best place to look for updates. The following businesses were offering curbside pickup or delivery as of March 24.

LONG LAKE

Birch's on the Lake
Carbone's Pizzeria
Red Rooster
Primo

MAPLE PLAIN

Blackwater Coffee and Cafe
Forkless
McGarry's Pub

MINNETRISTA

Buddy Boy Fine BBQ

MOUND

Al & Alma's
Carbone's Pizzeria
Dakota Junction
Lord Fletcher's
Scotty B's
Surfside Bar & Grill

ORONO

The Narrows

SPRING PARK

Vann Restaurant
Back Channel Brewing

couldn't keep up with orders the day before; by Monday, March 23, Ostlund said he was able to bring back eight of his employees and was working to set up online ordering by mid-week. "I'm doing whatever I can to survive and keep my staff employed."

The impact hasn't been even, nor has it been unchanging.

Some places, like Iron Exchange in Maple Plain, which opened only last December, have remained closed entirely; others, like Dakota Junction in Mound, known for its to-go food already, have only gotten busier.

Stephanie Bolles, who with Matt Bolles owns Dakota Junction, said she hasn't had to cut any hours for her 30 employees. Matt, handing dinners through car windows March 21, said he felt "a bit of survivor's guilt."

But the same pall of uncertainty hanging about Ostlund at Primo hasn't completely left the Bolles, either. Said Stephanie, "Every day is scary. We would love to have our normal life back, but we do what we have to do. Not only do I have to worry about my family, but I worry about [my employees'] families."

The mandate has posed an additional challenge for taprooms, bars and breweries, which are already more tightly regulated through the state's liquor laws.

Iron Exchange might try setting up delivery in the future, said owner Todd Murley, but the taps have been shut off for now.

Not so at Back Channel Brewing in Spring Park.

"We're a destination taproom. We do 99 percent of our business out of our taproom," said Melissa Leddy, co-owner of Back Channel. Leddy said it was quick thinking and coordination between her four partners and head brewer that allowed the brewery to start delivering beer to doorsteps by March 20, just three days after closing the taproom.

Back Channel packaged more than 1,000 crowlers March 18 – the most the brewery has packaged in a single day – and by Thursday morning had worked through three different bodies to lock down the legal ability to deliver its craft beers. "It's all happening really fast," said Leddy.

And locals have been quick to get behind their local restaurants. Area proprietors recounted patrons bringing in gift cards, \$100 in cash for employees and more tips than usual. Restaurants' social media pages lit up with customer comments.

"The new normal isn't as bad with great local businesses continuing to serve the community," one fan posted to Dakota Junction's Facebook page.

"Perhaps we may need a quarantine treat," mused another, tagging a friend in her response to news that Spring Park's Vann Restaurant would offer to-go service (named Vann-Go, a bit of levity in time of crisis).

It isn't just the restaurants' patrons: the restaurants themselves have put aside any industry competition to hold each other up, sharing each other's posts on social media and urging people to stop in at each.

"If we aren't the jam your tastebuds crave tonight, consider keeping it Westonka local," reads a March 19 Facebook post by Al & Alma's before directing people to Dakota Junction, Scotty B's, Back Channel and Vann.

Even with the uncertainty, local restaurants that can pay it forward are trying to do just that: Lord Fletcher's was set to give away 500 free walleye dinners to those in need March 22, and Vann's executive chef, Erik Skaar, said he was looking into doing something for those in what the state has now termed "critical" jobs.

"I am not going to let a virus stand in the way of providing delicious, healthy food," said Skaar. "In times like this, everyone has to support each other."

Follow The Laker Pioneer on Facebook.