

# LIFE

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# SHORTHANDLED



## Diners return to local restaurants, but staff is hard to find

By Jonathan Young  
Managing Editor

Randall and Sheryl Hubin bought the Champlin Pizza Ranch after it closed in 2019. The couple, who also own the chain's Andover location, renovated the restaurant and added an arcade, planning to reopen in April 2020.

Then COVID-19 hit.

A year later, COVID cases were down, and the Hubins were eager to launch the Champlin store. But they had a problem

— they couldn't find enough staff.

The restaurant didn't have its grand opening until June 21, after school let out and teens could fill the labor gap.

"We would've opened two months sooner if I could hire people," Randall Hubin said.

Even now the restaurant closes an hour earlier than it likely would if it were fully staffed, and Hubin hasn't seen seven hours of sleep in a long time.

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## Restaurants

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“You just work more of those hours yourself when you don’t have the people, and it does impact the revenue,” Hubin said.

The Hubins aren’t alone in their plight. Many local restaurants are reporting a shortage of help that can cause problems ranging from shortened hours to smaller menus and longer wait times for food. The local trend mirrors reports from restaurants across the nation as diners return, but staffing lags behind demand.

Robert Scott, president of Lucy’s Burgers in Blaine, said he’s been able to hire front-of-house staff like bartenders and servers who work for tips, but a dearth of kitchen staff forced the restaurant to close on a few Mondays over the past several months.

At one point, the restaurant had only five kitchen employees. To attract workers, it had to increase kitchen wages from \$15 an hour to \$20 an hour.

“We’re still struggling because the whole kitchen staff is brand new,” Scott said. “We’re trying to get them up to speed.”

Like the Hubins, Scott has hired more school-aged employees than usual, out of necessity.

201 Tavern in Anoka has also made sacrifices.

Although servers and bartenders aren’t as difficult to find, the kitchen is extremely shorthanded, so the restaurant cut its menu in half to focus on what it does best, according to owner and manager Kim Stone. Even so, guests may have to wait a little longer for their food. About 90% of people are understanding, Stone said, but occasionally a customer blows a fuse.

“I don’t think people realize how short the labor is,” Stone said.

According to Peter Turok, president of the Anoka Area Chamber of Commerce, the problem isn’t new, but it has grown worse.

“We have had a workforce issue that this chamber has been aware of for 10 years plus,” Turok said. “So this isn’t a great surprise. ... COVID really accelerated this to warp speed.”



Part of an ongoing series taking an in-depth look at the pandemic and its effect on our community.

And while restaurants are feeling the problem acutely, he said it isn’t limited to a single industry.

That lines up with what the MetroNorth Chamber of Commerce found in a recent survey of about 40 employers representing businesses of all sizes in the north metro.

“Jobs are going unfilled in not just the \$15 per hour category but \$20, \$25, and higher,” MetroNorth President Lori Higgins said in a statement.

According to the NorthMetro Chamber, it’s taking longer to fill positions, and applicants are not as well suited to the positions as they were pre-pandemic.

“Most importantly, this crisis is having a huge impact on a business’ ability to not just grow but sustain their operations,” Higgins said in a statement. “It’s causing burn-out with current employees, impacting the budget with the extra overtime, and causing some to reduce hours of operation, production, and customer service.”

Many business owners blame the enhanced unemployment benefits from the federal government for their inability to find employees. The American Rescue Plan Act, signed into law March 11, gave qualifying Americans an additional \$300 a week on top of state unemployment benefits through early September.

Randall Hubin said he’s had people tell him if he can beat what they’re making on unemployment they’ll work, otherwise they’ll work in the fall when the enhanced benefits expire. And it’s not as though Hubin is paying minimum wage. He said many positions at his restaurants start at \$13 to \$16 an hour. Yet the vast majority of employees at the Champlin Pizza Ranch are under 18, and he has many people submit an application but never respond, even when the restaurant reaches out right away.

“I don’t mean this as a political statement, but there’s no motivation to go to work” if you can

make more when you’re not working, he said.

He added that it’s a very rational decision on the part of would-be employees who hang on to unemployment benefits, but he thinks it might hurt them in the long run when prospective employers wonder about lengthy periods of unemployment during a time when so many jobs were available.

“I think it’s going to haunt them,” he said.

Scott and Stone also think the extra unemployment benefits are contributing to the labor shortage.

“Hopefully once that [extra funding] runs out, you’ll see restaurants being able to get staffed,” Scott said.

But he doesn’t think that’s the only challenge. He said higher-paying jobs in construction and similar fields are a contributing factor, because restaurants like Lucy’s Burgers can’t match those wages.

Scott continues to see “help wanted” signs all over the area, and he said the only way to hire employees is to pay more than the competition.

“If that continues, that’s going to impact the cost of our goods,” Scott said. “That has to be passed to somebody.”

But restaurants are also facing supply shortages and sometimes steep price increases, according to Stone. A case of wings that used to cost 201 Tavern \$89 is now \$150, Stone said, but she can’t just pass all the cost increases to customers for fear of driving them away.

Despite the ongoing challenges, Stone isn’t giving up.

“We’ve made it this far,” she said. “We’re going to get through this.”

She’s thrilled to see people dining out again, but she has one request: Have patience.

“We’re trying our best,” Stone said. “We are happy that everyone’s coming out. We’re happy to be open, and we’re happy to serve everyone. Just be patient with the staff.”

*Emilee Wentland contributed to this story.*

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