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**Screens, face masks and robot waiters: welcome to restaurant dining social distancing-style**

Making eating out safe for both diners and staff will pose huge challenges for restaurants - and their business models.

Big birthday dinners. Tapas at the bar. Catching up with friends at a noisy, packed bistro: all the things we love about restaurants are what will make them fiendishly difficult to reopen in the age of social distancing.

Restaurateurs, hospitality groups and chefs are all working on social distancing plans, even as they wait for official government guidelines. Solutions on the table include everything from robot waiters, pre-order and cashless payments to screens, art installations and click and collect dinners.

Yet with no clear date on when they can reopen, a wary clientele (61pc of Brits would feel uncomfortable going to restaurants after lockdown, according to an Ipsos Mori poll) and the next quarterly rent payment due in June, many restaurateurs fear that reopening with strict social measures will not be enough to help them survive.

Tables will be spaced further apart, drastically reducing the amount of covers a restaurant can serve. “Two metre distancing between tables would equate to a 70pc reduction in capacity,” says Jacob Kenedy, the chef/owner of Bocca di Lupo in Soho. “To mitigate the reduction, I’m considering turning our private dining room into a second restaurant dining room, and creating booth partitions along our counter, but it’s impossible to plan without knowing what the rules are."

Jacob Kenedy in the kitchen of Bocca di Lupo - before lockdown

Jake Kasumov, co-founder of Casa do Frango and MJMK Restaurants, says: “Restaurants are low-margin businesses – most operate around a 10pc net profit margin. If our capacity drops by half due to social distancing rules, then we would be making a significant loss of circa 40pc. The only way to survive would be to cut costs drastically, and sadly one of the first areas will be staffing.”

Bigger restaurants have an obvious advantage over neighbourhood bistros but will still see covers substantially reduced: two metre spacing at Gaucho and M Restaurants will mean reducing the number of diners by 30pc, says chief executive Martin Williams. Group booking sizes will be capped, too. “Parties over eight will have to go into one of our private dining rooms, where we’ll also give them more space between each other within the room.”

Many restaurants are considering partitions or screens between tables. Restaurant designer Afroditi Krassa, who works with the likes of Itsu and Dishoom, is encouraging clients to find creative solutions. “There are ways to make the change innovative, that don’t cost a fortune. Think of the restaurant in Amsterdam which has converted outdoor tables into little greenhouses – people can still see each other, and it looks fantastic. Restaurants could use pop-up installations, or something colourful or interesting like graphics, photography or drapery to divide up the space.”

There’s a tricky balancing act between making diners feel safe but ensuring an atmosphere that feels welcoming and escapist. “Don’t just screen the space off like you’d do in a hospital,” advises Krassa.

Even if restaurateurs make their reconfigured space attractive, there’s no escaping the realities of social distancing. “A huge concern is service and the interaction between our team and guests,” says Kasumov. “Can we really exhibit hospitality whilst our staff have to wear a face mask, remain 1.5m away from customers and stand behind a Perspex screen?”

A waiter wears a face mask at a restaurant in Amsterdam testing "quarantine greenhouses" for diners

Restaurateurs are considering every detail: propping doors open, hand sanitiser and temperature checks at the door, sanitising wine bottles, or delivering food to an adjacent empty table. Many of these measures are designed to reduce interactions with the waiting staff. Krassa says that some of her restaurant clients in Dubai that have reopened have switched to plastic cutlery and disposable menus.

Tech has an important role: pre-ordering online and switching to cashless payment apps are two ideas. Gaucho is considering going further. “We’re looking at robots and how they could guide you to the tables,” says Williams.

Social distancing will be tricky in the kitchen, too. Kate Bunyan, who advises on health and safety in challenging workplaces, helped Wagamama introduce new safety protocols before the chain reopened four delivery kitchens. “These include mandatory health questionnaires before every shift, no contact with delivery riders and increased frequency of hygiene regimes.”

Emma Woods, chief executive of Wagamama, says: “This will be very much a test and learn approach for the business and rollout depends on team and customer feedback.”

Staying two metres apart in the kitchen will require creative solutions. "We have changed our processes in the kitchens, moving around is limited to only what is necessary, and have adjusted our menu to make it feasible,” says Victor Lugger, co-founder of Big Mamma Group.

Alex Head, founder of Social Pantry, which has several restaurants in London, plans to move café production to a central production unit. “We can maintain clear controls on the food production in the spacious unit and will be able to reduce the overhead of having a chef at each site,” she says.

Manuel Gil of LLenatubar installed the petitions in a small restaurant in Leganes, near Madrid

Restaurants with small kitchens will need to reduce the number of staff working at the same time. Fine dining restaurants will have to simplify menus, avoiding dishes where each component is assembled by a different chef. Face masks are a given. Many restaurants are turning to delivery, at-home meal kits and other ways to reach diners.

Big Mamma Group is testing "click and collect" dishes at two of its sites, Gloria and Circolo Popolare. “The ancillary revenue from delivery, takeaway and office drops will be essential for many restaurants’ survival,” says Jacob Kenedy.

While delivery is helping restaurants stay afloat by providing some vital cash flow, it is highly unlikely to make up for the drastic fall in covers when they reopen. “Delivery will always be the icing on the cake. I imagine it will be about 5pc of total turnover,” says Gaucho’s Williams.

If the hospitality sector is to come through Covid-19 relatively intact, then delivery, table spacing, and other social-distancing concessions will not be enough on their own. Without further government intervention the best-case trading scenario for June is 24pc of sales for the same month last year. The worst? Just 4pc, warns UK Hospitality.

Restaurateurs are used to adapting, to operating on wafer-thin margins, but with social-distancing and low consumer confidence likely to depress their income for months to come, most say there’s only two things that could make a real difference: a nine-month rent holiday with corresponding protections for landlords, and an extension to the furlough wage subsidy scheme for hospitality workers.

“The next month is crucial in terms of government intervention,” says Williams. Kasumov is a touch more bleak: “The UK hospitality sector is on the brink.”

A British company whose software is used for room service in some of the world’s leading hotels says its technology could be used to reopen pubs and restaurants.

Crave Interactive has adapted its systems, which are installed in five- star hotels such as The Lanesborough in London and the ARIA Resort and Casino in Las Vegas to let guests order food and drinks on a tablet or smartphone, so they can be used in pubs and restaurants.

The company says its ServeSafely technology would work by allowing diners to scan a QR code when they arrive, and then be directed via their phone to a table. They would be able to order and pay on their phone and be alerted to collect their food when it is ready to collect.

The software could also be used to stagger arrivals to avoid queues or overcrowding.

The proposals were submitted last week to the All Party Parliamentary Group on how the £60bn hospitality sector could respond to the Covid-19 challenge.

Jane Pendlebury, chief executive of the Hospitality Professionals Association, says the technology is something the sector really needs. “When restaurants, hotels and bars are able to reopen, the public will want something that will give them more reassurance about eating out and this is it. It seems easy to use and I am sure it will be a roaring success."

However, the technology could raise questions about the future for the 80pc of hospitality workers who have been furloughed since lockdown was imposed.

The Government appears to be set to relax some restrictions, although pubs, restaurants and hotels could be among the last to be allowed to reopen.