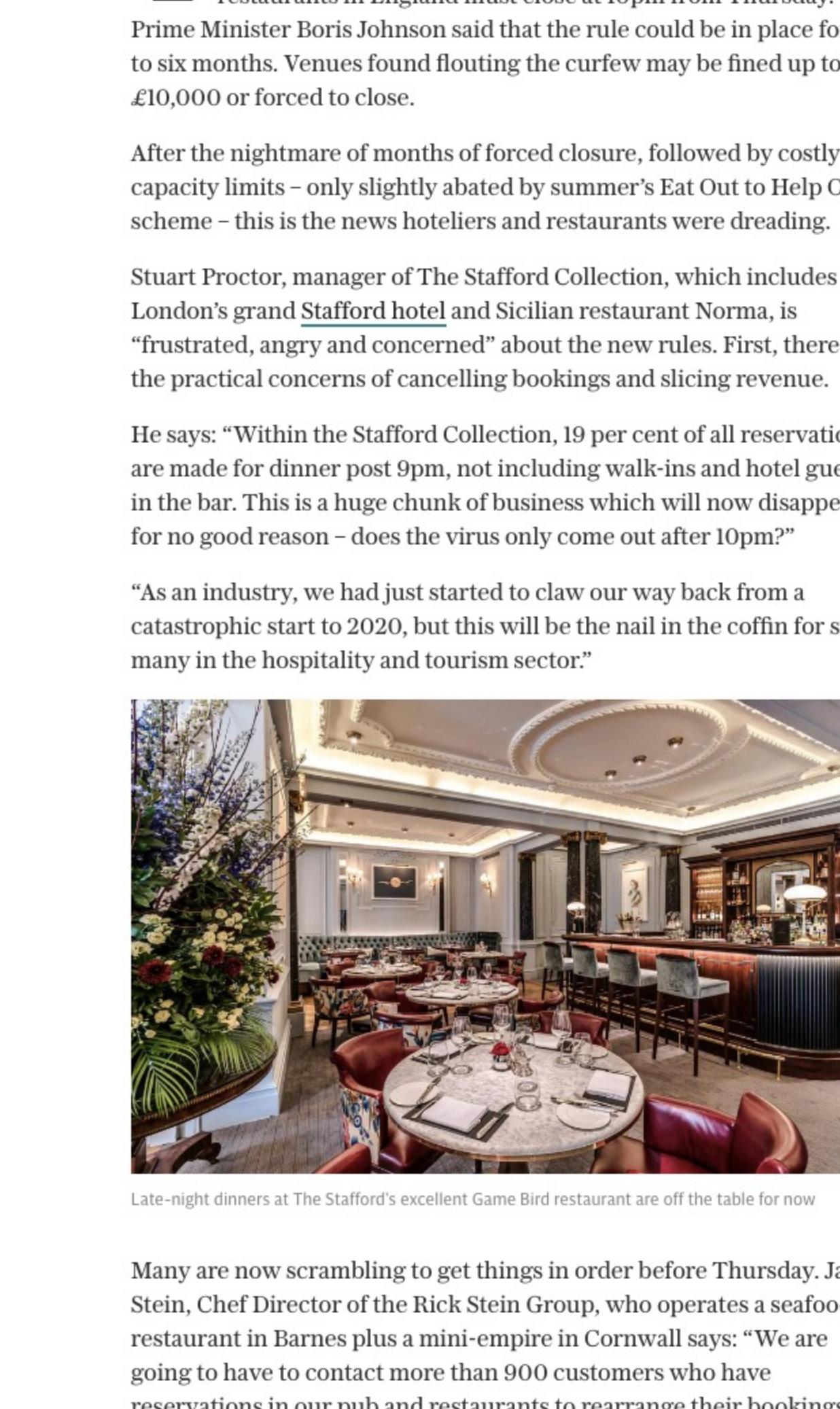


'Does the virus only come out after 10pm?' – London's top hotels and restaurants react to the new curfew rules

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Could the new restrictions mean lights out for some of London's best hotels and restaurants? Credit: GETTY

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By Emma Beaumont, ASSISTANT CONTENT EDITOR

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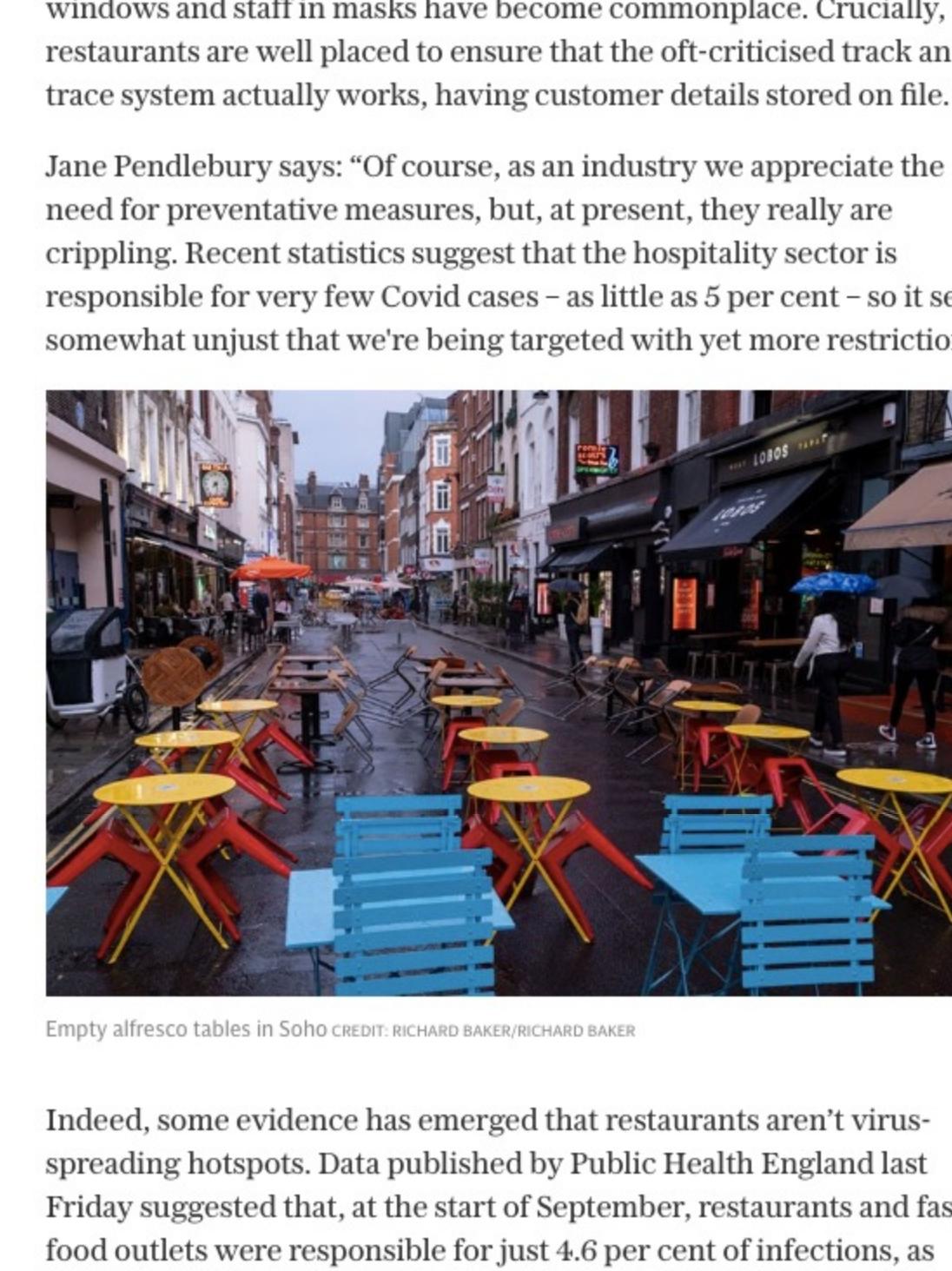
The ailing hospitality industry has been pummelled once again by the Government's announcement that all pubs, bars and restaurants in England must close at 10pm from Thursday. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that the rule could be in place for up to six months. Venues found flouting the curfew may be fined up to £10,000 or forced to close.

After the nightmare of months of forced closure, followed by costly capacity limits – only slightly abated by summer's Eat Out to Help Out scheme – this is the news hoteliers and restaurants were dreading.

Stuart Proctor, manager of The Stafford Collection, which includes London's grand Stafford hotel and Sicilian restaurant Norma, is "frustrated, angry and concerned" about the new rules. First, there are the practical concerns of cancelling bookings and slicing revenue.

He says: "Within the Stafford Collection, 19 per cent of all reservations are made for dinner post 9pm, not including walk-ins and hotel guests in the bar. This is a huge chunk of business which will now disappear for no good reason – does the virus only come out after 10pm?"

"As an industry, we had just started to claw our way back from a catastrophic start to 2020, but this will be the nail in the coffin for so many in the hospitality and tourism sector."



Late-night dinners at The Stafford's excellent Game Bird restaurant are off the table for now

Many are now scrambling to get things in order before Thursday. Jack Stein, Chef Director of the Rick Stein Group, who operates a seafood restaurant in Barnes plus a mini-empire in Cornwall says: "We are going to have to contact more than 900 customers who have reservations in our pub and restaurants to rearrange their bookings which means disappointment for some, many cancellations and more lost revenue."

Jane Pendlebury, Chief Executive of HOSPA (the Hospitality Professionals Association), sees the move as another huge blow. She explains: "To the casual observer, it may seem that closing at 10pm as opposed to 11pm won't offer much impact. But hospitality businesses are genuinely teetering on the brink. There's no room at all for any further loss of income."

"That last round at the bar, or night caps following a meal may offer as little as £20 a night to a venue's takings – but that can be the difference between someone keeping their job or losing it. Multiplying that across several tables or throughout a bar, helps to highlight the potential impact on revenue."

She also emphasises the psychological impact the new rules might have on customers. "There's a knock-on effect outside of the restaurant or bar itself. People are going to review potential hotel stays in light of it. The term 'curfew' sounds like heavy-handed, forbidding wording – something that's not doubt deliberate – but it almost implies people need to be in bed by 10pm, thereby casting a different light on all sorts of elements of the hospitality experience."

Plainly, it is difficult to see how an industry that is based around indulgence and relaxation will emerge unscathed by restrictions that limit freedoms and arguably increase fear.



Masks and outdoor tables: eating out in the time of coronavirus CREDIT: GETTY

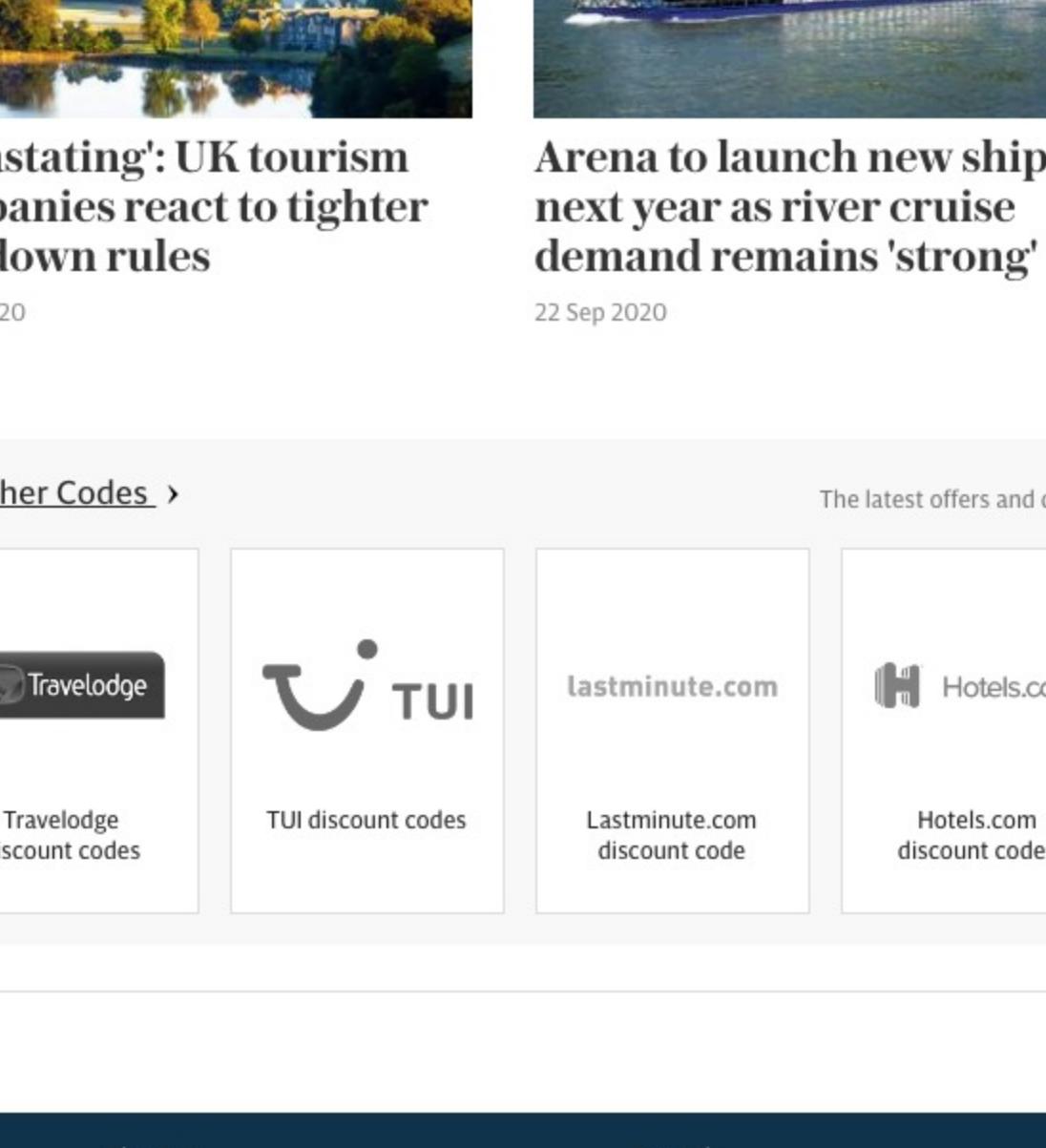
Many in the sector have been left reeling by the chaotic nature of the Government's coronavirus policy, which has been characterised by mixed messages and U-turns. Chef Tom Brown, whose hit Hackney Wick restaurant Cornerstone has weathered the storm well, says the new restrictions are a "cheap slap in the face."

He explains: "One minute they are telling people to visit us in hordes, the next we are not to be trusted past 10pm. The message needs to be clear: if it's unsafe for people to eat out then have the guts to close us down and support us accordingly."

For Stuart Proctor, it's "baffling that the Government would spend £522m on the brilliant Eat Out To Help Out scheme last month, encouraging the British public to eat out as much as possible, and now we are back to being enemy number one. Thanks to the scheme, we've taken staff off furlough to cope with the demand of customers – what do we do with them now?"

There are also huge questions surrounding the effectiveness of the measure. In an effort to adhere to Government guidelines and lure back nervous customers, many venues have created what could be described – to use Number 10's lingo – as relatively 'Covid-secure' set-ups. Increased distancing between tables, propped open doors and windows and staff in masks have become commonplace. Crucially, restaurants are well placed to ensure that the oft-criticised track and trace system actually works, having customer details stored on file.

Jane Pendlebury says: "Of course, as an industry we appreciate the need for preventative measures, but, at present, they really are crippling. Recent statistics suggest that the hospitality sector is responsible for very few Covid cases – as little as 5 per cent – so it seems somewhat unjust that we're being targeted with yet more restrictions."



Empty alfresco tables in Soho CREDIT: RICHARD BAKER/RICHARD BAKER

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