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“You Can Learn a Lot About Human Nature from Takeout Orders”

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Opening a restaurant is hard. A lot of people will tell you it’s a bad idea. Especially in 2020.

We opened Blue Giant on Jan. 13. It was a Monday, and L.S.U. was playing Clemson for the national championship. Despite the fact that we didn’t have any TVs, the restaurant was packed. We didn’t take reservations, and we didn’t offer takeout. Those first two months, wait times were routinely more than an hour and a half, even for the bar.

Then overnight, like other restaurants across the country, we had to change almost everything about how we operated. On March 15, amid growing concerns about the coronavirus’s spread, we decided we would offer only takeout for the foreseeable future. It was a decision made out of necessity, to continue to pay bills and keep our staff employed.

The dining room was deserted, chairs and tables pushed aside to make space for mountains of takeout containers. We had to change the menu — both to streamline the cooking process and to ensure that the food that was being packed into boxes would still be of the quality that we wanted to serve once it had reached its destination.

Scallop egg foo yung was the first dish to go, because each dish of it had to be cooked individually, unlike noodles or fried rice, which can be cooked a couple portions at a time. Also, once we jammed the big omelet into a box, it lost all of the visual appeal that it had when served on a plate.

We hoped people would understand that, in a world where everything was changing, the menu at a small neighborhood restaurant might also have to adapt. We were wrong. I tried explaining in detail once to a frustrated caller why we'd had to stop making scallop egg foo yung. “Yeah,” he replied, “but that’s what I want.”

You learn a lot about human nature taking takeout orders. One interesting finding is how many people don’t read the menu before calling. They just call and ask, “What do you have?” We also learned that the standard number of egg rolls in an order is not standard at all, and it seems to be somewhere between two and five. We edited our menu to read “one egg roll,” but this led to even more confusion. “One egg roll. What is that exactly?” Also: “How many is one egg roll?”

Maybe the greatest source of upset was that the phone would sometimes be busy when people tried to order. The sheer volume of calls blindsided us. We serve American-Chinese food, and I think we had underestimated how closely associated this cuisine is with takeout in people’s minds. While this was certainly good for business, being unable to reach us was the subject of a lot of angry emails, many of which would go on to say, “Anyway, I’d like to order shrimp wontons, fried rice, etc.” The process is smoother now, but getting here involved a steep learning curve for the person taking all the phone orders, as well as the people making them.

Obviously, these are minor frustrations, and ultimately they make for funny stories. Our overriding sentiment is gratitude to still be here, with almost all of our staff members still working, in the midst of such tremendous upheaval.

[Some 100,000 restaurants were forced to close](https://restaurant.org/news/pressroom/press-releases/100000-restaurants-closed-six-months-into-pandemic), at least temporarily, in just the first six months of the pandemic. The loss of tourism has been especially catastrophic for many businesses here in New Orleans. It’s shocking that the government has, through its inaction, decided to let all of these small businesses die.

To say we’ve been lucky would take away from the incredible work that our staff has done. To say it was just hard work would take away from the many great restaurants that we have seen forced to close forever. It was certainly an incredible combination of the two. We owe a tremendous debt to our customers, who have been adapting with us.

We’re still here, but we’re not fine. Over the summer another chef came to collect his takeout, and we asked him how things were going. “You know,” he said (with some modifications for civility), “it’s terrible, and I’m tired of pretending it’s not. I know I’m lucky to still be in business, and I know that it sucks a lot worse for a lot of people. But this really is terrible.”

It was cathartic. In that moment it became clear how strained things had become. The monotony and the uncertainty, the cabin fever. Even one of the dining room tables had started to sag, under the weight of a steam table and a thousand compactly stacked takeout bags.

Over the course of the pandemic, the restrictions continued to change. At one point, the only takeout cocktails we could sell were frozen ones, so we bought a frozen drink machine. It was loud, but we didn’t have guests inside, so whatever. Then to-go alcoholic beverages were banned entirely. Then they were allowed again, I think? It’s a blur, at least partly induced by the fact that we’ve drunk a lot of the booze that we weren’t allowed to sell.

Some indoor dining was approved, and we opened up again at a limited capacity — 25 percent, then 50 percent, then 75 percent, then back to 50 percent. We installed plexiglass partitions on top of our booths and provided hand sanitizer at each table, which a lot of people seem to think is a gift for them to take home.

The true difficulty was trying to explain to people why, when half the tables were open, we couldn’t seat them. One particularly inebriated guest who did not want to wait suggested that we gorge ourselves on a sack full of genitals. We told him we didn’t serve that dish.

All the while, we continued offering takeout. It’s disorienting to see a rail full of meal tickets, hear a kitchen clanging and banging like a Friday night, and then turn around to see only three two-tops at opposite ends of the dining room.

We are waiting to see what changes come next. Typically, the holiday season is one of the busiest times of year in New Orleans. This year, the jingle bells may be replaced with the death knell of still more local businesses. Even with the good news on vaccines, there is a long road ahead before anyone can reopen fully, and without more federal aid, a lot of restaurants won’t make it.

One of the fortunes that we wrote for our fortune cookies during the most restrictive lockdown said, “You will find a silver lining.” Looking back at this year, it’s not easy. The fact that so much of our food is now taken away to be enjoyed elsewhere has, I think, led to a much more consistent product coming out of the kitchen, since if an issue were to arise, we wouldn’t be able to address it immediately in person as we previously could. Some people have said to us that if we can get through this, we can get through anything. At least I got to hear someone who was hungry for some crab rangoons order “crab raccoons” over the phone.