

OpEd for the Peninsula Daily News – October 2020

Our local restaurant community needs our help — urgently.

The pandemic has hit the hospitality industry, and restaurants in particular, very hard. Before COVID-19, restaurants and hotels throughout Washington employed about 300,000 people. Recent numbers from Employment Security Department show that over 100,000 of those hospitality employees are no longer working.

We have seen this with local favorites. They say that in decades of being in business, they've never seen anything this catastrophic, like the beloved local Bella Italia in Port Angeles, which has been in business for 24 years. Neil Conklin, owner, says, "I never imagined having to close the restaurant for an extended period like this. Our business has always operated with very slim margins in this highly seasonal market, so in a way we have been prepared for this, we have always taken the long look. We laid the whole staff off back in March and have slowly rehired a small staff with a scaled back menu. Our revenues are down nearly 80%."

But Conklin, like many other restaurateurs, is trying to make the best of the situation to keep his business going saying, "With Phase 2 and the distancing needed in our restaurant, we are welcoming people back. We have five tables and have added a creative cocktails area along with retail wine and take-out."

Even with that said, life for restaurant owners is about to get even harder: Restaurants have been able to safely serve guests throughout the pandemic and have relied heavily on outdoor seating. But the arrival of fall means rain, wind, cold, and earlier darkness are on the way, and much of that outside seating will be lost. Without more indoor seating available, many restaurants will close. How do we get more indoor seating? The county needs to be able to move to Phase 3, and to do that we need to keep our cases low.

Here's our request: Please, wear a mask, practice physical distancing, and wash your hands. Ask your friends to do the same. You've done well, Clallam County, don't ease up now. Our cases are dropping and staying low because we're working together to take care of each other. If we continue to be diligent, we have a chance of being able to help our restaurants stay open, serve more guests inside, and stay viable. Please continue to support our restaurants, either by dining on-site or take-out. Our community needs that.

Olympic Peninsula Tourism Commission
Jefferson County Tourism Coordinating Council
Olympic Culinary Loop
The Chamber of Jefferson County
Forks Chamber of Commerce
Port Angeles Chamber of Commerce
Sequim-Dungeness Valley Chamber of Commerce