

NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER

Indoor dining slow to return, but restaurants ready for a busy weekend

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Co-owner Neal Brown, right, recreates his pose from a March photo as he chats on Monday with Sean Silvestre and Crystal Partlow of Manchester at the Shaskeen Pub and Restaurant on Elm Street.

PHOTOS BY THOMAS ROY/UNION LEADER

On the first day restaurants were able to reopen indoors after nearly three months, Ron Carlquist grabbed an open stool at the Red Arrow Diner in Manchester.

He was the only one at the counter, but customers filled the two open booths. The state's COVID-19 pandemic guidance allows for 50% capacity.

"It feels good. It really does. I missed this place," the Manchester resident said after being served his hamburger with pasta salad. "I'm glad they're open, but I'm glad everybody is doing the right thing and staying apart."

During the dining ban, Carlquist ordered takeout and sat outdoors at the Lowell Street landmark, but he's been waiting for a seat back inside since the ban started March 17.

"The food gets cold too fast," he said of outdoor dining.

The night before the ban was enacted — the eve of St. Patrick's Day — people rushed out to local bars and restaurants as news spread of the coming closure.

On Monday, many restaurants in the Queen City reported a slow reopening for indoor dining but expect a boost by the weekend. Many restaurants aren't usually open on Mondays.

"I'm not mad about it," said Red Arrow server Robin Deary. "It gives us a week to kind of prepare before the weekend when it is definitely going to be a lot busier."

Most people chose to eat outdoors on Main Street in Nashua, making it hard to tell indoor dining had resumed.

"It is such a nice day outside. Why would you want to be inside?" said Christopher Trulock while eating a sandwich in front of the Nashua Garden at 121 Main St.

The bar and deli had just two or three groups of patrons opt to eat inside on Monday, while the rest preferred to dine outdoors where tables have been set up along the

sidewalk and a portion of Main Street blocked to traffic to accommodate restaurants throughout the pandemic.

“I am not sure people even know that restaurants are now open inside at 50%,” said Trulock.

“Even when it is raining we still have people who want to eat outside,” said Kalli Bogdzewic, an employee at the Nashua Garden. “But, we are so grateful and so excited to be able to seat people inside. I just like seeing all of the familiar faces returning.”

Alex LaRoza and his mother, Debra, from Sunapee, decided to eat outside at Consuelo’s Taqueria in Manchester, but only because it was a nice day. They would have no problem dining inside, they said.

“I haven’t been out to a restaurant sitting down for like three months. We’ve done some takeout,” LaRoza said. “I’m totally ready to go indoors, but it is just nicer outside.”

Martin Delgadillo, Consuelo’s owner, spent time painting and installing plexiglass around the open kitchen during the shutdown. Business has been slow with all the offices downtown closed, but he had three or four indoor tables full around lunchtime on Monday.

“I think there is still a concern,” he said. “It is the reality of it. It is what it is, we are trying to make the best of it.”

Pickup orders have been steady since the restaurant reopened after Memorial Day. Weekends can get busy for outdoor dining.

“The base of people coming in and enjoying is taking a little bit more time,” Delgadillo said. “Today, was the day we were supposed to reopen, but I don’t see a lot of people out on the street, meaning a lot of people are still at home.”

Just before 2 p.m., several people sat inside Kisasi Japanese Cuisine on Elm Street in Manchester. The restaurant closed for about a month before starting takeout orders in April, said owner Shen Ni.

The restaurant has not opened for outdoor dining. The 100-seat dining room has been redesigned to accommodate social distancing.

“We usually don’t do outdoor dining, but right now because we can only do 50% indoor, we might add a few tables out there,” Ni said.

Trulock, who ate at the Nashua Garden, said Monday’s start of indoor dining is a good sign for the economy.

“Nashua is making up for lost time, and it’s nice. This will allow restaurants to bring in more revenue,” said Trulock, who works at Fratello’s Italian Grille in Nashua. “Bringing in 50% of customers is going to be awesome.”

Correspondent Kimberly Houghton contributed to this story.

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