

DETROIT STREET DISPATCH
Food & Love In the Time of Corona
Phillis Engelbert • detroitstreetfillingstation@gmail.com

PROLOGUE:

This personal/professional journal is the work of Phillis Engelbert, owner of Detroit Street Filling Station, The Lunch Room Bakery & Cafe and The Lunch Room Diner. The business began with The Lunch Room food cart in 2011 and grew into three brick-and-mortar locations between 2013 and 2017. Besides offering delicious vegan food, these restaurants are known for community activism and for hiring and supporting those in recovery from drug & alcohol addictions -- as well as returning citizens. What follows is a series of posts chronicling the human and economic impact of the coronavirus on our business. This is a living document, and will be updated on a periodic/semi-regular basis.

March 29

My first inkling that something was really wrong came on Friday night March 6. Before that, I had heard there was a worrisome virus sweeping Asia. Our health inspector mentioned it in early February during a routine inspection at our bakery & cafe. He said it had begun in the open-air markets where live animals are held and slaughtered for sale. I remember joking that being a vegan restaurant, it would never affect us. I only then learned that the name of the virus was corona. At the time I regarded it like SARS or bird flu -- something that would unfortunately hurt people far away, but would never land on my doorstep.

Fast forward to early March. The news was of people stranded on cruise ships off our shores. Then the first couple of cases were detected in Washington State. It still felt distant and somewhat insignificant. Until Friday March 6. That night I managed to leave the restaurant before 8pm and headed to LIVE, where my favorite weekly happy hour dance party takes place. It goes from 6-9pm which is just perfect for myself and dozens of my friends, who go to sleep early and get up early. I was surprised to see my friend Maggie there. Maggie is head of a U-M department and frequently travels for work. She told me the conference she was supposed to attend in Boston had been cancelled, as had been most of her upcoming conferences. All due to the coronavirus. I was shocked. Then I ran into my friend Jennifer. She works for the U-M Business School Catering Department. She had already been laid off, as all B-School functions had been canceled. What??? It was starting to feel real. Next my friend TK told me he had heard from a friend who cooks at a downtown restaurant, that all their U-M functions had been canceled. That restaurant, like a handful of other upscale downtown restaurants, relies on U-M groups' regular reservations for a large portion of their income.

Whoa. This problem was closer than I thought. My restaurants get business from U-M groups, but not so much that the loss of that business would crush us. But still. What was going on???

Friday March 6 had been a big day at my restaurants. Sales were strong. We were headed into our busy season. Just two weeks prior we had convened our first-ever all-locations-managers

meeting to strategize hiring for the spring and summer. Our biggest challenge, we thought, was how to handle the crowds at our doors. With the warmer weather would come sidewalk seating, meaning increased capacity. All trends pointed toward growth. We had to be ready.

But I left LIVE Friday night with a new sense of reality. Things were about to change in a big way.

And then it started. The next day sales slowed. And the next day too. In fact, all that week -- from Sunday March 8 to Saturday March 14 -- we slowed down. Each day's sales were about 10% smaller than the previous day. Throughout the week all U-M groups canceled their reservations. We had everything from 6-tops to 40-tops canceling. The true benchmarks came when universities started shutting down and sending students home. Harvard and the other Ivy Leagues came first, then OSU and others close to home. U-M closed that Wednesday. My student-workers left town. Ann Arbor public schools closed on Thursday. Sales plummeted. It felt like a slow march toward financial death. On Friday U-M canceled graduation. Some cities were starting to close restaurants' dining rooms and calling for people to stay at home.

For a couple of days we opened only The Lunch Room at lunchtime and Detroit Street Filling Station at dinner. It kind of worked as a stopgap. But Sunday March 15 was awful. Sales slowed to a crawl. I sent home early four staff members from Detroit Street -- and we had started the day lightly staffed. On my way from Detroit Street to The Lunch Room I realized I didn't know when I could have those staff members return, and it hit me. I walked into The Lunch Room and saw a friendly face and broke down sobbing. The stress was palpable. I felt like I could lose my business -- my baby -- the entity into which I had poured every drop of blood, sweat and tears for a decade.

That Sunday night I heard through the grapevine that Ann Arbor was considering closing restaurants. I texted the mayor and found out that was true -- that he and city council members were drafting language that would allow for restaurants to only open for carryout and delivery. The next day the governor pre-empted that move and called for the closure of all in-restaurant dining throughout the state, effective 3pm that day. I spent that Monday March 16 at The Lunch Room, and at 3pm we switched over to carryout only. That night I communicated with all our managers, and made the decision to close The Lunch Room and center carryout and delivery operations at Detroit Street Filling Station. We had already been experimenting with limited delivery at Detroit Street Filling Station. It was time to enter the next phase of operations.

March 30

We have now been operating as a carryout and delivery business for two weeks. I know that we are faring better than most, but nevertheless it is a struggle. Our distributors' delivery drivers tell us that 80 to 90 percent of the restaurants on their downtown Ann Arbor routes are now closed. And we're still here -- at least 2 of our 3 locations are still here. Sales are at about 60 percent of pre-virus levels. I'm told that that is also way above average.

But in order to continue operating we basically had to change our business model overnight. We had to scale down, hunker down, and make the most of our limited resources. At The Lunch Room Bakery & Cafe, we immediately cut staffing. We lopped off a front of house position, a dishwasher, and two bakers. At Detroit Street Filling Station, we shrunk to a staff comprising managers and other senior staff from our two downtown locations. Of the remaining (not-working) staff: some were students and left town and others who had children or elderly parents and decided to stay at home. In all, only about 7 staff members who wanted to work were denied the opportunity.

I have been sending out regular communication with all staff, offering help. At first I told people that we had "beautification projects." Anyone could come in for a couple of hours, tackle a project, and receive \$20, a meal, and enjoy some camaraderie. I also offered everyone unlimited free food for themselves and their families, plus emergency cash assistance. We designated one manager to become proficient at and help others navigate the unemployment system. But then the governor's stay-at-home order came on March 24 -- one week after our dining rooms were closed. And we could no longer offer staff the opportunity to come in and do projects. Only staff essential to the operation were lawfully allowed to work.

One thing that has saved us over the last few weeks has been the generosity of our patrons. Most significant has been gift card purchases, which totaled more than \$14,000 from March 1 through 15. Then on March 19 we announced our offer of free food to any unemployed restaurant workers, as well as anyone in general who could not afford to pay. That announcement brought in a new wave of gift card purchases. Many were accompanied by notes of encouragement and support; some were designated as "donations." We sent a message to our base thanking people for their support, which resulted in even more gift card purchases.

There have been good sales days and slow sales days. There have been good mood days and bad mood days. There have been good weather days, where everything feels hopeful, and cold, windy, rainy days, where everything feels bleak. Personally, my mood largely depends on how much sleep I got the night before. And sleep has been a struggle. So I try to harness my resources every day and present a strong, caring face for my workers and patrons. And I try to pull rabbits out of hats to keep the business going. With each passing day, however, that becomes more difficult.

Every employee begins their shift by washing their hands. Then they check in with me. They tell me how they are feeling. If they are not 100% healthy they cannot stay. Then they take their temperature and take and hold a deep breath for 10 seconds (to see if they have a cough). Then they get to work. We try to keep some distance between staff members, which is hard when people are working in close quarters in a kitchen. We set up tables to keep guests from coming more than a foot inside the doorway. We wear gloves when taking food out to cars. But still. There is a fear that we are not doing enough; that we could sicken the public or that our staff members could get exposed to someone with the virus. A handful of people (none of whom I know personally) have written stern messages telling us to close; that we are doing a public

disservice and are needlessly exposing people to the virus. I do my best to thoughtfully respond, but some people still lash out in anger. It makes me wonder: am I doing the right thing?

My instinct is to keep my business alive, as long as possible. My motivation is to keep as many people as possible employed, to keep an eye on my staff members who struggle even during normal conditions and are hanging on by a thread at present, and to preserve a structure that will be able to pick back up after this period. But what if the naysayers are right? It is an internal struggle that contributes to my sleepless nights.

April 6

Today I ended health insurance benefits for 13 staff members, effective April 30. I had been waiting to make this decision. I put out a press release a couple of weeks ago calling on Blue Care Network and the government to help cover health insurance premiums during this time. This action resulted in nothing except for a couple of phone calls from a BCN public relations person, assuring me they would waive late fees and were doing all that they could. I asked if their top executives were going without pay during this period, to which she had no answer. I also asked if their most highly paid people would return any dividends or bonuses from last year. Again, silence. Anyways, delaying payment doesn't help. I owe over \$17k from March. I haven't paid it yet. And now my April bill will be about \$8500. More manageable, but still difficult. And how will I be more able to pay as this period drags on?

We are cutting costs everywhere possible. We have been raiding The Lunch Room's inventory and getting creative with our menu, to keep our food purchases to a minimum. I'm going without pay. Two out of three landlords waived April rent. But still. March's bills -- based on February's reality -- are staggering compared to today's income reality. So, I terminated 13 staff members' insurance, messaged them all with the news and told them how to continue their coverage via COBRA (if they can afford between \$350 and \$550 per month). Then I tried to continue working. But I was not really capable. I left work around 4, came home, went for a long walk in the woods, and cooked dinner. And drank some wine. Such is life in corona virus reality.

I want to tell you about the human aspect of this experience. First, our customers. They are mostly really gracious and generous and kind. They tip well and leave us notes of gratitude. Last week one person gave me a check for \$2,000 and two other people gave us \$100 each. They tell us nice things when we deliver their food or they pick it up curbside. They buy gift cards -- over \$20,600 since this whole fiasco started (I date it to March 7). They offer to help. A financial advisor has been helping us sort through the CARES Act and navigate the offerings. An architect volunteered to help us through our fight with the city to keep our patio operating in the cold weather (another story). A cargo bike company donated a delivery bicycle for us to use

during this period. One person donated \$200 for us to deliver food to the hospital. People really want to help, and it's nice. We also have our naysayers... but they are far outnumbered by the helpful and generous customers.

We have now given away about \$2200 worth of meals to laid-off workers and homeless people. And donated about \$1500 in meals to our own furloughed staff and their families. This give-away program is all good. People get the food they need and we get appreciation and donations. It keeps us relevant and shows our humanity. It is the most important thing we are doing during this period.

Now let's talk about staff. This is where the story gets twisted and surprising. Pre-virus, we had 6 managers at The Lunch Room, 6 at Detroit Street and 2 at the bakery/cafe. We are down to 3 from The Lunch Room, 3 from Detroit Street and still have the 2 at the bakery/cafe. A full six managers dropped out; three right away and three over time. One found other work, three decided to self-isolate to avoid the virus, and two chose to focus on other priorities. The remaining Detroit Street/Lunch Room managers have formed a cohesive team at Detroit Street. Three others who were not formerly managers have been promoted.

Then there is a particular kitchen manager -- let's call him R. R had his first day back at work yesterday after nearly two weeks. R, after 2.25 years sober, relapsed. He spent the better part of a week injecting a host of terrible things into his veins. He ended up at the hospital, overdosed. They put him back together and he went right back and did more drugs. Once his friends and housemates found him, they brought him home. They took away his phone and car keys and confiscated all the drugs in his car. They watched him for 5 days, and then he came back to work. It was a week ago Saturday that most of us found out that R had relapsed. That day was terrible. Everyone was crying. It was like a death in the family. R is that important to our team. The folks in recovery had an impromptu AA meeting. Of the ten staff members working that day, it left just two of us to handle operations while everyone else met! But it was important and it allowed everyone to continue on. Besides R, there has been just one other relapse. That person got high for a night, and bounced back. I have had him working literally every day since then, both to give him structure and to keep an eye on him. There are two others on my watch list.

It's interesting how people respond in times of crisis. Sometimes the ones you think will rise up, decide to leave instead. And new heroes are born. Some of my staff members seem to have been made for times like this. Personally, I am there every day. I do physical and emotional wellness checks with staff. I praise them and support them. I work beside them, taking orders or chopping vegetables or cooking on the line. I try to joke around and dance with them and generally keep spirits high. But sometimes things get to me and I'm useless. Like the day R relapsed, and today.

April 12

It's Easter Sunday. The day our so-called president said we'd be getting back to normal. What a joke. We knew better. Normal is nowhere on the horizon. It's been about five weeks since the virus showed up on our continent. And nearly a month since restaurants were sidelined to carryout and delivery only.

I'm pleased to report that we're hanging in there. Through a combination of luck, marketing genius and sheer stubbornness, two out of our three locations are surviving. Detroit Street is doing sales that are pretty consistent with last year's at this time. The Bakery/Cafe is at about 60% of normal sales, but their staff is tiny. There are two people making and selling about \$2700 in food per week. And two bakers (1.5 FTEs) cranking out enough bread and desserts to supply both locations. The interesting thing about Detroit Street is that labor, as a percentage of sales, is way down. The good news is: efficiency is up and payroll is down. The bad news is: fewer people are working.

I've been thinking about the meaning of an economic engine. Using the restaurant as an example, we hire people to make and serve the food and wash dishes. Customers enjoy a night out and spend their money. We use that money to pay our staff and our suppliers. It's simple money-in, money-out. When customers stop coming, the engine slows or stops. Employees stop making money. They have no money to spend and nothing to do. Distributors suffer losses. Our produce distributor, Frog Holler, which caters mainly to restaurants, is down to a skeleton crew and has reduced hours from 6 days a week to 5 days a week. Our tofu maker, Michigan Soy Products, has shut down due to a lack of supplies. Some of their suppliers have shut down. We are saving money by buying less. We have stopped our linen service to save money. Sohn Linen suffers as a result. A nearby market has sold off one of their two delivery vehicles -- the one they used to deliver to restaurants. The restaurants have closed and many say they will not re-open. The chain just continues. This economic engine sustains our society. It gives people work/purpose -- and money to spend. And everything is connected. I wonder about how it will all come back to life, and *if* it will all come back to life.

I can measure the degree to which people are hurting by the amount of free food we are giving away. At first we were giving away about \$200/day. Now it's more like \$500/day. And we have a "hardship fund" in an envelope by the door. Staff is empowered to give it away as they see fit. The envelope can empty in the blink of an eye. I suppose a silver lining is that more people than ever are eating vegan food (hah!).

Most of my staff is now collecting unemployment. And I just gave everyone the remainder of their paid time off. Payday is Friday. If payday were today, I'd have negative money in the bank. But I'm counting on weekend sales to get us back in the black.

The CARES Act was heralded as this great stimulus package to save the economy. I seriously doubt that. Yes, most people will get their \$1200 check (or whatever it is). Some people need it and some people don't. Why is everyone getting it? Why not concentrate it in the hands of people who NEED to spend it? Another big chunk goes to the airlines. The remainder goes to small business. But I doubt it will save mainstreets throughout America. My own experience with it: I applied for a \$20k loan. I'm afraid to apply for more because the last thing I want is to come out of this thing saddled with debt. Debt is its own form of hell. Much of my loan will not be forgiven, according to the rules. The percentage of loan forgiven is dependent on payroll as of June being the same as payroll before the virus. Well, there's slim chances of that. My staff is down to about 40% of what it was. If things are still the same in June, that means that \$8k of the \$20k has the possibility of being forgiven and I'm left holding the bag for \$12k.

I believe that my business' finances right now are better than most. I'm making payroll and paying all our federal payroll taxes. I paid the one rent (\$8k) that I couldn't get out of. All of our vendors are paid to date. I made partial payments towards the state sales and withholding tax and health insurance premiums. I still owe them a combined \$20k, but that's what the loan is for.

Personnel update: Our staffing is fairly steady, with some changes. One more front of house member dropped out. She lives in Ypsi, has no car, and is afraid to take the bus. My son returned from Colorado and is back working at Detroit Street, which is a silver lining. Crystal, a rock-steady front of house member, has one year sober today. That is really fantastic. Our kitchen crew is doing well -- except R. He came back a couple of times but has been unable to make it through a shift. He admitted last night he is still using. And now, hopefully, he will get into treatment somewhere.

Personally, I'm ok. Overworked for sure and stressed out. Last night was the first good night of sleep I got in weeks. It really helps. I'm still finding it challenging to concentrate. I'm used to my brain working at a certain level, and now it operates at a lower level. I still force a daily brainstorm (online grocery store, care packages, free food to unemployed people, Easter dinners, etc). Mainly I jump from one thing to the next and forget what I originally set out to do. I write things down and lose my list. I try to spend time with people -- staff and guests. And balance that with administrative and marketing tasks.

I often get up early to cram in an uninterrupted hour before going to the restaurant to ... update the online menu, help the cooks track down ingredients, pick up baked goods from The Lunch Room Bakery for Detroit Street, take inventory at The Lunch Room to see what's left to raid, check in with a struggling staff member, remind everyone to take their temperatures and wash their hands, write a check for a delivery driver, restock our online grocery store, tend to plants, return messages and phone calls, do books, go to the bank for cash so I can cash employees' paychecks, re-update the online store, take pictures and do marketing for special items, chop vegetables, help on the cooking line, play social worker, drive deliveries, make the schedule, remember to drink water...

April 13

Today we were able to make use of a customer's \$200 donation by delivering lunch to nurses at the U-M Mott Hospital. Our customer-funded free food program in general has made it possible to give food to: our furloughed staff and their families, unemployed service workers, clients and staff from Dawn Farm Addiction Treatment Center, a growing number of homeless people, and anyone else in need.

Since March 19 (26 days ago) we have given out over \$7,000 of free food. Additionally, we have paid out \$5754 to staff members in paid time off. And our community has purchased over \$20,000 in gift cards.

April 14

And now... another relapse of a staff member who has been instrumental to our operation. Forty hours a week he gives his all, always with a kind word and a smile on his face. We are all waiting, watching, hoping for his return so we can shower him with love and support and help him get through this period. Treatment centers are not accepting patients these days. It is all up to him... and us.

And a couple of pieces of good news:

I visited our tiny crew at The Lunch Room Bakery & Cafe today. There are two cafe staffers, a bakery manager, and a bread baker who comes in at night. The Cafe workers -- Kathryn & Dillon -- make food for 50-100 individuals daily, mostly workers at the VA Hospital across the street. They also help the bakers. Our Bakery Manager Angie coordinates daily production and distribution of bread and baked goods to the Cafe & to Detroit Street, PLUS she makes and delivers special-order birthday cakes. Avery, the night baker, produces enough bread and buns to supply both locations PLUS the growing loaf-of-bread sales from the Detroit Street online grocery store. And they do it all with the utmost diligence and care for health standards.

The other good news: we received an email from a guest that made us reflect on why we do what we do, and what has allowed us to continue operating today:

"You probably know my wife and me from our visits to your restaurants. During this time of crisis, we both got your email and without talking to each other, we purchased something like \$550 in gift cards between the two of us.

The Lunch Room has been an important part of our relationship, especially when I lived on the west coast and she in Ann Arbor. When I used to visit her, I'd fly to Detroit and meet her at The Lunch Room, sometimes almost every weekend. We'd try to sit by the bar, enjoying each other after a week or 2 or 3 of not seeing each other. Half our nights in A2, we'd either eat at TLR or take out from you and eat at home. I think over an 18 month period we ate at TLR or DFS at least 4-5 times a week, sometimes for lunch and dinner - and if we woke up early and were

motivated, for a wonderful music filled brunch. Outside of our homes, we have probably spent as much time together at your restaurants as we have anywhere else.

At some point, in a couple of years, my wife will almost certainly defend her PhD and we'd very much like to celebrate that milestone at one of your restaurants. If you find yourself \$1000 short for payroll or anything else and need the help, I'm happy to take the risk and put money down on an unknown date 2 years from now.

We love your mission, we are both vegan, and we have lived some very important moments of our relationship with you - we'd love to see you survive and thrive well into the future."

Saturday April 18

Two days ago we received notice that our PPP loan did not get funded. It didn't even make it into the queue. The message we received from the bank said that "hundreds of thousands" of small business loan applications did not get funded because funds ran out. Where did the money go? Airlines, hotel and restaurant chains, where else? I don't know of a single small business that received funding, and it seems that everyone applied. I first learned the details of the program on Wednesday April 1. The process opened two days later. I submitted my application the very next day ... Saturday April 4.

To be honest, I anticipated this would happen. Call it skepticism, but the Trump Administration doesn't exactly inspire confidence that ordinary people will be prioritized. The good part is that I was not relying on the \$20,000 loan for my business' survival. (I could have applied for much more, but didn't want to face future debt). But many small businesses were counting on the loan for their survival. This loan program was heralded as the help that mom & pop shops needed to survive this period. It was both financial and psychological salvation. And it hasn't worked out that way. It breaks my heart to think that so many people (not unlike myself) have given their all to their business. And now they are watching it sink.

I posted our rejection letter on social media and that post generated a lot of response. Probably a dozen other businesses shared that they had also been rejected. People voiced anger and support. It was really gratifying to hear people's genuine concern for our restaurants. They asked how they can support us and suggested a gofundme page.

The truth is, I've always seen myself -- and this business -- as a community resource. We have space and personnel and food and generosity. Over the years, we've made a point of compensating our staff well AND donating money to nonprofits (\$31,000 to date). And we pride ourselves on the fact that we continue to take care of people. The amount of free food we are giving away at present continues to increase. We have an envelope of cash (our "hardship fund") by the front door that staff has the discretion to distribute to those who need it. So to think of ourselves as being on the "needy" end is a huge about-face.

Yes, in some ways we are a little needy. We can't pay all of our bills. We owe money to Blue Care Network and to the state. But payroll is met, and all of our small vendors have been paid. Sales are brisk, especially at Detroit Street Filling Station. The money that people have donated to us has been used to feed those who need it.

We had a kitchen managers meeting yesterday to solidify our systems during this period. We've been operating in a way that has "one foot in, one foot out." Our blended staff and menu (Lunch Room/Detroit Street) have been regarded as temporary. Well, yesterday we made the decision to think of it as permanent. This is where we are and we need to dig in. Get everyone up to speed. Uphold standards. Regardless of the ever-changing word about when/how things will open back up, we are making our own plans. We will be the best, most efficient, highest-quality take-out operation we can be.

The question on my mind today is: Where is the leadership?

We are sorely lacking on all levels of government. How are our elected representatives helping us deal with this crisis? Who's helping people handle the uncertainty? Where is the humanity? People are scared, anxious, sick & hurting. I want some compassion from our leaders -- all of them. Start a conversation on all levels. Check in with people. What do we need to cope? What is this all going to look like when we emerge? How can people get the help that they need?

Tuesday April 21

Sales are surprisingly strong at Detroit Street Filling Station. Both Sunday and Monday this week were about 50% higher than they were the week before. And last week was among our top ten ever. This is partly due to the fact that The Lunch Room is closed. Detroit Street is now pulling from The Lunch Room's customer base, as well as its own. Detroit Street is also now open 7 days a week, compared to 6 days pre-crisis. And, sadly, there are fewer restaurants open by the week. For instance, we noticed that No Thai (across the street from us) closed a week ago -- prior to that, we could see their delivery vehicles buzzing around. Plus, our carryout/delivery operation is going well. Staff is on their game. Food comes out fast and delicious. Service is top-notch. Everyone cares.

A note about restaurants in our city: I want them all to succeed. Our downtown is the vibrant center it is, because of the host of locally-owned small businesses. If the restaurants don't come back, what will take their place? Will their vacancies be filled by chains? Will we look like a freeway exit? I have spoken to the mayor about this and will lend help however I can.

I continue to be grateful for every day: for waking up healthy, for our staff coming to work healthy, for continued good business, for our equipment working (knock on wood), for our customer base continuing to be here for us with patronage, kind words, and generosity. I'm grateful that the food orders continue to come in, people continue to drive up to get their food, and that our delivery drivers are kept busy.

Life these days is a balancing act. On the one hand, my head is in the business. Every day I think about how to keep this machine going. I dream up ideas and share them with Andrew Brown (who in a not-virus world is our events manager and lead musician). Andrew makes a graphic or collects photos and works his magic on our social media sites. For instance, this week's campaigns are: "like" us on instagram and get entered in a contest to win a giant roll of toilet paper; DONUTS (enough said); and the release of more of our recipes. Past campaigns include: grocery store, birthday cakes, "share the love" tipping, free meals to those who need it, various types of food porn, bicycle delivery, gift cards, Easter dinner, care packages, and many more. It is an effort to remain relevant and interesting and to engage our base... which translates into sales and betters the chances that we will survive as a business and an economic and social engine.

Then I come home and read The New York Times and my head goes into the virus-drenched real world. The worries start. What if, what if? Are we doing enough? Presently I'm trying to track down enough masks for every employee who wants to wear one... or for when/if it becomes a requirement. We have an employee health log; every day when an employee arrives they take their temperature and answer several questions and record their information. So far, so good. But the worry is still there.

I'm also concerned about what happens when social distancing restrictions are relaxed. On the one hand, this is a tough time for so many people who are stuck in their homes, especially those without a paycheck or with difficult family relationships. They need to get out, to get back to their lives. On the other hand, a premature decision to re-open and subsequent second virus spike, would be probably more devastating than anything yet seen. I have a concern about re-opening a dining room with fewer tables. For us, to keep tables 6-feet apart would mean losing about $\frac{3}{4}$ of our seating capacity. How would 25% seating help us? Would it be worth risking the health of our servers? It may make more sense to continue our current carryout/delivery model than to operate with just a few tables.

And an update on substance-abuse-related relapses among our personnel: we currently have three staff members out, due to relapse. One, the previously mentioned kitchen manager R (relapsed about a month ago), is at home, trying to stay clean, and awaiting an opening at a treatment center. The other staff member, who I mentioned in my April 14 entry, ended up in the hospital and is now doing better. We expect him to return to work this week. And yesterday we experienced another relapse. This young man had worked every position-- cook, dishwasher, front of house, delivery driver. He showed up at the restaurant high yesterday and two of our other employees-in-recovery handled him, guided him away, and helped him find a place to stay for the night. It's hard to watch someone you care about go through this. They become a different person in front of your eyes. Compassion quickly turns to anger and hurt and sadness. There is really nowhere for him to go. I can't have him at work. The detox and treatment centers are closed to newcomers, to protect the health of current residents. I have no answers to this one.

Thursday April 23

Yesterday saw the return of one staff member who had relapsed on alcohol. After a rough 10 days, and medical help, he got his condition under control. We discussed how much more difficult it is these days -- vs normal times -- to stay sober and mentally healthy. It is a blessing to have him back; several of us had been worried about him and we had missed his energy. Hopefully all of us at the restaurant have learned something from his experience and can better take care of ourselves and each other.

One topic on everyone's mind lately is the weather. We seem to have been experiencing endless winter, which is tough on people. A little sunshine and warm air would do wonders for our spirits. It makes me feel sad for those stuck at home, especially with kids, itching to get out. When we had that peek at springtime a couple of weeks ago, it visibly lifted spirits. But it also encouraged social activity (is "spring fever" still a thing?). Weather also drives sales -- even now. Sales strengthened during the warm spell, so we planned for more, then winter returned. Thankfully sales have hung in there.

Regardless of the weather and the virus, I want some things to stay normal. To me, springtime means planters on the patio at Detroit Street. We started in mid March with cold-hardy pansies and snapdragons. Yesterday we received an order of showy perennials and annuals from a greenhouse. The planting probably starts today and you will start seeing beautiful pots around the edge of the restaurant.

Yesterday also signaled a change in my thinking. Previously I was absorbed in learning about and applying for all the various forms of small-business aid we've all heard about. That has yielded nothing. Yes, there is still a slim chance our PPP loan will get funded in the next round. But beyond that, I am not expecting help from the government. The only help we have received has been: 2 of our three landlords forgave April rent, and generous and caring patrons have purchased gift cards. Also helpful has been the ability to stretch out tax payments without penalty.

As of now, I am putting 100% of my efforts into the business -- taking care of employees, keeping our food production in top shape, marketing, selling food, giving away food, communicating with our base, staying relevant, and administration. While I'm rooted in the present, I still have one eye open toward the future. There are lots of questions about the future of The Lunch Room-- what and when it will look like. Everything is on the table. But planning for the future feels like shooting darts in the dark.

I hope everyone is finding a way to survive this. I know there are many ways this period is affecting people -- psychologically, financially, physically. I wish we could be more of a place of sharing and caring. You know how we're doing, but we don't know how you're doing -- unless you are coming to pick up free food. Then we have an inkling. It's tough to build community during a time of social distancing. Perhaps, with spring coming, we will figure out a way.

Sunday April 26

Things have become clearer and simpler since I gave up hopes of government assistance. Sure, it's possible our loan will get approved on the next round of paycheck-protection funding, but it's a longshot. I am not counting on it. My financial projections and marketing efforts are solely based on what we are able to bring in and put out at Detroit Street and The Lunch Room Bakery. All the programs and possibilities have proven to be nothing more than a distraction.

There have been some exciting developments over the last few days:

- The weather has improved. Yay! That means people are feeling happier. It also means we are making more use of the delivery cargo bike that Urban Cargo Bikes donated to us at the beginning of the crisis. The plants we received on Wednesday have been planted and now adorn the perimeter of our patio.
- Sales are strong. Detroit Street sales are right where they should be this time of year. The Bakery/Cafe is at about 70% of normal sales. But The Lunch Room remains closed. So in total, our business is doing about 60% of the sales we did last year at this time, when all three locations were open.
- Our staff members are doing well overall. We have two individuals still out, trying to get and stay sober. One person who was out on a relapse, is back and doing well. Our core group of about 30 staffers between the two locations is becoming more proficient at their jobs and functions as a well-oiled machine. We are better able to handle crazy dinner rushes.
- Our Bakery/Cafe location continues to amaze me. The two Cafe staffers make and sell breakfast and lunch Monday through Friday. The two bakers produce mountains of breads and pastries to satisfy the ever-growing demand. And the donut-making operation we started at The Lunch Room Diner is going gangbusters. We started with 30 donuts a day and are now ramped up to 100. And they still sell out.
- Our community remains generous and gracious. Since the crisis began in mid-March, folks have purchased more than \$25,000 in gift cards. And write us nice notes. And say nice things. We are feeling the love!

But for as positive as I feel about the business, my feelings swing the opposite direction when I look out from this safe and protected hive. Our national and world state of affairs frighten me. This is the worst possible time to have Trump as president. What type of human being, much less a leader, suggests to vulnerable people that they endanger their lives by ingesting disinfectant? And then later quips that he was being sarcastic? How can he do that and what is his goal? Thanks to Trump, many seasoned and knowledgeable diplomats and scientists are gone from their posts. Since the start of his presidency, unable to do their jobs under his tutelage, they quit. And still he makes life hard for those who remain. If there ever is a time for strong leadership, crisis management, and compassion, it is now. Every day that goes by without heroic efforts on the part of the government is a day that leads us closer to becoming a failed state.

This is what I would say to our leaders:

- Compile a brain trust of the leading epidemiologists and public health professionals.
- Follow their recommendations on social distancing, shelter-in-place and other considerations. Use ONLY their advice in public proclamations.
- Put all available government resources into developing and mass producing testing (testing that WORKS), supplying hospitals with adequate equipment, and developing a vaccine and a cure.
- Divert resources to our communities to give them any hope of survival. Distribute funding to city governments, individuals and small businesses. Stop this bullshit of massive grandstanding loan programs that primarily benefit big business, the president's friends, and the banks. Start with forgiveness of all federal payroll taxes for small businesses. That would go a long way.
- COMMUNICATE: Give a daily briefing that is useful to people tucked away in their houses. Tell them what's happening, acknowledge their pain, provide a forum for response. Make communication a 2-way street. Help people understand this crisis and give them hope there will be something for them to return to.
- Envision a bold new future. When we can re-open, there will still be a jobs crisis. We need public works programs, projects for young people, a fresh take on education.
- We need single-payer health care for all. If this crisis has shown us anything, it's that our health care system is broken. So many people are in poor health generally and don't receive the care they need. That makes us vulnerable, as a population, to opportunistic viruses. Let's focus on improving our health as a nation, so we will be better able to fight off all illness.
- Strengthen our public health institutions. Give the CDC and public health systems the resources and respect they need, so are ready to battle disease address concerns as they arise.
- We need a system that's guided by science and compassion -- not profit. This crisis demonstrates the limitations of the free market. If we wish to remain functional and relevant as a society, we need re-think our structures and our priorities.

Tuesday April 28

Yesterday I was reminded of the adage "if you want something, let it go" (or something like that). No sooner had I completely given up hope of government assistance when \$10,000 was plopped into our business checking account. It came in at the same time as our weekend sales deposits. I shook my head, thinking "I know we had a good weekend but not THAT good." I had to look twice. The description line next to the \$10k was gobbly-gook, but it contained the letters "SBA." I asked two people at the bank, neither of whom knew what the deposit was about. One connected me with an SBA staffer who assured me that it was a grant from the Small Business Administration.

The funny thing is, I recall filling out this very short form six or seven weeks ago. At the time, I was bombarded with offers of assistance and -- doing my due diligence -- I replied to every one. Some of them, including the SBA emergency assistance fund, never acknowledged my submission. So I didn't give them a second thought.

Further information about the \$10k: I was told that if I didn't sign any paperwork then it was a grant; not a loan. It can be spent on any business purpose and there is no reporting. Wow, this is really a new day. I guess I'll either use the 10k to pay some bills or save it for the eventual re-opening of The Lunch Room.

Other things that are new:

- I took a day off yesterday; my first in a long time -- so long that I'm afraid to admit how long. But it predated the start of the corona period. A day off does wonders for the soul, especially when it's in nice weather and one can spend the whole day outside. Sunning, napping, hiking, eating, and spending time with family made me feel like anything is possible.
- The nice weather is bringing out more people. So far everyone seems to be observing social distance rules, as they stroll and enjoy themselves. The mood is lighter.
- We continue to hit the jackpot with making the right items for our customers. Groceries, donuts, and now.... Cocktail mixes (just add booze). Since introducing the mason jars full of mix yesterday, we have sold out our stock twice and are making more.

I'll conclude with another thought that's been on my mind: communication. I'm working internally with staff on a way to allow our customers to speak to us and each other on our social media sites about how they are doing. And I'm talking to community organization leaders about creating an online forum for small businesses in downtown Ann Arbor. We are going through a lot of the same experiences and emotions. We don't have to do it alone. Let's share, and help each other through this.

Sunday May 3

A lot has happened in the five days since my last report. In fact, so much has happened that there hasn't even been time to write about it. We got a PPP loan (in addition to the SBA emergency funding grant/loan), we started selling flowers from a family farm/greenhouse, and we had our biggest sales week ever in the history of Detroit Street. We also came to terms with the increasing permanence of our situation and what that means for ourselves and our employees.

As I sit here writing this at 7:27 am, out in the yard with sunshine and birds, I am aware of my aching muscles and tired head. Our sales have been much stronger than anything I could have anticipated through this crisis. Food orders come in steadily throughout the day, then the flood of tickets starts around 4pm and lasts until 8pm or so. Online orders literally pour in -- the tickets stream from the printer. We have two phone lines, and during dinner they both ring constantly. While we are on one call taking an order, the call waiting buzzes ceaselessly. Callers get frustrated that they can't get through. What a weird problem to have.

The harder we try, the more food we sell, which places more responsibility on us to give back. It's great to feel like an economic engine. Just this week we gave away about \$2300 in free food

and gave \$1000 in cash assistance to furloughed staff members who have not yet received unemployment. A food distributor mistakenly dropped off five cases of whole-grain Pop Tarts (labeled "sunflower oil"!), which they couldn't take back. So we received a credit and took the Pop Tarts down the street to Tea Haus where they continue to prepare school lunches for kids who need them -- support Tea Haus! They are champions!

Another fun development has been selling flowers and herbs. It started with a thought about selling something special for Mother's Day. While conceptualizing food and drink baskets, I thought it would be a nice touch to include a flower with each basket. I called my friend Karlene from Goetz Greenhouse & Family Farms. She said they don't have cut flowers, but they do have potted Gerber daisies. I asked if we could order 100 for Mother's Day, then thought "why wait?" I asked if they could bring some for us to sell in our online store. Her husband, Farmer John, showed up an hour later with 25 Gerber daisies, which we sold almost immediately. That was Wednesday. They have brought us more product twice since then -- hanging baskets, potted flowers, and potted herbs. And I just messaged to ask them for more. It's a partnership I feel really good about. We help them sell goods that, with Farmer's Markets closed, they have difficulty distributing. And we can offer our customers plants they normally get at Farmer's Market, but can't at present. It's nice to see people's faces light up when they pick out their hanging flower baskets.

OK, backing up. On Tuesday I wrote about receiving a mystery \$10,000 that turned out to be from the Small Business Administration. Well, the very next day we received a message that our PPP Loan had been approved. Then things turned into a weird version of "Let's Make a Deal." I grew up watching that game show, where contestants could choose the sure thing -- an appliance or a new car -- or take a gamble on what's behind Door #1. Behind Door #1 could be anything from a lump of coal to an all-expense paid trip to a luxury resort in Hawaii. Watching contestants choose revealed their true nature: were they cautious or a risk-taker?

So this is how my loan/grant experience turned into "Let's Make a Deal." On Monday I received money that I was told -- by experts who were 95% certain -- was a grant. It had no strings attached and no reporting requirements. But as soon as I received word of the \$20,000 PPP loan, I received the following communication from a small business advisor employed by the county:

"I just wanted to give a couple of updates and some clarification about EIDL [Economic Injury Disaster Loan] and PPP. As you know there have been a number of different interpretations on how all of these programs are going to work together. It seems that even from bank to bank we are seeing different views on how all of this will shake out in the end. Here is the way I would suggest approaching it. If you get the EIDL advance, these are just showing up in peoples accounts, they are basically grants and can be used for just about anything; *except on equipment and refinancing debt, see me if you aren't sure*. However, if you also get PPP from a bank be prepared for the EIDL advance amount to be deducted from the total forgivable potential of the PPP. Initially we thought if the EIDL advance *was not used for payroll*, that all of

it could be forgiven but I'm hearing differently so I want everyone to be prepared if that holds true. *See the example below.* Bottom line the EIDL advance amount would basically turn into a 2 year loan at 1% via PPP. That's not a terrible thing since so much more could be forgiven with PPP, I'm just trying to eliminate any surprises. If you are only taking the EIDL and no PPP, all of the *EIDL advance is forgiven.*"

So... imagine me, having given up on any or all forms of government assistance, and just trying to make my business work. Then I get \$10,000. And two days later \$20,000. Then I'm told basically "you can keep the \$10k as a grant, or if you choose to take the \$20k you essentially get a \$30k loan." \$10k for free or \$30k to pay back -- maybe. As I worked a busy lunch and mulled it all over, the absurdity of it struck me. But these are the times we're living in.

Later that day I spoke by phone with Andreea from Bank of Ann Arbor. She patiently talked things through with me. By her calculations, since our loan was for such a modest sum (compared to what we were eligible for), it would likely be forgiven. We could spend the entire sum of the PPP and the EIDL combined -- \$30,000 -- on a single payroll. In other words, we would not have a problem spending the money on payroll-related expenses within the 6- or 8- (depending on who you consult) week period following receipt of the monies. She also explained that even in the worst case scenario -- having to repay the entire sum -- it would come out in small monthly increments over a long period of time at a 1% interest rate. So I rolled the dice, chose what's behind Door #1, and had the \$20k deposited into our account. I'll use it on the next payroll and have enough money left in the account to pay off bills from early March. I can live with the mystery, regardless of how it turns out.

The current period aside, it's been an interesting trajectory for Detroit Street. The restaurant got off to a rocky start. We opened with a fine-dining concept, which after three months proved financially unsustainable. In December 2017 we pulled the plug and, deep in debt, started over. We rolled out a casual, community-oriented approach which felt much more natural and true to our roots. Live music and art shows were cornerstones of the new concept. But this came at the start of a brutally cold and snowy winter. Spring came and we started to do better. Then construction started. Our restaurant was completely strangled and literally shaken by earth-moving equipment that tore up streets and sidewalks on both sides of the restaurant. That disruption continued through the spring and summer of 2018. Finally in the fall of 2018, with construction basically completed, we started to hit our stride. Sales grew and we built a loyal following. The music nights and new menu were a hit. Then came another rough-weather winter. We had to borrow more money to keep the business afloat. I remember thinking: which plague is next, frogs or locusts?

Things really looked up in 2019. That spring and summer, Detroit Street began to meet its potential. Our reviews greatly improved, we commissioned a mural for the side of the building, flower pots sprang up everywhere and our dining room and patio EXPLODED. Weekdays were decently busy and on weekends we often had an hour wait for a table. Some nights we were so full that we stopped taking reservations a few days out. I remember looking around at the

buzzing restaurant -- servers with trays of food, guests enjoying themselves, the bar cranking out cocktails, the band playing -- and trying to capture the moment. Somehow I had an inkling that it wouldn't last. I couldn't say why; maybe it was just a feeling that nothing is permanent. But it was so magical that I wanted to remember it forever.

So now I know that the next plague was not frogs or locusts, but corona. This period has its place within the restaurant's cycle of life. It has a past and a future. And for now, that future will be carry-out and delivery, plants and flowers for adornment and for sale, building community in whatever way possible. At some unknown point in the future, hopefully we will return to the bustling space, incredible concerts by our extremely talented musicians, and all the small but meaningful conversations that happen between staff and guests and across tables throughout the restaurant.

Mother's Day, Sunday May 10

I'm starting to experience a new curve on the corona-era rollercoaster. There are many lenses through which to look at this thing. There are the broad sectors-- public health, economic and political. Then there are the personal ones. And then they start to blend together. Each time the stay-at-home order gets extended, on the one hand, I am not surprised or dismayed. It's necessary and understandable. But it also deepens the feeling of tightrope walking without a net.

I'm feeling the effects of two months of disruption to professional and social routines. These days... confusion, sadness, and fear combine with my usual sense of optimism, creativity, indefatigability and compassion. When I was a U-M student in the 80s, living in East Quad, there was a janitorial closet someone had labeled "Primal Scream." Rarely used back then, I'm sure it would be in demand right now.

Some days I ignore the news and focus on the business. It's easier to operate with blinders on. But it doesn't seem like a responsible way to exist. So other days I consume news and listen to people around me -- other business owners, health care workers, farmers, unemployed people -- and what I read and what they tell me swirls around in my head. I worry about food supply and how long unemployment funds will last, a second round of infections and how/when we will have elections again, and it proves a distraction from running the business.

OK, that's the personal.

In terms of the business, sales remain strong. We are continuously improving our carryout and delivery systems. Piece-by-piece we have transformed our dining areas into storage spaces for dry goods and carryout containers. Over the weeks we have moved stacks of chairs here and tables there... plugged in a rice cooker, created a station for filling flour bags. This week we settled in even more. Putting aside the "temporary" sentiment, we organized the space to make it most useful for the long haul.

Staff updates: Overall people are doing well. They continue to take their temperatures on arriving at work daily and so far, knock on wood, everyone is healthy. It's a tremendous crew. Everyone goes above and beyond, keeps a positive attitude, and takes seriously the health and safety expectations. Our team of managers on a daily business demonstrates their commitment to the business' success.

On a sad note, three staff members with various periods of sobriety under their belt have relapsed and are currently not working. One, the previously mentioned kitchen manager R, finally got into treatment. That's the best news. Another staffer got into treatment, but only lasted a day. He left and is out there somewhere, using. The third person is currently holed up in a motel room. One of his co-workers paid for three nights in the room. But he also took away the individual's debit card to prevent him from emptying his entire bank account on drugs. I have learned, to my amazement, that one can blow thousands of dollars in the blink of an eye when using.

Now it's time to focus on the day. It's Mother's Day and we have about 70 baskets to prepare. The planters we brought onto the patio to protect from frost need to be taken back outside. The pay period ended on Friday and there is payroll to do. There are bills to pay, store items to re-stock, and recipes to edit for the website.

Sunday May 17

All week, I've been thinking about what I wrote in last Sunday's blog post. I went down a few emotional rabbit holes that day and the next. The course of events is too large to fully process and respond to, and grappling with it all can become debilitating. The question I've been trying to answer is how to chart a course-- both personally and professionally -- that feels reasonable, responsible, tolerable, and meaningful.

The simple, two-pronged (and obvious) answer made itself clear: keep the business healthy and help those in need.

What does that look like? First, for the business. The priority, as always, is on personnel: daily checking in on everyone's physical and emotional well-being. And it means maintaining and strengthening the organization. We have weekly meetings with kitchen managers and front of house managers to problem solve, hone our systems, and introduce new ideas. And following the same rule of thumb as in "normal" times -- we can't just tread water. We have to continually evolve to keep things fresh, interesting and relevant. For instance, our cooks create dinner specials -- both to keep themselves and our customers interested. And we are making three changes to our regular menu this week, plus expanding store offerings. To our regulars: we don't want you to get bored with your choices!

Our partnership with Goetz Greenhouse & Family Farm continues to be a personal bright spot. I love the flowers and herbs they bring two or three times a week. It makes our patio smell and look fantastic, verdant and alive! I'm happy to support them by purchasing their goods, and I see

the joy these products bring to our customers. Plants are my happy place and apparently I'm not alone.

The next part of my corona-era-survival-guide is helping others, and this past week we were able to up our game in that area. First, we renewed our commitment to providing free food to those who need it. A PR campaign spelled out an easy way to order entrees and/or groceries using the 100% "industry discount" via email. People are starting to take advantage of that. Second, I met with Lisa at Tea Haus. She and her staff have been providing 650 free lunches for school kids per week plus meals for the homeless at Delonis Center for the last two months. That's amazing! We are now helping them by procuring peanut butter, jam and other supplies; plus we are baking and donating cookies once a week. Another plan in the works is to hold a fundraiser for Al Otro Lado: the organization that provides humanitarian and legal assistance to immigrants and refugees at the border. Last year we raised over \$8700 for Al Otro Lado. Now their needs are even greater.

Lots of people ask me about re-opening. When are we going to do it and what will it look like? What about the future of The Lunch Room Diner & Canteen? It's difficult to formulate answers given all the uncertainties. So I'm answering the only way I can: we are staying the course until compelled to change. As things begin to open up, we will add well-distanced sidewalk tables. And we'll keep doing everything else that we're doing at Detroit Street and The Lunch Room Bakery & Cafe -- providing delicious and healthy meals and constantly striving for better. Springtime provides new hope. Within our current confines, we will continue to chisel out new opportunities.

Sunday May 24

Today marks the beginning of summer weather. For the first time, the AC is on in the kitchen. I'm writing this from Detroit Street's plant-filled patio, where the ceiling fans are providing a much-needed breeze.

Along with the heat comes plants and produce! We just received 30# of fresh-picked asparagus (which we braise with lemon-"butter" and top with miso-walnut parmesan, yum) along with for-sale tomato plants, red bell pepper plants, and numerous herbs and flower pots. The Goetz family farmers bring us the goods and we sell them. And eat them. My favorite meal is braised asparagus and grilled Brinery tempeh atop a garden salad. The world feels right when I dig into this dish.

The biggest topic of conversation over the past week has been re-opening. The recent governor's order, which allows for the limited operation of retail stores locally and restaurants in northern Michigan, has sparked questions about our own re-opening plans. That is a tricky question, in response to which there are more questions than answers.

On the one hand, we want to get back to being a real restaurant! Our staff miss the hubbub of a busy dining room. Our bartenders are anxious to once again serve up beautiful cocktails. The

musicians are tired of practicing at home and are ready to perform on the patio. Even the cooks say they miss looking out the service window and seeing all the guests. For my part, I certainly miss the party atmosphere that characterizes busy nights. There is a magic in those moments that's hard to describe and impossible to replace.

On the other hand, change is hard. It took a lot of effort to transition to all carry-out and delivery. And it will take an equally great effort to transition back to full-service. On top of that, there is fear and anxiety. We -- us and you --- can't just flip a switch and become comfortable with the dining experience. How will it feel for diners to sit in a sparsely populated dining area and be waited on by servers wearing masks? Will that be enjoyable? Do patrons want to be quizzed about their health at the door, and to have to use hand sanitizer or wash their hands? Is there any protocol that will make restrooms sufficiently sanitized to prevent the spread of illness? Is it economically feasible to open up for service to a limited number of guests?

Perhaps fortunately, those questions are on hold for at least another couple of weeks. We will closely watch the outcomes in areas where re-opening is already occurring. By listening to experts and our own clientele, we will hopefully know when the time is right to take steps toward dining-in.

Now, back to the present. All of us on staff here remain focused on doing the best we can with our current systems. That means paying attention to: food quality and efficiency, timely food delivery, tweaks to our online store to keep it current and user-friendly, tasty dinner specials and drink mixes, mouth-watering baked goods, lots of garden plants, and friendly curbside service. Our merged Lunch Room/Detroit Street management team grows more cohesive by the week. Kitchen managers and front-of-house managers all take their positions seriously. They ensure smooth operations all the way around. I'm proud of the way they have tackled complicated and potentially thorny issues with integrity, resolve and compassion. I couldn't be happier about all the personal growth that has taken place here over these last several weeks.

I also marvel at the receptivity and generosity of our customer base. In my last post I wrote that we were starting to help Tea Haus with their free-school-lunch program. When we asked "how can we help" they said "order us peanut butter, jelly, and chips from your suppliers and we'll reimburse you. And bake cookies once a week if you can." We have now baked and donated 200 cookies twice, and procured the requested supplies. When Lisa McDonald -- the amazing philanthropist/activist owner of Tea Haus -- brought up methods of reimbursing us for the supplies, I said: "wait -- let's see if we can fundraise that." I calculated the supplies & cookie ingredients cost us a little over \$500/week. One post on social media]has already raised about \$1200 -- enough for two weeks plus. And the donations keep coming in. Honestly, I love this community! Your eagerness to help is a powerful antidote to the anxiety and fear so prevalent during this time.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. I let staff decide if we should close or not, and the unanimous response was to take the day off. So we are going to regroup for the day and hopefully relax

and enjoy ourselves. Everyone on our staff deserves that. And hopefully all of you can enjoy the day as well. Let go of the stress and experience the good things in life.

Sunday May 31

How can we be so united, yet so divided? The shared experience of living through COVID times certainly creates bonds. You can look at just about anyone and see your own anxiety reflected in their eyes. The question “how are you?” gets a response “you know, fine, all things considered.” We are only “fine” in a limited way. You can only be so “fine” against a backdrop of pandemic, fear of one another, economic catastrophe, crazy unemployment, and now... our country burning.

For despite our shared experience of stay-at-home, COVID fears, ennui, anxiety and job worries, there is a social ill that divides us: racism. Racism is, I believe, our country's original and greatest sin, and is the backdrop for today's perfect storm. Take decades of racial injustice and heap onto that a horrific instance of murder by police -- plus repeated cases of abuse or killing of blacks by law enforcement or vigilantes -- and add a dose of anxiety, jitters, frustration and boredom, then ignite it all with crass, dishonest and provocative statements by our so-called commander-in-chief -- and boom. Our cities go up in flames.

So... sitting here on our little corner of Detroit & Catherine Streets, where flowers bloom and birds sing and grateful customers pick up to-go orders and leave generous tips, and business hums right along, it is impossible to feel at peace. I am constantly reminded of our shared humanity -- how we are social creatures, and not islands unto ourselves. What's happening in Minneapolis and Washington DC and Columbus and Raleigh and Detroit impacts us right here. And we impact it. We have all allowed inner-city schools to fail. We have allowed urban neighborhoods to decay. We have allowed police departments to racially profile and the courts to fill the jails with racial minorities. And we have allowed a monster to enter the White House, where he continues to tear us apart.

Since the start of the pandemic, and really since the start of the restaurant, I have grappled with the question of how to stay relevant. Given the limitations of operating in the food service industry, where margins are razor thin and obstacles present themselves at every turn, it has been my goal to model responsible business behavior and to give back. That includes things like employee pay and benefits, hiring practices, and fundraising for nonprofits that help vulnerable populations. But now, staying relevant seems more challenging than ever.

A few weeks ago, when Trump again threatened to cut off funding for the World Health Organization, I thought we should have a WHO fundraiser. Sure, it would produce a tiny drop in the bucket, but at least it's DOING SOMETHING. I met with our events coordinator/ house musician extraordinaire Andrew Brown, and we came up with tonight's live/livestream patio concert and WHO fundraiser. As I am writing this, I am texting with Andrew about how to use tonight's event to also raise funds for an anti-racism organization. Tune in tonight and see how we do.

Now a bit about the restaurant. Detroit Street is doing incredibly well, all things considered. In addition to strong sales, we fundraised the \$500/week (and then some) to support our end of Tea Haus' free school lunch program. We continue to sell all the seedlings and flowers that Goetz Family Farm brings us. Our staff members perform admirably; and when there are hiccups, our managers handle them effectively. Personally, I have been able to let go of much of the hands-on work and take a little time for myself. I also have time to concoct and implement ways to stay relevant.

Four of our staff members in recovery are currently out, having relapsed. Some have tried and failed at treatment. One has left the state. And there is one who hopefully will find a successful path back to us. A team of staff members -- several of whom are in recovery themselves -- have been grappling with a policy that protects our recovery-friendly workplace, while setting guidelines and assistance for those who relapse. Always a difficult proposition, this task is made harder by COVID-era considerations.

As for the future, there are still no real answers. Guests ask us when we will "re-open" and former staff ask about returning. In response I think: a) we are already "open" in a way that feels real, albeit limited, b) there has not yet been a "re-open" date announced, c) I have real concerns about a limited re-opening that could cost us more than we would gain in money and health, and d) my stressed brain is having trouble grappling with it. It's difficult to throw yourself 100% into a certain model, while dabbling a toe in a whole different model. So... I don't know. Ask me next week :)

It is my hope that soon this blog will feature other writers. I am encouraging staff members to share their experiences with you. Look forward to hearing from them soon.

Sunday June 7

In the week since my last post:

- The governor expanded the state's gradual re-opening.
- One staff member, Erika Riaño Mojica, contributed a blog post (see thelunchrooma2.com/dispatch)
- One more staff member in recovery had a relapse and disappeared from our crew.
- Finches have constructed nests in two hanging baskets on our patio.
- The nationwide protest movement has continued, grown, and begun to produce real social change.
- Moods are lifting, people are out and about, and the weather is nice.
- Strong sales continue on our little corner of Detroit and Catherine Streets.

Change is a funny thing. It is constant, but always takes us by surprise. Speaking for myself, I try to anticipate and plan for change -- but it often takes unexpected twists and turns and is almost never easy.

The biggest change on my mind is the partial re-opening of restaurants set to begin tomorrow. For numerous reasons, we are taking it slow. We are continuing with carryout and delivery, and our dining room remains closed. BUT... we have plenty of beautiful outdoor seating where you can eat your carry-out order. Tomorrow we will start serving cocktails and other beverages, plus desserts, to those who wish to sit and enjoy. We'll see how this week goes, then consider further steps toward re-opening. This decision to go slow was arrived at with input from all staff members. First and foremost, I have to make sure they are comfortable with what we are doing.

Personally, I feel a cloud lifting. Maybe I'm just used to this new reality, maybe the reality is getting better, maybe I'm uplifted by all the people who care enough to protest racial injustice. In any case, it's a welcome relief and makes it easier to get up in the morning and give it my all.

This post will be short as it's time to head in and meet with our cooks. Then I will enjoy a glorious afternoon and evening off. I hope everyone out there is doing ok. Come by Detroit Street if you need something... a kind word, a smile, a meal. We are still giving away food to anyone who needs it. If that's you, just order and request the "industry discount." There will be no charge and no questions asked. Peace out.

Thursday June 25

It's been a while since I last wrote. Eighteen days -- a record. Blame it on COVID-era craziness. It's difficult to find the time and clarity-of-mind to write when the world spins and tilts at the wrong speed and angle. How do you make sense of your world when the things you take for granted -- like hugging your friends, making plans for the future, and being a citizen of a democracy -- are upended? Every day I set out to navigate a ship, blindfolded, through shark-infested and iceberg-filled waters. Then I go home and try to make sense of it all, then toss and turn through the night with weird dreams and get up to just to do it all over it again. Is anyone else feeling this way?

I know. That's a whole lot of sharing and it's kind of grim. But this is our current reality. We are simultaneously "re-opening" society while COVID cases spike around the nation, and are now increasing in Michigan. It's a constant and politically motivated push and pull. There is no uniform message; the rules and responses vary from county to county and state to state. Our national leadership is so deeply lacking that European nations are banning travelers from The United States. Public health workers, facing death threats for attempting to enforce safety standards, are quitting in droves. And our president is seemingly concerned with nothing beyond his own re-election.

Of course, there are bright spots. Like Detroit Street Filling Station. The flowers bloom, the birds sing, guests dine outdoors and enjoy themselves, people share warm sentiments, and SO MUCH vegan food gets prepared and sold. In fact, in some ways there is reason to be ecstatic. Business is good at both Detroit Street and at The Lunch Room Bakery & Cafe. It is so good that all staff just received bonuses. The amount given was determined by the number of weeks

worked throughout the pandemic. The majority of our 35 staff members have been working all 14 weeks, and received \$210 apiece.

Speaking of staff – they are the brightest bright spot. Our crew is upbeat, professional, responsible, caring, and accountable to the business and each other. And to a person, they are a pleasure to be around. It is because of their hard work that our business is succeeding. So, to the workers goes the spoils.

Unfortunately we had two employees relapse on drugs or alcohol since my last post: a server and a dishwasher. They represent staff relapses numbers 7 and 8 since mid-March. Both individuals were rock-solid workers with exemplary attitudes and great personalities. They were well-liked by their peers. And both succumbed to their addictions. One is in the hospital and the other's whereabouts are unknown. Their absence has left holes in our operation – both logistically and emotionally. I've been told that this recent period has been particularly tough on those in recovery. There are numerous stories about people in the local recovery community who made it through the first three months, only to relapse in recent weeks. I can only guess that the growing length of this stressful period, with no real end in sight, is to blame.

We are also grappling with a racist incident that happened on Detroit Street, just down the street from the restaurant after we closed one night last week. Two of our managers who were walking out after they finished closing duties caught the tail end of it. Apparently there was a pick-up truck and another vehicle full of men in red MAGA hats yelling racial epithets and threats at an African American woman. She had walked away, down the street toward the restaurant, and told our managers what happened. She called the police and was on the phone while our managers approached the vehicles. As they attempted to take photos of the license plates, the vehicles backed out. The occupants had placed a water jug behind their wheels, which created a loud explosion and watery mess as they drove over the jugs and sped away. I can't stop thinking about the cruelty of their actions, and the fear it instilled in the woman who just happened to be walking down the street. Although I wasn't present, I am livid. How dare people behave like that? It brings home the terrible reach of racism. It is inescapable. I only wish I could find the woman who was the target of the verbal assault and apologize on behalf of all of us.

Now back to some bright spots: flowers, birds and vegetables. As you probably know, in early May we started selling seedlings and hanging baskets from Goetz Family Farm and Greenhouse. This past week, our supplies dwindling, we packed up our plant store for the season. I planted the remaining seedlings around the restaurant where they now attract birds and butterflies. One house finch made a nest in a hanging begonia basket; as of today, four chicks have hatched! [See photo below] The sparrows swoop in near the tables to clean up leftover crumbs. And an occasional swallowtail visits the pansies and geraniums. I planted six moon flowers around a tree on Catherine Street and their large, showy, fragrant blooms brighten up that stretch of sidewalk. And we are looking forward to the return of live music! Our tentative plan is to have two of our house band (Djangophonique) members perform on the patio this coming Wednesday night for a return of Hot Jazz and Wine Wednesday. Stay tuned for further music announcements.



Just-hatched house finch chicks in a nest built in a hanging basket on our patio.

It's also far enough into the growing season that local farmers are harvesting vegetables – lots of them. Asparagus season has passed. Now we're on to cucumbers, beets, onions, zucchini, summer squash, snap peas and more. We put much of the fresh produce into our garden vegetable borscht, which has become the mainstay of my personal diet. Soon there will be tomatoes, which together with fresh local cucumbers, red peppers, onions, and basil will make a delicious gazpacho that we will sell as long as those vegetables last.

Day by day, we take the bad with the good. You may wonder why I am telling you all of this. Part of it is self-serving. Creative output helps heal the soul. Another part is I feel it is important to chronicle this time. What I see and hear and experience from my little triangle of the universe is a slice of the larger story of what we are all experiencing in one form or another. One can only hope that from this period we will learn and grow and improve and learn to respect and care for one another and achieve real and lasting social justice.

Monday July 6

If I were to give this post a title it would be “Learning to live with it.” After weeks and months of ups and downs -- opening this and closing that, getting mixed messages from our leaders, reading ever-changing information about how the virus infects, what it does to the body, and how it may mutate -- it has become clear that no one really knows. There is no timeline, no blueprint, and no master plan. Couple that with the tug of war between racial justice and white supremacy -- people standing up for what’s right being met by a backlash of fear, anger and hatred from those who derive their privilege from the status quo-- and you see that everything hangs in the balance.

My game plan is to hunker down and continue trying to navigate this reality, while keeping both feet planted on the right side of history. As for the day to day, I expect the unexpected, such as: talking down a stressed and irritable customer, having a car run a stop sign and bang up our delivery vehicle, shooing away (and handing \$5 to) a panhandler sans mask that breathes into car windows, tracking down staple ingredients that suddenly become unavailable from our suppliers, confronting subtle and not-so-subtle forms of racism, helping others with their fears and anxieties -- all while remembering to breathe. I add these things to the normal list of all the things required to run a restaurant-- scheduling, equipment maintenance and repair, paying bills, doing payroll, tax reports and the like.

We are getting close to the four-month-mark since corona took hold. And miraculously, there is good news to report: our business continues to do well. I could not be more grateful that you all are staying with us. We are lucky to have the challenge of keeping up with ALL THAT FOOD. Our ordering and staffing increase by the week. It’s almost impossible to have too many employees on in a given shift. Every payroll brings a round of raises.

It has now been three weeks since we started serving food at our outdoor tables, and it has been a good experience. We have 14 socially-distant tables lining the sidewalks and on the patio, with bottles of hand sanitizer in lieu of condiments. Most of the tables fill up during meal periods. The vast majority of our business, however, continues to be takeout and delivery. We miss the live music, yet it’s still a nice vibe with all the flowers and umbrella tables. And it’s wonderful to see our guests again. We have no plans as of yet to open our dining room. That move could still be months away and falls into the category of “impossible to plan for.” Ditto for the re-opening of The Lunch Room Diner. That wonderful little space is very much on my mind, yet the time is still not right to make a move.

I will end this post with a list of things I’m grateful for:

- My employees, first and foremost. I could not ask to be surrounded by a better group of human beings.
- All of you, for continuing to put your trust in us.
- The summertime. It may be hot, but at least it’s summer and we get to be outside with the green things and flowers and birds. Ann Arbor is so beautiful in the summer.
- Good health. To date, everyone in our Detroit Street circle has remained healthy. Knock on wood.

- The Black Lives Matter protesters and everyone who is doing anything to further the cause of racial justice.

July 13, 2020

Same, same, different

During summertime, the Kerrytown neighborhood marches to the beat of a Farmer's Market drummer. The local population swells on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when vendors set up their stands and the public streams through to gawk, visit, and purchase produce and crafts. In that regard, this summer is the same as every other. But this summer is also very different. Everyone is wearing masks. People awkwardly and distantly visit with friends and neighbors in conversations that go like this: "hello, hey it's me behind this mask, how are you?" Foot traffic through the market is one way. Signage tells people to stay six feet apart and move along. Yellow-vest-clad volunteers are there to remind people of the rules.

I am grateful that some things have not changed. One of my favorite Saturday market rituals is trading lunch for produce with Dennis of Sparr's Greenhouse. Dennis walks across to the restaurant in the morning to order food for his wife, to be picked up later. I take him the order around 2pm, and then the haggling begins. Dennis says: here, take all of these cucumbers and tomatoes and this flower bouquet is for you. I say: Dennis, this is too much. Just give me half the produce and the flowers. He bargains up, I bargain down, until we reach a happy medium where we both think we got more than we gave.

Then I wander over to the Goetz Family Farm stand to pay for the boxes of produce they delivered that morning and to ask Karlene (the matriarch) what she has leftover from the day. Often there are odds and ends that I take off her hands and she adds to the invoice. I write her a check and leave. Last Saturday she came by after market with a box of basil and said "this is for you." I said, "Great. We'll make pesto." Then I give her baked goods and cold drinks – both of us walking away happy with the trade. Sometimes I'm graced with a visit from Farmer Jon (Karlene's husband) who loves to chew the fat and tell stories -- truth or fiction, I'm never really sure. If I'm lucky, their son Jake pays a visit. He enjoys all the flowers and hanging plants on our patio and comes by for a break from the bustle of the market. If I'm REALLY lucky, Jake brings along some of his young children (shout out to Abigail and Levi). Farm kids—even really young ones – have a wisdom and confidence beyond their years and a gusto for life.

One byproduct of being located in the Kerrytown neighborhood is that summer is our busiest season. It's funny how you can walk three or four blocks south to Washington and Liberty streets, and the cadence is totally different. Their ebbs and flows are much more dependent on the university. Fall, with returning students and football Saturdays – plus spring, with graduation celebrations – are their busiest times. But for us, summer reigns supreme. Take the combination of a large outdoor area, which we adorn with flowers and greenery everywhere, and the draw of Farmer's Market, plus vegan dishes made with fresh veggies and bam – that is us. And this

summer is no different than the rest. I am extremely grateful that business is so strong. But I can't help feeling that it may be fleeting. In these uncertain times, anything could change at any moment. But while we can, and while everyone in our orb is healthy, we will continue to produce as much delicious vegan food as we possibly can.

A noteworthy thing happening as of late: our new t-shirts are flying off the shelves. A few weeks ago I approached Elmo, a local printer, about a design with our Detroit Street logo and "Black Lives Matter" printed in much larger text,. Our staff was really excited to wear these shirts, carrying the words that are on everyone's mind. After distributing shirts to staff, we offered them for sale – with all profits going to Peace Neighborhood Center. These shirts are now on their third printing. And I'm about to write Peace a check. Staff members report the great reception the public has to the shirts, which makes me immensely happy. Watch for new face masks coming soon, with a similar design.

I'm actually on vacation right now for three days in northern Michigan, staying in a caboose-turned-camper in the woods. It's great to get out and hike the dunes, kayak and swim. It's a reminder that there's more to life than COVID. But it doesn't stop my thoughts of inequality or injustice.

On the way up here I read an opinion piece in Sunday's New York Times by Amna Akbar. The writer, a law professor at OSU, focuses on the movements to defund police, cancel rent, and lower carbon emissions – and the connection between the three. But what the piece really did for me was to present the notion that real change is possible. Change that is so big and so deep that it would actually put the needs of people and the planet over profits, and would make unnecessary the instruments of suppression that make capitalism work. I seldom let myself entertain such possibilities, having become jaded by decades of in-the-trenches activism. But just for a moment I became giddy at the thought of what our society could be, and how everyone could participate and have meaningful lives and livelihoods.

Then my attention returned to where I am now: the Great White North. It's beautiful in northwestern Michigan, but it's also a playground for the rich. On some of the inland lakes, there is not even public access for swimming – just private homes surrounding the lake. These natural resources should be available to all.

In the mid-1980s, following the Sandinista revolution, I spent time in Nicaragua. One reform that really stuck with me was that the properties of Somoza, the toppled dictator, had been nationalized. His oceanside compounds were turned into worker-vacation sites. Anyone and everyone could go. I was living with a schoolteacher, Britania, and her daughter, Marcela. Teacher salaries were on par with taxi drivers. Britania and Marcela had their turn for a vacation that summer. They had never before experienced anything like it. I was so excited for them. It made me wonder: if Nicaragua can give its workers a nice place to vacation, why can't we? So I will end this post with one more social change demand: vacations for everyone. Mar-a-Lago in 2021 anyone?

July 21, 2020

“Test, Don’t Test”

Adventures in pandemic-land continue. First off, I am happy to report that all staff members are healthy. We continue to take and record our temperatures and to answer health-related questionnaires daily. That rules out symptomatic infections among staff. As for the possibility of asymptomatic infections, who knows? The only sure answer would come through periodic testing. But now, 4+ months into this pandemic, widespread testing is still elusive.

On July 7, the county health department wrote to all restaurants: “The new ‘testing cadence’ from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services recommends anyone working in public-facing positions (restaurants, retail, etc.) to be tested every two weeks.” A number of testing sites were listed, including St. Joseph Mercy, Packard Health, CVS, Rite Aid, and others. We committed ourselves to following those recommendations, starting with sending our managers to get tested.

One week later, I reported back to the health department: One of our managers was having difficulty getting tested. It turned out that most sites required appointments, and some were not taking appointments at all because they were already scheduled too far out into the future. Other sites would not test asymptomatic workers. Our manager finally ended up getting tested at Packard Health five days ago. He waited for 2 hours in a line of cars for the drive-through test -- and has still not received his results.

Our health department rep responded by saying that some sites were having trouble getting testing materials, so had less availability than usual. They were also hearing about longer turnaround times for results.

On July 16, I wrote to the health department: “Do you know if anything is in the works to make testing more widely available? We want to follow recommendations and get our staff members tested every two weeks, but that prospect seems very difficult in the current situation.”

They wrote: “We are hearing of more and more of limitations in terms of location, delays in results and are working each and every day to set up additional clinics, pop up clinics, etc. However, there are some larger limitations outside of our control in terms of testing supplies and lab capacity. As supplies become limited, it is more likely that staff who have no known COVID exposure, do not have symptoms and are just trying to get routinely tested will be turned down for testing to reserve it for people with known close contact to a case, people who are symptomatic and people who may work in direct patient care.”

OK. Test; don’t test.

As is typically the case these days, what happens locally provides a glimpse into what is happening nationally.

Reading the New York Times two days later, I came upon the story “Trump Proposes Draining Billions from Next Relief Bill.” My “aha” moment: “In talks over the weekend, administration officials ... pushed to zero out the funding for testing and for the nation’s top health agencies.”

And equally appalling, though not 100% relevant: “Suggestions from the administration... included funding priorities unrelated to the spread of the coronavirus, including constructing a new building for the FBI... The administration also suggested eliminating a proposed \$2 billion allocated to the Indian Health Service, which is responsible for providing medical care to more than half of the nation’s tribal citizens and Alaska Natives, who have been devastated by the pandemic and are particularly vulnerable to the virus.”

Then in the July 20th New York Times appeared the story “Delays From Testing Backlogs May Cloud True Spread of Coronavirus.”

It began: “As demand for coronavirus testing surges around the nation, laboratories that process samples are again experiencing backlogs that have left anxious patients and their doctors waiting days—sometimes a week or more—for results.

“At the city and state levels, testing delays could mask persistent rises in case numbers and could cloud ways to combat the coronavirus, as health officials continue to find themselves one step behind the virus’s rapid and often silent spread, experts said.”

Yup. That sounds about right.

So, to recap, we have:

- Soaring coronavirus numbers
- Limited testing supplies
- Long wait times for results
- A growing presence of federal police in major cities (I know, not corona related, but so disturbing I had to mention it)
- A weakening of the CDC and its ability to collect data
- A general fear and anxiety about what comes next
- And, for us at Detroit Street Filling Station, significant hurdles to following the health department’s “testing cadence” guidelines.

Tying the strings together, as he often does, was Charles Blow, with the NYT column: “Where is the Outrage?” (Right here, Charles.)

Blow wrote about the climbing number of cases, the administration’s dissing of Dr. Fauci, the lack of testing, the insistence that schools reopen in the fall, the elimination of funds for the

Indian Health Service, immigration facilities where COVID is raging, Trump's efforts to overturn the Affordable Care Act, the US' impending withdrawal from the World Health Organization, and the removal of the CDC from the information loop.

Blow ends his piece with: "How is this happening? How is it being allowed to happen? Real people, Americans, are being allowed to get sick and die while Trump plays a political game. How long can this continue?"

Amen.

August 22, 2020

A whole month later...

Since my last post we have had:

- Summertime at Detroit Street, which means a busy patio and sidewalk full of guests eating, drinking and enjoying themselves -- surrounded by plants and flowers. It means sangria and gazpacho and grilled corn and watermelon. There has been live music on most Friday nights, when Mr. B and Pete Siers set up the piano bike and drum kit across the street and regale us with the finest boogie-woogie and blues in the land.
- Social action, which means campaigns highlighting the need to fund coronavirus testing and the USPS, selling Black Lives Matter shirts and masks and sending proceeds to Peace Neighborhood Center, and providing voter registration forms and absentee ballots at the restaurant. Vote!
- Big decisions, namely regarding The Lunch Room Diner in Kerrytown. Yes, we have turned the space over to Eat -- a carryout and catering operation in need of a dining room and downtown presence. And we have shrunk from three locations to two in a bid to conserve resources and survive this period. More details below.
- Staffing stability, with a few changes. The majority of employees are continuing to work and hone their professional skills, making the restaurant function like a well-oiled machine. A handful of staff members have left town and terrific new folks have come in to replace them.
- A growing realization that our pandemic business model will probably be in place for another six months or so. We will not offer indoor dining until the situation has drastically improved, which likely means operating as a carryout and delivery operation through the cold months.
- An increased sense of anxiety about what may happen in the months leading up to and directly following the election, coupled with a growing acceptance that chaos and uncertainty are inevitable.

A Lunch Room postmortem.



As you may know, this business started out as a food cart. My then business partner and next-door-neighbor Joel Panozzo and myself launched our vegan food business in 2011 in a 6' x 10' hand-built wooden cart, operating out of a now-defunct food cart courtyard on the west side of downtown. We named it "The Lunch Room."



After two successful seasons, we scouted out a brick-and-mortar location and found it in Kerrytown in February 2013. The space we leased was completely barren at the time -- just four walls, an exhaust hood, and a toilet (not a functioning toilet; just a toilet). Everything had been removed in order to install new code-compliant systems: electrical, plumbing, and HVAC. Even the floor was rubble. There was a trench down the middle of the floor, where the sewer line had to be re-connected.



Joel and I were part of a crew that constructed that space over a six month period. We painted, plastered, ground, hammered, caulked, bled, sweated and cried. We went over-budget in money and time.



Our food cart patrons helped out by buying gift cards. Friends contributed their labor. We took the wooden marquis from the food cart and affixed it to the outside of the building. Finally that August of 2013, short on sleep and experience and long on chutzpah, we opened our doors.



In a short time, The Lunch Room found its stride. We got a liquor license in 2014, which expanded our offerings and customer base. We opened our Bakery & Cafe in 2015 because we needed more space to prepare breads and pastries. And we opened Detroit Street Filling Station in 2017 because The Lunch Room constantly had lines out the door and was unable to meet the growing demand. And now, with the pandemic, we have shrunk back to two locations.

I'm not sure how or when The Lunch Room became an Ann Arbor must-visit place or attained cult-status following. It's hard, when you are somewhere day-in and day-out, to see changes that an outsider would notice. But there was something about that little space that just screamed "community." I had countless conversations with guests at the counter and on the floor. Some were quick and superficial but an impressive number were deep and meaningful. I made close friendships there with staff and customers. And maybe it was because the tiny tables were so close together, but one could daily witness interactions between tables. We hosted first dates and wedding anniversaries, small weddings, friend reunions, Halloween parties, scavenger hunts, music nights, and fundraisers. We gave away thousands of dollars to local organizations helping vulnerable populations. We took stands for social justice. We advocated for worker rights and prisoner rights and immigrant rights. And we served up really good food.

There is so much more to write. Who out there has Lunch Room stories to share? Please send them in. We are in a period that does not leave much space for sentimentality, but the closing of The Lunch Room deserves sentimentality. That little space saw so much love.

It helps that Detroit Street Filling Station is in the same neighborhood, has many of the same dishes and staff members as The Lunch Room. Even The Lunch Room's neon sign is now displayed in the lounge at Detroit Street. RIP The Lunch Room. Your spirit lives on!

October 6, 2020

As I write this, our Halloween decorations are going up and there is a chill in the air. Endless summer? Wishful thinking. Fall has undeniably set in, which means that outdoor dining has taken on a new twist. We have been fielding lots of questions about our plans; here are some answers.

As usual, our first priority is the well-being of our staff. For that reason, as well as for the health of our guests, **we are not opening for indoor dining**. This coronavirus is serious stuff and requires serious precautions. As much as we would love to welcome you back into our beautiful restaurant, and as frustrated we are with how long this has gone on, the time is still not right.

Our plan is to extend the al fresco experience as long as possible, and to make it as enjoyable as possible. Here's what you need to know:

- Dress warmly. You will be sitting outside! Once the sun goes down, the air cools quickly. Sweaters, long underwear, hats and boots go a long way.
- Wrap up in one of our dozens of fleece blankets! They are soft, warm and stylin'. Rest assured -- they are laundered after every use.
- Our covered patio is partially enclosed and has infrared heaters in the ceiling. There are four socially-distant tables on the patio, so get here early and claim one!
- We are playing with fire, literally. One wood-burning chiminea has arrived and we are considering purchasing more. A chiminea is a chimney-shaped, enclosed fire pit with a 360-view grate. It is safe and warm. Feeling cold? Put another log on the fire!
- Don't forget about carryout and delivery! You can eat our food from the comfort of your home.

Other updates:

- The business remains stable and our entire crew remains healthy. Knock on wood! We have strict off-the-clock-activity guidelines to which our staff is expected to adhere...and that seems to be working.
- Our voter registration and education project is going strong. To date we have distributed about 60 voter registration forms and about 150 absentee ballot applications. Our staff members have volunteered with voter registration efforts at public housing sites. And we

have supplied numerous individuals with forms and directions to conduct voter registration drives at their schools and workplaces. Need info? See <https://thelunchrooma2.com/vote>.

- We remain very concerned about the volatile political situation and our rudder-less reality. In the midst of a pandemic, racial injustice, global warming and the seeming breakdown of civility, we remain committed to social justice and to the preservation of our democracy.
- We are community! Stay with us. We need each other now and into the future. Together we can weather whatever comes our way.

October 25, 2020

"REVISITING THE PLAGUE." A CAMUS REVIEW FROM 2004 HOLDS RELEVANCE TODAY.

Sunday is my day off. When removed from the hustle and bustle of the restaurant, I can clear my head and think.

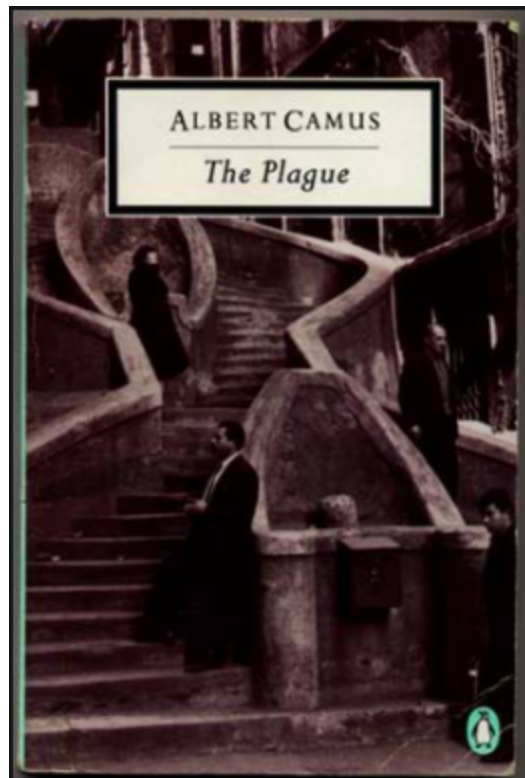
Today I had planned to write a blog post about what life could be like without all this fear and anxiety – about what we could accomplish, as human beings, free from pandemic and repression and without worries about healthcare, childcare, tuition, food and housing. (I'll save that piece for another day.)

But then I read an article about the killing of yet another young man of color by police. This killing happened in the Rio Grande Valley – the borderlands in South Texas. For three and a half years I had a job with a migrant farmworker health organization that regularly took me to the very area where the young man was killed. While violence by the Texas Rangers toward immigrants in the Valley is nothing new, the fact that residents protested IS new. People risked exposing themselves to ICE and possible deportation —to take a stand. They must have been really fed up.

Then, as it often does when I become introspective about state-sponsored violence, my mind turned to Albert Camus. The World-War-II-era French existentialist, best known for penning "The Plague," had a unique and inspired way of exploring the range of human behaviors during war

and pestilence. His characters included those who harm, those who heal, and those who do nothing (and by virtue of doing nothing, contribute to the harm).

In 2004, while director of Michigan Peaceworks, I wrote the following piece "Revisiting The Plague." That time, the post-9/11 era, was defined on the homefront by shrinking civil liberties, and the arrest and detention-without-charge of Muslim immigrants — and abroad by unjust wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The lessons of "The Plague" held special meaning then. Fast forward 16 years and "The Plague" again (or still) is instructive, but for new reasons. Faced with an actual plague, plus state-sanctioned and vigilante violence, Camus' words can inspire us to heal our society and begin to put back together our severely damaged nation and world.



"Revisiting The Plague"

by Phillis Engelbert, October 2004

The Plague by Albert Camus, 1947.

If Albert Camus were alive today, he would undoubtedly have much to say about the current state of international relations and the human condition. Fortunately for us, we have his body of written works—both to serve as a caution (against hardening our hearts) and an inspiration (to continue to act with love and sympathy). For in these times in which the dominant message is that violence equals salvation, patriotism equals redemption, and tighter state control equals

penance, Camus' writings remind us of the essential role of "healers" in our society. His works also remind us that thought is nothing if not connected to action.

One of Camus' most celebrated pieces was his 1947 novel *The Plague* (originally published as *La Peste*). Set in an ordinary seaside town in Camus' native Algeria, then a colonial French territory, the book documents a 10-month period during which the bubonic plague—an extremely contagious, fatal disease—exacts a high death toll and robs the town's residents of any semblance of a normal life. A foreboding smoky pall emanating from the crematorium—which operates around the clock—hangs eerily over the town. Soldiers guard the entrances to the town, which has been quarantined from the outside world, to prevent escape.

Out of that desolate mix arise two unassuming heroes—Bernard Rieux, the town doctor (who also serves as the story's narrator); and Jean Tarrou, a newcomer to the town who voluntarily assists the doctor in his grim tasks of diagnosing plague, caring for the dying, and arranging for the removal of the dead. In the following passage, Tarrou explains to Rieux what he thinks about plague.

"All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences. That may sound simple to the point of childishness; I can't judge if it's simple, but I know it's true....If, by making that statement, I, too, become a carrier of the plague-germ, at least I don't do it willfully. I try, in short, to be an innocent murderer. You see, I've no great ambitions.

"I grant we should add a third category: that of the true healers. But it's a fact one doesn't come across many of them, and anyhow it must be a hard vocation. That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done. Among them I can at least try to discover how one attains to the third category; in other words, to peace."

Tarrou was swinging his leg, tapping the terrace lightly with his heel, as he concluded. After a short silence the doctor raised himself a little in his chair and asked if Tarrou had an idea of the path to follow for attaining peace.

"Yes," he replied. "The path of sympathy."

Most of Camus' works were published between the years 1932 and 1957, and were shaped largely by World War II, the German occupation of France, and the French occupation of Algeria. Camus strove to define the essence of humanity during a most difficult historical period: the march of fascism and totalitarianism through Europe, with its accompanying police terrorism, torture, war, and concentration camps. He shunned indifference and stressed that by confronting injustice and adversity, one confirms the human spirit. In that vein, Camus' philosophy was similar to that of another famous humanitarian, Mohandas Gandhi, who stated, "The real test of nonviolence lies in its being brought in contact with those who have contempt for it."

In *The Plague*, Camus expresses through his two protagonists, Rieux and Tarrou, his solidarity with downtrodden people and his opposition to all forms of killing—including state-sanctioned

killing. In one episode, the pair take a break from their work in order to get better acquainted. Rieux thus learns how Tarrou's eyes came to be opened to human suffering.

"To make things simpler, Rieux, let me begin by saying I had plague already, long before I came to this town and encountered it here. Which is tantamount to saying I'm like everybody else. Only there are some people who don't know it, or feel at ease in that condition; others know and want to get out of it. Personally, I've always wanted to get out of it....

"When I was seventeen my father asked me to come to hear him speak in court. There was a big case on at the assizes, and probably he thought I'd see him to his best advantage. Also I suspect he hoped I'd be duly impressed by the pomp and ceremony of the law and encouraged to take up his profession....

"The only picture I carried away with me of that day's proceedings was a picture of the criminal. I have little doubt he was guilty—of what crime is no great matter. That little man of about thirty, with sparse, sandy hair, seemed so eager to confess everything, so genuinely horrified at what he'd done and what was going to be done with him, that after a few minutes I had eyes for nothing and nobody else. He looked like a yellow owl scared blind by too much light. His tie was slightly awry, he kept biting his nails, those of one hand only, his right....I needn't go on, need I? You've understood—he was a living human being.

"As for me, it came on me suddenly, in a flash of understanding; until then I'd thought of him only under his commonplace official designation, as the defendant! And though I can't say I quite forgot my father, something seemed to grip my vitals at that moment and riveted all my attention on the little man in the dock. I hardly heard what was being said; I only knew that they were set on killing that living man, and an uprush of some elemental instinct, like a wave, had swept me to his side. And I did not really wake up until my father rose to address the court.

"In his red gown he was another man, no longer genial or good-natured; his mouth spewed out long, turgid phrases like an endless stream of snakes. I realized he was clamoring for the prisoner's death, telling the jury that they owed it to society to find him guilty; he went so far as to demand that the man should have his head cut off. Not exactly in those words, I admit. 'He must pay the supreme penalty,' was the formula. But the difference, really, was slight, and the result the same. He had the head he asked for. Only of course it wasn't he who did the actual job. I, who saw the whole business through to its conclusion, felt a far closer, far more terrifying intimacy with that wretched man than my father can ever have felt. Nevertheless, it fell to him, in the course of his duties, to be present at what's politely termed the prisoner's last moments, but what would be better called murder in its most despicable form."

Camus was a historian, a philosopher, a socialist activist, a journalist, a theater director and actor, and a playwright and novelist (and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957), but above all he considered himself an artist—one who believed that the purpose of art was to serve humanity. Of all the French existentialists and other European writers of his generation, Camus is considered the most humanistic.

Camus shunned restrictions placed upon free thought by both the powerful, authoritarian right and the sectarian, dogmatic left. He knew about government censorship first hand, from having been ordered to quit the left-wing Alger-Républicain by French colonial authorities (for being pro-peace and pro-Arab) and from having his Paris publication being forced underground during his days of working with the French Resistance.

Camus also had demands placed upon his writing by the Communist Party of Algeria. He resisted the intrusion by, for instance, refusing to use terms like "the proletariat" or "the masses" that lumped all downtrodden people into one category. Having grown up among poor people (Camus was the son of an illiterate, hard working mother; his father had been drafted into the French army and killed in battle when Camus was an infant), he came to know and understand them as individuals. "What touched [Camus] deeply," wrote Germaine Brée in *European Writers* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990) "rather than ideologies or aesthetic theories, was what he called 'the human face,' certainly not the allegedly inevitable 'march of history.'"

Camus' concern for the downtrodden individual, as well as his disdain for cruelty and his search for the truth comes out again in the following expository by Tarrou.

"Have you ever seen a man shot by a firing-squad? No, of course not; the spectators are hand-picked and it's like a private party, you need an invitation. The result is that you've gleaned your ideas about it from books and pictures. A post, a blindfolded man, some soldiers in the offing. But the real thing isn't a bit like that. Do you know that the firing-squad stands only a yard and a half from the condemned man? Do you know that if the victim took two steps forward his chest would touch the rifles? Do you know that, at this short range, the soldiers concentrate their fire on the region of the heart and their big bullets make a hole into which you could thrust your fist? No, you didn't know all that; those are things that are never spoken of. For the plague-stricken their peace of mind is more important than a human life. Decent folks must be allowed to sleep easy o' nights, mustn't they? Really it would be shockingly bad taste to linger on such details, that's common knowledge. But personally I've never been able to sleep well since then. The bad taste remained in my mouth and I've kept lingering on the details, brooding over them.

"And thus I came to understand that I, anyhow, had had plague through all those long years in which, paradoxically enough, I'd believed with all my soul that I was fighting it. I learned that I had had an indirect hand in the deaths of thousands of people; that I'd even brought about their deaths by approving of acts and principles which could only end that way. Others did not seem embarrassed by such thoughts, or anyhow never voiced them of their own accord.

"But I was different; what I'd come to know stuck in my gorge. I was with them and yet I was alone. When I spoke of these matters they told me not to be so squeamish; I should remember what great issues were at stake. And they advanced arguments, often quite impressive ones, to make me swallow what none the less I couldn't bring myself to stomach. I replied that the most eminent of the plaguestricken, the men who wear red robes, also have excellent arguments to justify what they do, and once I admitted the arguments of necessity and force majeure put forward by the less eminent, I couldn't reject those of the eminent. To which they retorted that the surest way of playing the game of the red robes was to leave to them the monopoly of the

death penalty. My reply to this was that if you gave in once, there was no reason for not continuing to give in. It seems to me that history has borne me out; today there's a sort of competition who will kill the most. They're all mad over murder and they couldn't stop killing men even if they wanted to.... "

At the time that Camus wrote *The Plague*, France was under Nazi occupation and Europe had become a cesspool of mass murder, torture, fear, and other forms of unspeakable injustice. The ugliness around him, however, only heightened his need to create a literary work that would cast light on the darkness. Camus gained inspiration from the hellish reality, as well as from those who fought against it, to create the literary tale of calamity and courage that is *The Plague*. As Camus wrote to a friend, "The Plague, which I wanted to have read at several levels, has nonetheless as its evident content the struggle of the European resistance against Nazism."

Through Tarrou, Camus struggled with the question of how to exist in a diseased society.

"...I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. And today I am still trying to find it; still trying to understand all those others and not to be the mortal enemy of anyone. I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague stricken, and that's the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a decent death. This, and only this, can bring relief to men and, if not save them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little good. So that is why I resolved to have no truck with anything which, directly or indirectly, for good reasons or for bad, brings death to anyone or justifies others' putting him to death."

All this brings us back to the present: What lessons would Camus have us take from his writings and apply to the world today, with its spiraling violence, deepening poverty and despair, and shrinking liberties? What would Camus say to caring, conscientious people, especially those who are feeling hopeless and powerless? In my opinion, Camus would say: Don't be indifferent, resist injustice, speak the truth, identify with the oppressed, and be a "healer"—one who attempts to lessen the suffering of others. Camus would say that confronting the madness is the only way to affirm and define our humanity. The following passage from the final page of *The Plague* seems to speak directly to us.

"From the dark harbor soared the first rocket of the firework display organized by the municipality, and the town acclaimed it with a long-drawn sigh of delight. Cottard, Tarrou, the men and the woman Rieux had loved and lost—all alike, dead or guilty, were forgotten. Yes, the old fellow had been right; these people were "just the same as ever." But this was at once their strength and their innocence, and it was on this level, beyond all grief, that Rieux could feel himself at one with them. And it was in the midst of shouts rolling against the terrace wall in massive waves that waxed in volume and duration, while cataracts of colored fire fell thicker through the darkness, that Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

"Nonetheless, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers."

November 1 , 2020

Blog post

11/1/20

We all need a fairy godmother

As I write this post, it is three days into our outdoor seating closure and two days from the most significant election of our lifetime. Dare I say, it is a time of high anxiety and uncertainty. Is anyone else having trouble sleeping at night?

Here is a snapshot of what's going on at Detroit Street: We announced on Friday that we were doing our part to stem the spread of COVID, before COVID came to us. With cases skyrocketing here and everywhere, we made the responsible choice to stop all on-site service. However, with our outdoor dine-in business accounting for nearly half of our sales from June through October, that was a gutsy move. And we are feeling it. That decision cost us about \$4,500 in lost sales on Friday and Saturday combined. It's a bitter pill to swallow. I'm feeling a little nervous and so are staff members. Fortunately, our warm-weather sales gave us a financial cushion... for now.

My instincts tell me that moving to just carry-out/delivery was the right decision for the business and for our patrons. Our short-term pain will likely be worth the longer-term gain of staving off COVID, for as long as possible. Knock on wood, all 46 staff members at Detroit Street Filling Station and the five staffers at The Lunch Room Bakery & Café have remained healthy. You can't put a price tag on that.

You may wonder: what's our plan for getting through the winter? First, to keep expenses commensurate with income. Second, to keep sales as strong as possible.

Sales depend on our patrons' interest in what we have to offer. To that end, we plan to dazzle you with new and spectacular victuals. There is no down-time in our kitchen. When the tickets slow, the cooks get busy. Over the last few days they have been experimenting with Thai curry cauliflower wings, soft pretzels, butternut squash risotto, taquitos and (vegan) pigs in a blanket –

to name a few. Don't be surprised to see a new burger, new wrap, new soups and new savory baked items coming your way in the coming weeks. In addition to food, look forward to new craft cocktails, beer, wine, and a plethora of groceries—all available on our online store.

The next point of our strategy for success is, as always, to do the right thing. That practice has sustained us thus far. As a restaurant, our greatest resource is food. We are offering it – for free – to any displaced service industry worker. Since the start of the pandemic, we have given away \$20,324 worth of food. We are a community that takes care of each other. If there is a need, we address it. And so do you.

Similarly, we take care of our staff and they take care of each other. It's hard to describe the incredible camaraderie in our establishments. Staff encourage and support each other through these are trying times, while making responsible choices about their off-the-clock activities. They have amazing spirits and strong moral compasses. For the business's part, we support our employees by offering a top-of-the-line health plan to all full-timers, and paid time off to all staff. If someone has so much as a sniffle they are asked to stay home and get paid for doing so.

I am leaving you with high hopes that our country will make a move to a new and better path on Tuesday. I'm guessing that if you are reading this post, you have already voted. But if not, VOTE like your life depends on it. Because it does. Regardless of the outcome, we will continue taking care of people and we know you will too. This is a beautiful community. We love all you people.

Nov 15, 2020

There's always a next move

On Thursday we shared an article on our Facebook page about the need to get outside no matter the weather. It contained the quote "There's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing." Words to live by! Today I braved the cold and the wind and hiked through Traver Creek Park and Dhu Varen Woods. The outdoors truly is tonic for the soul, and it provides a safe way to catch up with friends. Now that I have returned and warmed up, it's time for an update about life in restaurant land.

As you probably know, two weeks ago, as coronavirus cases soared, we closed down our outdoor seating (we never re-opened for indoor dining). It was a tough call, literally pitting our economic well-being against the physical health of our staff and community. Now, seeing the exponential growth in cases, I feel even more confident that it was the right decision. And in terms of sales, thanks to you all, we are hanging in there.

As of this writing, I am learning that we were merely ahead of the curve. The governor's announcement just ended indoor dining for all restaurants and bars for at least three weeks. Given the public health emergency, I believe that she is making the right call -- the only responsible call. I only wish that it were accompanied by a federal relief package for struggling workers and businesses. Without that, there will be a lot of suffering this winter.

Having gained valuable experience with carryout and delivery operations, I am happy to share that information with anyone who asks. Locally owned enterprises need to survive. We pour our hearts and souls into our operations. It is an industry fueled by blood, sweat and tears. Holler if we can help. And for out-of-work industry folks, call us for free meals and groceries.

Back to Detroit Street... even our end of on-site dining has not shielded us from the feeling that COVID is closing in. We hear about new cases in the community every day. I have 50 staff members (between Detroit Street and the Bakery & Café) to keep safe AND to keep employed. So far so good. But next week, ten of our employees -- most of them students -- are leaving town for one to several weeks. That thought is frightening on so many levels. I want to see them all return safely and I want to have a thriving business for them to return to.

Perhaps the best thing about the restaurant—in normal times but especially now—is the intense feeling of camaraderie. To be sure, staff members are concerned and afraid. We are basically passengers on a leaderless and rudderless Titanic in iceberg-infested waters. But at least we are in it together.

Employees describe our workplace as an oasis, a bubble, an island, a lifeline, and a family. They talk about how if not for the restaurant they would go crazy. They can't imagine being stuck at home, isolated, potentially unemployed, with nothing to do but worry. Two staff members who quarantined for the first few months of the pandemic report that at first they had ambitious plans to exercise, read, learn new things, and take on projects. And then, as the days turned to weeks and months, they lost all resolve. Ennui set in. They decided to return to work despite the exposure risk, and are both happy they did so. Personally, I know I would be in the same boat. I crave the social interaction, mental and physical challenges, and the distraction the restaurant provides.

Some days it seems like a miracle that everyone -- myself included -- just shows up and does their job. It feels like a monumental accomplishment to just make food, package and deliver meals, order supplies, clean and sanitize, and organize our coolers and pantries. Somehow we go beyond the necessary operations and keep up with things like in-house health inspections. (We recently scored 100% on our actual health inspections -- at both Detroit Street and The Bakery & Café—despite it being eight and 12 months respectively since our last inspections (they normally

happen every six months)). We continue to experiment with new dishes and drinks, do personnel reviews and give raises, and conceive of and execute marketing campaigns. We tell jokes, dance, get goofy, and check in with the person next to us to see how they're doing. My personal pet side project is caring for plants. Plants are everywhere inside and outside the restaurant and I probably spend 5 hours or more each week with them.

So, friends, I have news to share. Yes, I've been holding out on you. WE ARE EXPANDING! Crazy, right? I know. But when the going gets tough, well, the tough figure out their next move. And here is ours...

Tomorrow we are moving into the building next door, the place you may know as Jessica's Apothecary. It is literally 19 feet from our back door. The 2-story building, built in 1900, is small and adorable, both inside and out.

We are still determining exactly how we will use the space. Initially we will store much of the equipment and supplies that now occupy Detroit Street's (former and hopefully future) dining room and lounge. And maybe carve out a small office for yours truly. With the rest of the space, we are thinking about an intimate music venue and private dining space.

In my mind I envision a jukebox (know one for sale?) with a small dance floor in one corner and an upright piano in another corner. There may be small bar along one edge. Murals on the walls will be lit by soft, recessed ceiling lights. Plants and more plants will be wound with twinkle lights. Friends and couples will occupy small cocktail tables and booths. It's a vision of an intimate, cozy, casual and magical space that is open and inviting to all. How does that sound so far?

Of course, it will be a while before this plan comes to fruition. So many factors are at play, not the least of which is getting COVID under control. But this project gives us something to look forward to – a hopeful light at the end of the tunnel.

Stay well everyone. Be good to yourselves and each other.

December 1, 2020

Is there always a next move?

THE WHAT: We are closed again today and plan to re-open tomorrow. These two days have been necessary to regain our footing after COVID cases in the workplace. When we re-open it will be with reduced hours— noon to 7pm—seven days a week. Our menu is being pared down. And with reduced staffing we may need to slow the flow of orders at peak times. Please bear with us.

THE WHY: (aka Detroit Street Dispatch #28 thelunchrooma2.com/dispatch)

Sarah Vaughn's vocals drift through the speakers, the snow falls gently outside and I am comfortably lodged in the couch cushions in the living room of the house where I have lived since 1994. Those things feel normal and right. But if I look harder, very little feels right. It's life in the time of COVID.

I am a strategist and a thinker and an organizer who loves a good challenge. I have stamina and energy and smarts. But COVID lately has me outflanked. Next moves are coming to me more slowly and with less confidence.

Who would have ever predicted in March, when we first shuttered our dining rooms, that we would be stopped in our tracks by COVID in December? Eight-plus months ago we began running and hiding from the virus. We donned masks, stayed home, and stopped hugging our friends. We applied hand sanitizer by the gallon. We Zoomed in for meetings.

Somehow for the first seven months all of us at the restaurant eluded the COVID monster. In September we grimaced as university students returned. Those of us driving deliveries saw the unmasked parties in the campus area and read the writing on the wall. Soon after, cases began to surge all around and we got nervous. Never having opened for indoor dining, in late October we closed down our carefully executed outdoor dining operation. I regularly issued lengthy missives to staff pleading caution in their off-the-clock activities. Our diligence really seemed to pay off. Until it didn't.

Our illusions were shattered November 20th when our first employee received a positive COVID test result. It was near the end of a busy Friday dinner service. We were, thankfully, rocking and rolling. I was bartending that night, making carryout cocktails hand over fist. From my vantage point I could see into the kitchen and eyed the long line of food tickets. Despite the masks and the pandemic, things felt good.

And then the text came: "Phillis, I have some really shitty news..." and the spell was broken. As a business owner, hearing that an employee has tested positive is like being punched in the gut. I was stunned. My carefully constructed glass house shattered. At that moment I knew that something had fundamentally changed.

The rest of the night was a blur: a call to the health department, a conversation with managers, the process of determining who was in close contact (6 feet apart for at least 15 minutes) with the positive individual, and delivering the news to those six cooks that they would have to quarantine for 14 days.

Then came the rush for tests. Despite having been told by our health inspector that there was no point in testing yet – that it was too early to test positive as a result of the contact –we did it anyways. Two managers raced to urgent care, only to find it closed for the night, and then returned to the restaurant. After everyone else had left, five of us sat in what used to be our dining room, masked and far apart, and tried to determine what it all meant. The news especially devastating because two of the individuals in quarantine were the kitchen managers responsible for coordinating our sold-out Thanksgiving meal. Somehow we had to field a team for the four days from Sunday through Wednesday that would prepare the regular menu plus 120 Thanksgiving feasts. And we had to do it without half our cooking staff and crucial leadership.

Saturday we closed for a frenzy of cleaning and testing and planning, and then Sunday we hit the ground running. But that day we were stopped in our tracks once again. Midway through service came the news that the roommate of one employee and close friend of another employee had tested positive. Both employees left immediately and headed home to quarantine, bringing our total in quarantine to nine.

A handful of us clocked 60+ hours apiece over the coming few days and somehow made it through the regular menu plus the feast production. Wednesday night we left the restaurant tired and happy, but also sad that all of our personal Thanksgiving plans had been canceled. At least it would be a day to rest.

By Thanksgiving Day, over 20 staff members had received negative test. I became hopeful that maybe we were out of the woods. Friday felt almost normal.

But then the next day, one of the quarantining cooks called with the news that she had tested positive.

When you learn that an employee has contracted a potentially life threatening illness – and that it most likely happened in your workplace – it's heartbreaking. But on the positive side, she had no symptoms and had been in quarantine for a week already—thus was incapable of infecting anyone else. So we extended her quarantine period and carried on.

Throughout this time, our two infected employees—as well as the thought that others could get it—were on my mind constantly. I reached out to them daily, or almost daily, to check on their physical and mental status. The restaurant supplied them with food; I or other staff drove around care packages whenever requested. And I promised to pay everyone in quarantine for their full 80 hours of missed work. Money also started becoming a concern: the price tag for the missed sales on Saturday plus all the paid time off totaled about \$17,000. It's a bitter pill we could swallow, but if it happened again...

We trudged onward.

That was Saturday, day 8 of the first group's quarantine. Then came Sunday. And Monday.

Sunday night, while sitting in my yard beside a fire, I got a call from another cook – one who had not been affected by first incident – that he had tested positive. That news triggered a new round of calling the health department, contact tracing, delivering bad news to those needing to quarantine, and promising those individuals that they would also be paid for the two weeks. That incident brought our quarantine total up to twelve. Things were starting to feel dicey.

I remade the schedule for the umpteenth time and convinced a couple of cooks to work extra hours to compensate. We just had to make it to Wednesday, when our first round of quarantiners would return.

Then came yesterday.

Monday morning I was on my way in at 8am when I got a call from the kitchen manager on duty: we needed vegan mayo! I thought: ok, let that be our biggest problem of the day. I stopped by our bakery/café, grabbed the mayo and headed to Detroit Street. I helped get ready for service, then put together a big care package for a quarantining cook in Ypsilanti. Approaching to the freeway entrance, I got a call from a kitchen manager: he had just tested positive -- quite possibly as a result of exposure to the cook who tested positive on Sunday.

Wow. That was a huge blow. I pulled over and just stopped. It hit me: this wasn't just the "one more" effect, it was also about the infected individual. This kitchen manager was one who had stepped up and put in a Herculean effort to get us through the past week. He is so reliable and so good and so caring and so careful and so diligent. I also happen to have known him literally since the day he was born. He is young and healthy, but this virus is a monster and it is dangerous. And these young people in my employ are getting sick. The pressure and guilt and sadness of all that is incredible. I called the restaurant, told them to close, and continued on my way to Ypsilanti. At least I could deliver two boxes of food to an employee in quarantine who is too skinny and never eats enough!

The cycle started again: Health department, contact tracing, and quarantine calls (4 more this time plus the COVID-positive person, for a total of 17 employees).

At an all-manager Zoom call that afternoon, we discussed what to do. The decision was made to re-open Wednesday with reduced staffing and reduced hours. We came up with a concept of “pods” – kitchen employees who would only work with each other. Everyone in the pod would work an entire 11-hour shift together, every other day, thus reducing the number of individuals with whom they would be in contact. We also figured out how to distance staff members from each other – not an easy feat in a busy kitchen. The most important new concept for us will be line-cook buddies. Whereas normally there are between two and four line cooks at a time, depending on how busy we are, the new system will limit us to two line cooks at a time. (All positive cases thus far have been line cooks). Line cook pairing will be consistent; the same two line cooks will work together and only on alternate days. When it gets too busy we will just have to turn off the online store.

I also reached out to staff members yesterday to judge their level of comfort in returning. Their responses overwhelmed me. One wrote: “Honestly, of course I’m a little scared. I don’t want COVID, but I also want to help support the business in any way possible and I’m ready to get back to work. I feel good about this new plan.” Another wrote: “Whatever we have to do to keep going, I’m in. This is the best job I’ve ever had and I’m not giving it up without a fight.”

So now we try again. Hopefully our leaner, better, and wiser system will work. I worry that this virus may not be done with us. If it strikes again, it will be time to make more difficult choices. For now, we continue plugging holes and bailing out the ship.

December 12, 2020

Six feet of separation

There is a daily log in the restaurant that staff read upon arrival. It outlines the day’s schedule, describes any specials on the menu, and contains notes about random tasks and projects. Lately at the top of the page it simply states “SIX FEET.” Since re-opening eleven days ago, “six feet” has become our mantra. Other terms in our current restaurant lexicon include: pods, teams, line buddies, socially distant work stations and KN95 masks. Such is restaurant life in the tenth month of coronavirus.

By most measures, we have made a successful comeback from our staff COVID cases and brief closure. Sales are brisk, thanks to all of you. Our team is leaner, more efficient and more focused.

We have not yet had another COVID case – knock on wood. And if we do get another positive case, possible exposure to other staff members will be greatly limited.

In case you're interested in the details of our safer workplace, here they are:

Among kitchen staff, we have two teams—each of which works half the time. A team consists of kitchen managers, prep cooks, line cooks and dishwashers. The kitchen schedule is set up so that each team works two open-to-close days, three half days, and has two days off. There is virtually no overlap between teams.

We also purchased three additional food prep tables and spread out kitchen work stations. Now, with the exception of line cooks, everyone can stay at least six feet from their nearest co-worker. Line cooks operate in teams of two or three as “line buddies.” Line buddies work together every shift, thus limiting potential exposure if someone were to get sick.

Front of house positions are easier to keep socially distant. Stations include: phone, bar, front door, food bagging (aka expo) and delivery. Whenever possible we avoid entering one another's work space. We ask for things to be handed over and prep cooks ask line cooks to stir their pot or pull a tray from the oven. The person working expo brings the bags of food from the kitchen and sets them on a table near the front; the front door person takes it from there. When we do have to pass within six feet of someone, the rule is to walk quickly and not to speak.

The whole arrangement feels bit sterile and awkward, but it seems to be working. Everyone is committed to doing their part. Our employees want to be here and they want the restaurant to succeed.

So yes, we are staying healthy, making food, and paying the bills. But things still are not quite right. The gravity of the situation takes a toll on us. We are, as a team, on the same emotional rollercoaster: we go up and down, hour by hour and day by day. We simultaneously feel an intense connection to one another and are all a little afraid of each other. We are skittish from our previous COVID cases. Various ones of us are facing loneliness or relationship break-ups or struggles to stay sober or just missing friends and normalcy. Those who have quarantined face a special set of emotions and fear another setback. We commonly discuss our difficulty sleeping or clenched jaws or the irritability existing just beneath the surface. A simple “how are you” can bring about tears.

Fortunately we always have a critical mass of people (thank you, irrepressible comedians) putting out good energy and bringing up the general morale. Regardless of how we feel, we all put our best foot forward. We listen to each other and care for each other. We bear down, do our

work, focus, and produce. We do our best to control our environment – to stay afloat, stay productive, and stay alive.

As I tell staff members and myself, don't set your bar too high. Happiness and joy may not be realistic expectations at present. Try for calm and peace. Accept each moment as it comes, and accept the moment after that. Talk about your feelings and make real human connections. Be there for your co-workers and friends. Survive and grow during this period and there will be a light at the end of the tunnel.