



MITCHEL HESCHELES,  
OWNER OF CHOW GASTROPUB  
IN SPRINGFIELD

# Oregon22's Restaurant Flop

CUSTOMERS ARE AVOIDING DOWNTOWN EUGENE DURING THE CHAMPIONSHIPS,  
FRUSTRATING LOCAL EATERIES

*By Henry Houston*

**T**he starting gun has fired, but Oregon22's track and field-loving visitors from around the globe are nowhere to be found in Eugene restaurants.

In preparation for the track and field competition that has drawn athletes, media and spectators from around the world, local restaurants stocked up on food and scheduled workers for shifts during the 10-day event. But so far turnout at restaurants has been nonexistent, some restaurant owners say, especially with locals staying at home out of fear of crowded establishments.

The Riverfront Festival, though, has been a way to support local businesses during the World Athletics Championships, says Eugene City Manager Sarah Medary, and the games were intended to be a statewide tourist event.

Mitchel Hescheles owns Chow Gastropub in Springfield. It's located behind the Lane Transit District Springfield bus station, and he says his restaurant is closer to the University of Oregon than downtown Eugene. But he hasn't seen an increase in business during the World Athletics Championships.

Before Oregon22's July 15 opening day, Hescheles says he ordered more food than usual, did more food prep and had everybody on the schedule, anticipating a huge increase in business. But the projected extra customers never showed up.

Most of the Oregon22 events have been 9 am to 3 pm and 5 pm to 8 pm. With a no re-entry rule at Hayward Field, attendees can either eat inside the venue or eat in between morning and afternoon sessions. Thursday and Friday events aren't as long as the previous days, so Hescheles says he hopes around that time visitors will be interested in checking out restaurants outside of the UO neighborhood.

Downtown has been a ghost town during the games, says Marilyn Magnus, who works as a bartender at First National Taphouse at 51 W. Broadway.

"We've all been disappointed because we were expecting to do well, making more money than we usually do," she says.

Magnus says the restaurant decided to pare down its food and drink menu to focus on items that wouldn't slow down service time during the expected rush. The restaurant added more staff, doubling its front of house positions, expecting a large turnout.

But throughout the opening weekend, the customers didn't come.

Business was slow on Friday night, the first day of the games, she says, and Saturday night didn't have steady business until 9:15 pm. Customers are coming downtown later because of the city's Riverfront Festival, she says, which has been a boon for the bars but bad for restaurants that close around 10 pm.

"It's just been inconsiderate to local businesses to have so much stuff around the event," she says of the championships, "instead of promoting people to go out and eat locally. It really is taking business away from us, and we all thought it would be the best week of the year."

She says an automatic 20 percent gratuity to offset cultural norms on tipping has helped with worker tips. Having their regulars come in would've helped out, too, she adds, but they stayed away because of reports that downtown would be overwhelmed with crowds.

Even though nearby bars are seeing some increased late-night business, First National Taphouse isn't going to extend its hours. "People don't come here to get crazy," she says. "They come here to drink a couple of pints and eat good food."

Eugene City Manager Medary says the Riverfront Festival has been a way to make the Oregon22 events free for everyone and support local businesses. In 2017, Medary and Mayor Lucy Vinis attended the London World Athletics Championships for a handoff ceremony, as well as to see what to expect.

But the festival in London felt weird, she says. The media corporation Dentsu organized everything and there wasn't a local flavor, she adds.

"It was always about a promise to this community that if they're here, everyone can play," she says. "We wanted local businesses, local restaurants, local beverages, local artisans — a full on local presence."

Had the city not organized the festival, she says it's possible that Dentsu and the World Athletics Championships would've hosted its own event without local business vendors.

Although the World Athletics Championships is held in Eugene, Medary says the overall strategy has been to get travelers to see all of Oregon. "People have been encouraged to be all around the state," she says. "It hasn't had a total Eugene focus other than the event itself."

Business has even been slow in the Whiteaker neighborhood, says My Soul Hot Chicken owner Michael Wiley. He says he felt a difference in the area when his neighbor Tacovore, long known for its wait, didn't have a line outside of its building.

Like Hescheles and Magnus, Wiley says TV media outlets predicted long waits and scared locals from going out to eat. "It's been the complete opposite," he adds. "It's been frustrating. I need to get all the help I can get. It's been very bad. We had the [Oregon Country] Fair this week and that weekend wasn't good for me."

Medary says the city has not told any news outlets for locals to stay at home, and that it has actually encouraged residents to attend events, such as the Riverfront Festival. "We want people to come down," she says.

My Soul Hot Chicken's business model is focused on locals, Wiley says, and doesn't rely on tourists or students. But after hearing that Oregon22 would be good for restaurants, he says, he ordered a lot more chicken and bread than he normally would for a week.

But business during Oregon22 has been so slow, he adds, that for this week he only ordered some cabbage. "I am 25 percent of what I projected to do," he says.

So far, Wiley estimates he's lost thousands of dollars — a big number for a new business. "I was paying payroll and had barely enough to cover it," he says. "It's been shitty."

Losing so much money in a 10-day event that the state of Oregon poured \$40 million into has been frustrating, he says. "You think they'd want to make sure local businesses would do well," he says. "Everyone I've talked to has done poorly." ■