



Curry & Coco Thai Eatery owner Nalinrat 'Lily' Sahunalu plans to close the restaurant after Christmas and doesn't know if she'll reopen.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Restaurants: City restrictions loosened to help

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year, including 10,000 over the past three months. In Clatsop County, Astoria has been hit the hardest. Baked Alaska, Albatross, Charlie's Chophouse, 3 Cups Coffee and Street 14 Cafe have all closed their doors.

Side Road Cafe was one of the only closures in Warrenton. Sutton said the decision was a combination of increased demands on the couple's time, from schooling kids at home to making the small cafe safe and profitable during the pandemic.

The cafe occupied the lobby of a building on Marlin Avenue sharing several businesses, leaving Sutton and Elston to police good behavior while managing a small space severely limited from indoor dining. Despite having a drive-thru, Sutton worried about losing the community feel of the cafe and essentially becoming a coffee kiosk.

"A big part of our place was 'Warrenton's living room,' where you could come in and sit down and feel welcome ... and not being able to offer that was painful," she said.

Elston landed a job at the Clatsop Community Action Regional Food Bank. Sutton stays at home with the children, taking online baking classes and making deliveries to friends and family to stay relevant in hopes of one day restarting a business.

Adjusting

Restaurateurs have adjusted with the closures and government restrictions.

After closing Sweet Basil's Cafe in Cannon Beach, chef John Sowa went to work at the Silver Salmon Grille in Astoria. Eric Bechard, owner of Albatross, continues working on the Union Steam Baths building he had purchased in Uniontown and hopes to reopen as a sauna.

Baked Alaska co-owners Christopher and Jennifer



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Amyleigh Sutton scores a loaf of sourdough bread. She hopes to reopen a cafe or bake shop in the future.

Holen scaled down to Nekst, a to-go brunch space just east of their old restaurant catered toward weathering shut-downs in dining.

As executive director of the United Way of Clatsop County, Jennifer Holen would usually be organizing the cooking competition Iron Chef Goes Coastal. The fundraiser can bring United Way \$100,000 to funnel into local social service groups. Unable to hold the gala during the virus, she instead started a Dine United campaign, offering \$5 gift certificates to local restaurants for each \$25 donation to United Way at clatsopunitedway.org. The campaign runs into January.

"The idea was we wanted to do an event that could hopefully help inspire people to continue to get takeout or dine in when it's available or to highlight local restaurants," she said.

The Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association surveyed 400 businesses across the state. Nearly 40% of restaurateurs said they wouldn't survive until the summer without additional government support.

Nalinrat "Lily" Sahunalu, who opened the Curry & Coco Thai Eatery in Astoria last year, is closing after Christmas to travel and doesn't know if she'll reopen when her lease expires in March.

"We just want to wait and see if things (are) getting bet-

ter," she said. "We love Astoria. We want to be there ... We have a lot of good reviews and good support from local people."

Parklets

Astoria, while pumping unused coronavirus funds into regional business grants, has loosened restrictions on outdoor dining and approved several parklets in parking spaces outside The Merry Time Bar and Grill, the Green Door Cafe and Blaylock's Whiskey Bar to increase capacity during restrictions on indoor dining. But restaurateurs don't see outdoor dining making much of a difference until the weather improves.

Greg Astley, director of government affairs at the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, has called for more government support and criticized the state for scapegoating restaurants amid the virus.

"Even just as (recently) as a few weeks ago, we were less than a percentage of the workplace outbreaks," he said. "So it's not being transmitted in restaurants. In fact, the governor and the Oregon Health Authority have said it's these small gatherings by people — these social gatherings in private settings — that have been the primary source of transmission."

"And so we question why people are allowed to gather in their homes to do these

kinds of activities, when we're not allowing them to gather in one of the most heavily regulated industries, where we sanitize and clean the tables, the restrooms, the chairs, the menus, the door handles."

The National Restaurant Association has galvanized Astley's and other state restaurant groups to pressure Congress to pass the Blueprint for Restaurant Revival, a relief package totaling more than \$900 billion.

The blueprint calls for a \$120 billion fund to provide restaurateurs with grants for operating costs, a new round of forgivable, tax-deductible Paycheck Protection Program loans and other long-term borrowing programs. The association wants enhanced tax credits for employee retention and wellness, improved insurance coverage for business interruptions and legal protections from liabilities related to the virus.

The \$55 million Gov. Kate Brown recently provided in coronavirus relief grants helped, as would more federal support, Astley said, but opening up more restaurant capacity is the only way to keep people employed.

"We've shown that restaurants are a safe place," he said. "In some ways, it's up to us as operators to make sure consumers have confidence in the steps we've taken to make them a safe place to come and work and visit."

Sutton keeps her eye out for vacant storefronts around Warrenton or Hammond, or for a food cart where she can cook. But the barriers to reentry are high.

"It would be great to have ... maybe a bailout," Sutton said. "Bailouts are happening all over, but not for restaurants that I'm seeing. There's not much incentive to reopen, especially not at this point in time, not for at least a year probably. You're already at low margins, so there's not that much incentive to put yourself out there."

Lehn: Site was created about 10 years ago

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Lehn, 66, divides his time between tending his 5 acres off Cranberry Road and approving online posts. "I have had to space things out," he said. "I could sit at the computer all day, but I kind of have to take a break."

The site was created about 10 years ago by Ed Archer, who asked Lehn to administer it. It now boasts more than 14,800 members.

"That's one heck of a babysitting job you have, Frank," posted Susan Seidl when Lehn updated the membership number recently. People even chimed in from as far away as Boston thanking him. "And everyone's been nice," posted Susan Moretz.

Lehn moved to Long Beach in 2005, having cherished visits when he was growing up. He graduated from Camas High School in 1972, and became the third generation of his family to work at his hometown's paper mill, which is twinned with Wauna.

"After 27 years, I was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease and given a medical retirement. I sort of floundered around for a few years and then was given the opportunity to move to Long Beach."

Lehn is a collections volunteer at the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum in Ilwaco, giving him access to old photographs, which he posts with accompanying stories. He marks anniversaries of storms which have buffeted the region, most recently the Great Coastal Gale of 2007.

"I've always been interested in history, and this area is rich with it," he said.

"I figured the group would be a good place to share what I know about local history, starting with my local shipwreck stories."

Local photographers post shots, including ocean waves crashing at Cape Disappointment, eagles and sunsets.

No sales listings are allowed. Bear and coyote sightings are reported. Some amuse: Shelby Mooney posted a photo of wildlife poop and wrote, "City girl needs help with scat ID — elk or bear?" and drew 93 humorous replies.

Others reveal the community's caring spirit. When Californian Rose Wells posted that her plans to move to the area were on hold because her partner had just died at 43, it prompted an outpouring of sympathy. "May we help with your healing process and help to get you back on your feet?" asked one poster, Kathy Erskine.

Lehn shares emergency information with Joanne Rideout from Coast Community Radio in Astoria. Her Ship Report broadcast gives him credit for old shipwreck stories.

"He's really good at keeping a lid on interlopers on his page who try to steer the conversation to politics or bashing visitors who don't know the ropes about common mistakes, like parking on the beach at low tide," Rideout said.

Lehn said he enjoys the people he meets online.

"I sometimes feel like I'm herding cats, but if you stay on top of it, it's OK," he said. "My real reward comes from the members who appreciate the positive nature of the group."

Vaccine: 'Light at the end of the tunnel'

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Patrick Allen, the director of the Oregon Health Authority, said vaccinations will likely not be available for most Oregonians until spring.

"The vaccine is the light at the end of the tunnel, but we will be in this tunnel for several months," Allen said in a statement. "We need to keep doing what we've been doing to help our friends, neighbors and ourselves stay safe."

Columbia Memorial, Providence Seaside and public health officials have been meeting since early October to coordinate vaccine delivery and storage and plan for a community immunization program.

Chris Laman, the direc-

tor of pharmacy and cancer center services at Columbia Memorial, said the hospitals and county will partner to hold mass vaccinations when the time comes.

"While we've got this vaccine that's here, it's not here for everybody yet," Laman said. "And it's going to be a few months, maybe many months, before everybody in the community gets offered the vaccine."

Laman said that in the meantime, it is important to continue wearing a mask and following other public health guidance. He also urged people to go to trusted sources for information to avoid misinformation about the vaccines and the virus.

Gary Warner of the Oregon Capital Bureau contributed to this report.

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