

Employees harassed for enforcing mask rules

By **LIZZY ACKER**
The Oregonian

Like all restaurants, the coronavirus pandemic has meant constant flux for La Rambla, a tapas restaurant in Oregon's wine country.

The McMinnville restaurant closed and then opened, owner Kathy Stoler said, and then closed again.

Since the official reopening of restaurants in Oregon, Stoler said, "I had to close twice because of someone coming into contact with someone with COVID."

Every surprise closure meant food wasted and money lost, so Stoler implemented new rules: Her staff needed to be vaccinated and anyone who wanted to eat indoors had to be vaccinated, too. Everyone who isn't eating, inside and out, also must wear masks.

Stoler said she lost some employees over her vaccine requirements, but on the whole the response has been "very positive."

Until Labor Day, when a group of people dining outdoors became aggressive with staff members who asked them to mask up when going to the restroom inside.

The mask rule is not unique to La Rambla. State rules also require masks indoors.

Rama Merrill-Troxell, the restaurant's manager, posted about the incident on Facebook, after one of the women in the party posted a negative review of the restaurant.

The review, which has since been taken down, called

La Rambla "racist and closed minded."

In her post, which is also no longer on Facebook, Merrill-Troxell said the interaction "truly hurts my heart."

She detailed the exchange, in which the party was seated on the patio because they didn't all have proof of vaccination. Other parties asked to be moved away from them, as they loudly and angrily talked about the policy. Then a man verbally attacked a 16-year-old hostess who asked him to put on a mask when he came inside to use the restroom.

Merrill-Troxell said she approached the group and asked them to be more respectful. When the man came out of the bathroom, she was attempting to tell him the same thing when he lashed out at her and called her offensive names.

At that point, Merrill-Troxell asked the group to leave, which they were reluctant to do.

During the incident, she said, one of the women in the party put her hands on Merrill-Troxell.

"When she put her hands on me," Merrill-Troxell said, "I felt this woman is losing control."

But when Merrill-Troxell asked the woman to remove her hands, she said she did.

"I didn't feel like I was assaulted," Merrill-Troxell said, noting that she worked at a dive bar for 17 years, so she is familiar with unruly clientele.

Finally, she said, the group left the property. The area was full of people who

were watching the whole altercation.

Merrill-Troxell said she thought the group finally left because so many people were filming them.

"Everybody on the street is saying, 'Get out of here!'" she said, adding that there was a big round of applause when the group finally left.

According to Merrill-Troxell and Stoler, the police were called and the party was nearby when they arrived. But both women said the police did little to address the behavior that they reported and that many people had filmed.

"There were three cops out on Third Street that were talking to these people and they never got any names or anything," Stoler said.

Merrill-Troxell said she was talking to an officer and wanted to press charges "and then the officer said that he was being overridden, and that I wasn't able to press criminal trespassing charges."

McMinnville police did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

For her part, Merrill-Troxell doesn't want people to retaliate against the woman in the group who posted the negative review, and she declined to share video of the incident.

"I am feeling like the whole world has gone mad," she said.

"I really don't want them to be demonized," Merrill-Troxell said. "I really just wanted to say, 'Let's treat each other kindly.'"

Recreation food products flourish amid pandemic

By **SUZANNE ROIG**
The Bulletin

From the region that gave a start to Hydro Flask and Humm Kombucha, central Oregon has become a mecca for entrepreneurs seeking to carve out a niche for themselves in the outdoor food products industry.

Henry and Julie Mosier, who forged Food for the Sole, say inspiration struck when eating the dehydrated food on the market. Julie Mosier, while backpacking South Sister seven years ago, pulled out her dehydrated food and found it gloppy and bland.

While in the forest she thought she could do better.

Like many entrepreneurs, necessity was the mother for invention for small businesses, which are the backbone of Oregon's economy, according to the Economic Development for Central Oregon, a nonprofit that encourages business development.

By 2018, the mother-son team was creating its own dehydrated food in the Bend Prep Kitchen. Today the pair has eight employees and about 35 accounts that sell their products in 10 states. They declined to discuss specific sales data.

"We focus on veggies," said Julie Mosier. "When we're done making a meal, before it goes to dehydrator, it's ready to eat. It's real food. When you look at our ingredient list you can understand every word. There's texture. We cook with layers to create the complexity and nuances of flavor."

Nearly 95% of all businesses in Oregon qualify as a small business, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration. In 2019, the year with the most current data, 377,860 small businesses in Oregon were registered and employed 852,983 people, or more than half the employed statewide. Small business is defined as having fewer than 200 employees.

The outdoor food indus-



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Nardina Belcastro mixes ingredients together while preparing a ratatouille meal at Food for the Sole in Bend.

try is such a vital component of the economy that in 2020, the Oregon State University-Cascades launched a bachelor of science program. In 2020 the program had 18 students.

The program, funded by Hydro Flask, is designed to inspire future workers in the field of developing a systems approach to product commercialization, said Christine Coffin, a spokeswoman for the university. The interdisciplinary program focuses on engineering, natural resources, outdoor recreation, sustainability and business.

"The number of mergers and acquisitions in the past two years speaks to both the quality and quantity and established businesses in the tri-county region to the appetite of larger companies to acquire competitors," said Roger Lee, CEO of Economic Development for Central Oregon.

One such acquisition occurred earlier this spring when Laird Superfood, a publicly traded company, acquired Picky Bars, a Bend-based snack company founded by triathletes. Other notable companies in the region are cookie maker Red Plate and granola-maker Bird Seed Food Co.

Getting to this level requires efficiencies that save money and time. Food for the Sole was able to make sizeable savings

with the help of the Oregon Manufacturing Extension Program, a statewide nonprofit that works with businesses to eek out savings. With the program's help the Mosiers were able to cut 10 hours a week of inventory control that saved them \$25,000 a year which increased productivity and sales by \$200,000, said Kleve Kee, Oregon Manufacturing Extension Program managing consultant.

All this occurred during the pandemic, Kee said.

The savings were gleaned by using the Lean manufacturing principles that eliminates waste in a production system. The principles were made famous by Toyota in the 1930s. Most of the savings came from installing sensors in the dehydrator equipment that sent a message to the owners when they went off line, Kee said. That saved the company money from having food spoil in the dehydrator.

"We work at making companies more efficient by working with the people and improving the processes without expanding the work force," Kee said. "The solutions we worked on with Food for the Sole included technology."

The technology allowed the company to not only eliminate waste, but monitor dehydrators without having to employ staff, which makes the company more efficient.

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