

# Restaurants: Limited indoor recreation, entertainment are a go

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Throughout the pandemic, Meda has been adding on to his business, creating a Day of the Dead-themed cantina next door. The high-ceilinged bar, colored predominantly in red and gold, is decorated with dozens of multi-colored skulls over glossy countertops of reddish-brown wood. Empty wooden frames adorn the walls, waiting to be filled with tall canvas paintings, Meda said.

“There was some uncertainty in making sure I was good to go ahead and be able to make this and keep the business going,” Meda said of the new addition to his business. “Business expansion has to do with projected sales. When your projected sales are not coming, your investment becomes: ‘Should I do this?’”

With the limited reopening effective on Feb. 26, Meda said he is pushing to open his new establishment in the next two months. Across the street, Burt is undergoing a similar effort. He plans to open a new grilled cheese restaurant in April nearby called “Toasted.”

“Now that there’s a little light at the end of the tunnel, now I can start training people and see about opening this when we’re at at least 50 or 75%,” Meda said, simultaneously reaching above him to knock on a wooden frame overhead.

## ‘It feels really good to feel a little more stable than we did before’

With some of the highest coronavirus infection rates



Joe Meda, owner of Joe's Fiesta Mexican Restaurant, serves up food to dine-in customers at his Pendleton restaurant around the lunch hour on Monday, March 1, 2021.

in Oregon, Umatilla County has been caught firmly in the extreme risk category for months. However, with a steady recent decline in cases, Gov. Brown's office announced on Feb. 23 that the county was eligible for high risk, permitting indoor dining at 25% capacity.

The change also allows

indoor and outdoor recreation, entertainment, and shopping and retail establishments to reopen at limited capacity, as well as faith institutions, funeral homes, mortuaries and cemeteries. It allows indoor and outdoor visitation at long-term care facilities and only recommends, rather

than requires, that office work be done remotely.

When speaking of future business, Meda and Burt couldn't help but follow each prediction or aspiration by mentioning the uncertainty that has consumed local businesses throughout the pandemic. But on Feb. 26, watching the famil-

iar faces of loyal customers walk through the door and taking countless phone calls brought with it a sense of hope that things were inching back to normal.

Collin Taber, a 19-year-old employee at Moe Pho Noodles & Cafe in the same block as Joe's Fiesta, said he showed up at work on Feb.

26 at noon to find seven full tables, a sight he described as both “scary” and “exciting.” After three months of solely takeout orders he and his co-workers were rusty, but over a 2½-hour rush, they got back in the swing of things.

“It was nice to see familiar faces, too,” said Taber, a student at Mount Hood Community College. “When I came in I noticed that the people I saw before were back, which was really cool, and then I had something to talk to them about, about being back. And they were really excited, which made us really excited.”

Customers who came to get their daily dose of pho were happier than usual, said Taber and his co-worker, Alexi Brehaut. Customers were eager to know how the business was doing and to show support by coming in. They knew how much other businesses had been struggling.

“It's just us getting some breathing room,” Brehaut, a 20-year-old student at Eastern Oregon University, said. “Being able to take a deep breath and finally get something that's not supposed to mean that much to someone, but it does mean that much to people.”

Taber added that the latest reopening has brought with it a sense of stability after months of uncertainty.

“With all the uncertainty that we had, it feels really good to feel a little more stable than we did before,” Taber said.



Oregon National Guard members await their next patients during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic at Wildhorse Resort & Casino in Mission on Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021.

## Wildhorse:

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health care workers administer the second dose of the Pfizer vaccine later this month, everyone who lives, works or is enrolled with the Umatilla Indian Reservation that wants the vaccine will have received it.

The Wildhorse event marked the first time the Tribes were opening up their vaccine supply to non-Indians who live on the reservation or work for a tribal entity.

While tribal members were still eligible to receive the vaccine at Wildhorse, a two-day breakdown showed that 85% of those vaccinated were non-American Indians.

One of the factors enabling the CTUIR to take this vaccine moonshot was its decision to order its vaccines through the Indian Health Service, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Although the sovereignty of Oregon's nine federally recognized tribes means they can tailor their own vaccine programs, the CTUIR was one of only two tribes who opted for the Indian Health Service over the Oregon Health Authority.

Tribal leaders credit their vaccine supply with allowing them to steadily vaccinate



An Oregon National Guard member draws up a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine during a vaccination event at Wildhorse Resort & Casino in Mission on Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021.

tribal members, identifying anyone who was willing to obtain the vaccine through the Tribes' enrollment office.

When the CTUIR received a nearly 1,000-dose shipment, Yellowhawk CEO Lisa Guzman realized the Tribes would need to plan something larger than the weekly clinics they had been running.

The Tribes sent out postcards to non-tribal residents throughout the reservation, continuing to network even as the Wildhorse event started to vaccinate as many people with connections to the reservation as possible.

“All of those staff who were working are connected to a lot of folks in the commu-

nity,” Guzman said. “So they would pick up the phone and say, ‘Is your family in here?’ And they would say, ‘Well, no.’ And we would say, ‘Well, get them in here.’”

By April, Sams and other tribal officials believe they can fully reopen their government and tribal enterprises, given the vaccination rates.

As the CTUIR looks to put the pandemic behind them, Sams credited the plans they had in place that blunted the impact of the virus.

As of Monday, March 1, only one tribal member has died from COVID-19, and despite the virus modifying how they operated, Wildhorse and other tribal enterprises have turned a profit

during the pandemic.

“I think had we had a better plan countywide, we probably could have had more things open than we did,” he said. “And we were trying to demonstrate that over and over again, that it is possible if you have a strong developed plan.”

For the Tribes, it wasn't just about protecting its economy, but also protecting a tribal membership that had previously been decimated in centuries past by epidemics spread through white settlers.

For the Oregon National Guard, this is the first time they assisted a tribal vaccination event and their first vaccination operation in Umatilla County, according to Maj. Heather Bashor, a public affairs officer with the Oregon National Guard.

For Guzman, having the National Guard there was another milestone for the tribes.

“When we roll out any kind of event in a tribal community, people have their own views on what tribal communities are about,” she said. “So for us to bring young guards to help us and participate and be part of the tribal community and work with our tribal members or individuals from other federally recognized tribes, it breaks down barriers. It really does.”



Weston Middle School sixth grader Megan McLouth reads her lines during a read-through of a play she and Hazel Hammersla wrote virtually on a shared Google document during pandemic isolation.

## Playwrights: Details of the performance are to be determined

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imately 30-minute play isn't set into a specific time period. There are no phones, but they have trains and McDonalds, Megan explained. In the main role, a boy named Kye attempts to deliver a message to “the next great warrior.”

After not seeing each other for months, they finally got together in person in mid-January to post play audition posters in Athena businesses. Auditions took place several days later at Athena City Park. During tryouts, the girls realized they had a bit of a problem.

“We were going to have more boys in the play, but only one boy showed up at the tryouts,” Hazel said.

Megan and Hazel adjusted the script on the spot. Most boy roles became girl roles, but not all. A girl plays Kye's dad. The cast list includes 19 characters played by 10 actors.

A couple of Wednesdays ago, the cast members assembled at the Moosebees Hair Salon in Athena for a first read-through. They plopped on a couch and chairs near a cozy fire in a wood stove. On the coffee table lay a big bag of Quaker Chewy Bars and an assemblage of masks and phones.

They ignored the dings of incoming texts and concentrated on the

dialogue. Megan directed the action when she wasn't reading her own lines.

At the end of the read-through, they decided to practice their curtain call just for fun. As she watched the young actors emote, salon owner Christy Lovins smiled.

“I think they really miss socializing with their friends,” Lovins said. “This is a good thing.”

“The Messenger” is actually not Megan and Hazel's first attempt at play writing. They collaborated on a short play called “Friends” last year, which they wrote together at Hazel's house, meeting together once a week. Megan had caught the theater bug after acting in “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever” at the Little Theater of Walla Walla in Washington, in December of 2019.

“I really wanted to be in a play again,” she said. “I thought, ‘Nobody else in our school is going to make a play that I can be in so I'm going to make one myself.’”

The girls recruited actors for “Friends,” and then performed it at school for their classmates.

The young playwrights haven't yet scheduled the performance of “The Messenger.”

“We haven't decided when we're going to perform,” Megan said. “We'll do it whenever we're ready.”