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Resetting the Table: Concerns for Restaurant Operations in MA

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Special Edition: COVID-19 Crisis



Photo Source: (Lueckemeyer, 2020)

State of the Massachusetts Restaurant Industry

The restaurant industry in the state of Massachusetts represents, as of 2018, over 15,000 restaurants (Massachusetts Restaurant Association, n.d.). The nearly \$19 billion-dollar industry was nearly brought to a complete halt of operations with the outbreak of COVID-19.

Massachusetts RESTAURANT INDUSTRY AT A GLANCE

Restaurants are a driving force in Massachusetts's economy. They provide jobs and build careers for thousands of people, and play a vital role in local communities throughout the state.



HOW DOES THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY IMPACT THE MASSACHUSETTS ECONOMY?

Every dollar spent in the tableservice segment contributes \$1.87 to the state economy.

Every dollar spent in the limited-service segment contributes \$1.57 to the state economy.



Photo Source: Restaurant.org

While many restaurants pivoted their operations to offer take-out, curbside pick-up, and delivery services only, many operators made the difficult decision to temporarily close their restaurants. It is estimated that of the restaurants that closed, 75% would not re-open (Severson & Yaffe-Bellany, 2020).

Effective June 1st, 2020 restaurants in Massachusetts were allowed to operate their establishments with outdoor seating. Then on June 22nd, 2020, the Baker Administration opened step two of phase two, which allowed for indoor dining to occur with a variety of safety measures (*Safety Standards and Checklist*, 2020).

It is estimated that 10% of the workforce in MA is a restaurant related position. With a significant increase in the furlough's or layoffs to the industry, the MA unemployment surged. The Boston and eastern districts of the state make up the largest volume of restaurants and employees (Massachusetts Restaurant Association, n.d.).

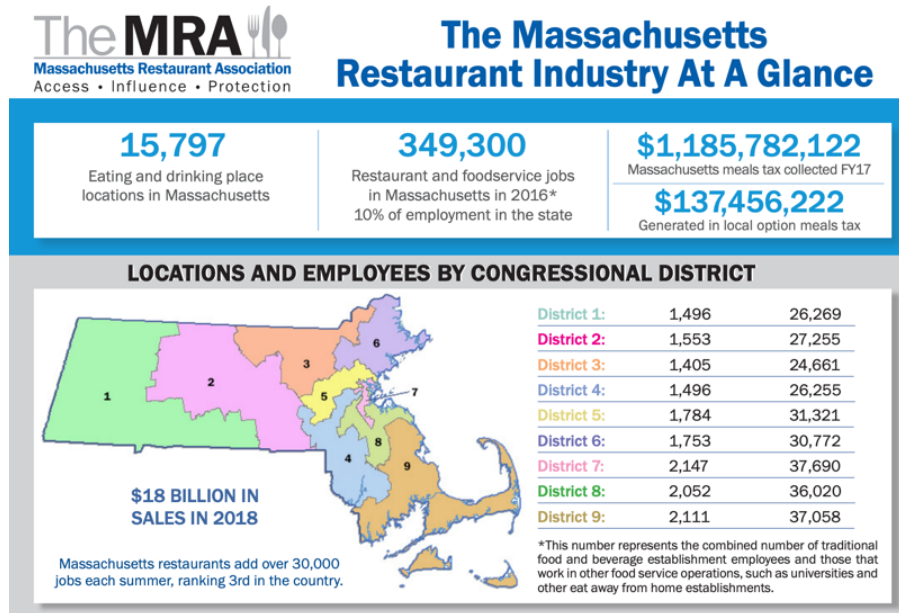


Photo Source: The Massachusetts Restaurant Association

The proper re-opening of the restaurant is going to be a key aspect to maintaining positive online reviews and repeat business. However, this new territory of reduced seating to comply with social distancing, the increased frequency of enhanced cleaning protocols, and the personal health and safety of the guests and employees along with wearing facial masks all take on a new realm of concern. These concerns are fresh on the minds of the consumers and the restaurant operators.

Consumer Concerns

While there are numerous concerns that guests have upon returning to a restaurant for a dining experience, the main concerns indicate four main categorical areas (social distancing, sanitation, ventilation, and proper protective equipment).

1. ***Social Distancing***

Guests want to see that the tables have allocated the recommended six feet of distance. This will also include the staff, that they adhere to this spacing and not cluster together. Additionally, they have high concerns about the employee's health status and the other consumers' lack of care.

2. ***Sanitation***

The cleanliness of both the operation and the table is at the top of the consumers mind. This is a great opportunity for operators to enhance their practices and bring this to the forefront of the minds of the consumer – so they not only see it but feel it as well (Szende et al., 2020). In some manner, customers want to see that policies are monitored and well enforced for both customers and employees. In addition, customers would like to see that effective chemicals are used and cleaning procedures are followed. The perception of clean is key to increasing the confidence a consumer has with a restaurant.

3. ***Proper Ventilation***

As the virus is known to be spread via droplets in the air, another concern is having an effective ventilation system. At the present moment, many customers are more comfortable dining outside during the warmer months. This will allow them to see how the business handles the experience, building trust that they will handle it well inside.

4. ***Proper Protective Equipment (PPE)***

While facial coverings are not the most desired option, it is understood that it will help slow the spread. It is important the entire team of employees and customers are properly wearing masks. Some operators find it disturbing that consumers do not take wearing masks seriously. Signage as well as gentle reminders are cues to help the guest adhere to the guidance.



Photo Source: Chops Restaurant (Severson, 2020)

The Future

While the future of the restaurant industry remains in somewhat of a limbo state as guidance allows for additional business levels, handling the experience in a transparent manner will help generate the much-needed confidence by the consumer. Trust placed in the restaurant operators hands is an important concern for consumers (Cobe, 2020; Klein, 2020).

This research team is currently conducting an in-depth study to examine the 360° view (customers, operators, and employees) of the challenges to operating a restaurant in Massachusetts under the present pandemic conditions.

Resources:

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