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Expert Insight on Leisure and Hospitality Job Losses



Claire Stewart

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What are some of the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the hospitality industry?

The most important impact has been that the pandemic exposed and magnified the troublesome labor issues that were festering prior to 2020. One of the biggest issues has been that of tipped workers being paid subsistence wages with the expectation that the public provide their salaries by tipping well. And, that chefs and other workers have been historically left out of that tipping process altogether. The pandemic exposed the fragility of hospitality

employment; there are no virtual office alternatives for service people whose labor is needed to create and serve food or clean hotel rooms. So, workers who already had qualms about their work environment are not rushing back to a system they know was already broken. Restaurants, for example, are bribing chefs with signing bonuses, begging them to come back, but that chef may have already found an alternate path, and it is a good chance it is an entrepreneurial path.

Which impacts from the pandemic do you anticipate will be long-lasting or permanent?

I think a positive impact has been a reshaping of what constitutes "fine dining." We have arrived at the notion that take-out food can be very good and prepared with care. Chefs have tailored their menus to withstand packing and transportation, and good service can still be present in the accuracy of food orders and timely delivery. Another development has been the acceleration of environmentally friendly products to box and consume all these to-go orders.

How have businesses reacted or adjusted to COVID-19? What's different about larger companies versus small businesses?

Large companies have the advantage of having deep pockets as well as human resource departments to manage safety protocols, lay-offs, and rehiring. They also have savvy lawyers and money people who can navigate federal and local aid and tax breaks, not to mention they can afford to update their facilities and outfit their workers with safety equipment. Smaller companies live much closer to the bone, not able to withstand even just a few weeks with no money coming in. They certainly could not afford to keep their employees paid while their businesses were closed, so small companies saw a great exit of their talent. And yet small companies have shown to be nimble; converting their spaces to take-out or delivery locations, adjusting their menus and hours, without the need for corporate or franchise approval. And small businesses are likely to be run by members of the community with staff and owners who inspire loyalty.

Given the current environment, what advice would you give to hospitality workers and businesses?

I remind my hospitality students that cream always rises to the top. Difficult times create opportunity. The pandemic has created new challenges and technology has only begun to change the way people travel, dine and are entertained. As an instructor, I cannot exactly train my students for how to work on Mars someday. But I can emphasize transferable skills and behaviors that can be adapted to work on Mars. Practice critical thinking and be professional, be flexible, and grow emotional intelligence. Be on time. Do more than the person next to you. Do the absolute best you can every day because the person next to you is not. That is an opportunity. Be better than you need to.

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Claire Stewart graduated from the Culinary Institute of America and has worked as a professional chef at Rainbow Room, the Yale Club of New York City, the Continental Club, and for New York City's First Family at Gracie Mansion. Stewart is an associate professor at New York City College of Technology, City University of New York. She is the author of *As Long as we Both Shall Eat: A History of Wedding Food and Feasts* and a contributor to *Consumption and the Literary Cookbook* as well as *Savoring Gotham: A Food Lover's Companion to New York City*. She wrote chapters in *We Eat What? A Cultural Encyclopedia of Unusual Foods in the United States* and *Sage Encyclopedia of Food Issues*.

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