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"I WONDER IF MY FAVORITE RESTAURANT/BAR IS THINKING OF ME": THE GUIDELINES ON THE REOPENING OF RESTAURANTS, CAFES AND BARS AS THE BUSINESS CLOSURE ORDERS ARE LIFTED

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As the stay-at-home orders related to COVID-19 pandemic are being lifted, restaurants and other food and beverage operations must consider what measures to take to safely and efficiently operate in the new world that has forever been changed by COVID-19. The U.S. National Restaurant Association (NRA), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) each released guidelines for restaurants, cafes and bars planning to reopen.

In its COVID-19 Reopening Guidance: a Guide for the Restaurant Industry published on April 22, 2020, the NRA which represents the interests of its restaurant and foodservice industry members, covers four areas: food safety, cleaning and sanitizing, employee health monitoring and personal hygiene, and social distancing. The recommendations include cleaning and sanitizing reusable menus and discarding paper menus after each customer use, designing a process so guests stay separated while waiting for seating, limiting party size at the tables, using technology to reduce person-to-person interaction (including mobile ordering, menu tablets, texts on arrival for seating, and contactless payment), and establishing designated pick-up zones for customers.

The FDA, a federal agency tasked with protecting and promoting public health through the control and supervision of food safety, pharmaceutical drugs, tobacco and other consumer products, has published several guides for the restaurant industry. In its Best Practices for Retail Food Stores, Restaurants, and Food Pick-Up/Delivery Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the FDA concentrates on general recommendations related to food handling and employee safety and provides cross-references and links to materials provided by CDC, the Environmental Protection Agency, and Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The CDC's Interim Guidance for Restaurants and Bars is included as part of the CDC Activities and Initiatives Supporting the COVID-19 Response and the President's Plan for Opening America Up Again. This interim guidance is laid out in a series of three steps to address a gradual scale-up of operations (e.g., restaurant take-out and delivery as step 1 followed by opening dining rooms with limited seating capacity as step 2 and full restaurant operations while maintaining social distancing as step 3). The guidance includes practical recommendations for each step that include prioritizing outdoor seating, cleaning and disinfecting any pens, counters, or hard surfaces between each use or customer, and using phone app technology to alert patrons when their table is ready.

Novel practices, creativity and tech upgrades will be at the forefront of the foodservice industry coming back online. From the automatic touch-screen doors and single-serve condiments to the availability of QR codes at each table for the guest to instantly get the restaurant menu on a phone, to new positions such as the sanitation administrators responsible for cleaning and sanitizing items and surfaces that the restaurant staff and guests touch (while avoiding any contact with food and beverages for service to guests), many of the measures implemented by the restaurant and bar operators will be dictated by consumer behaviors and reactions. Differentiation based on safety, value and experience will remain critical to a restaurant's success. Change is upon us, and the guests and the restaurants will have to come together to find and embrace an acceptable new normal.

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