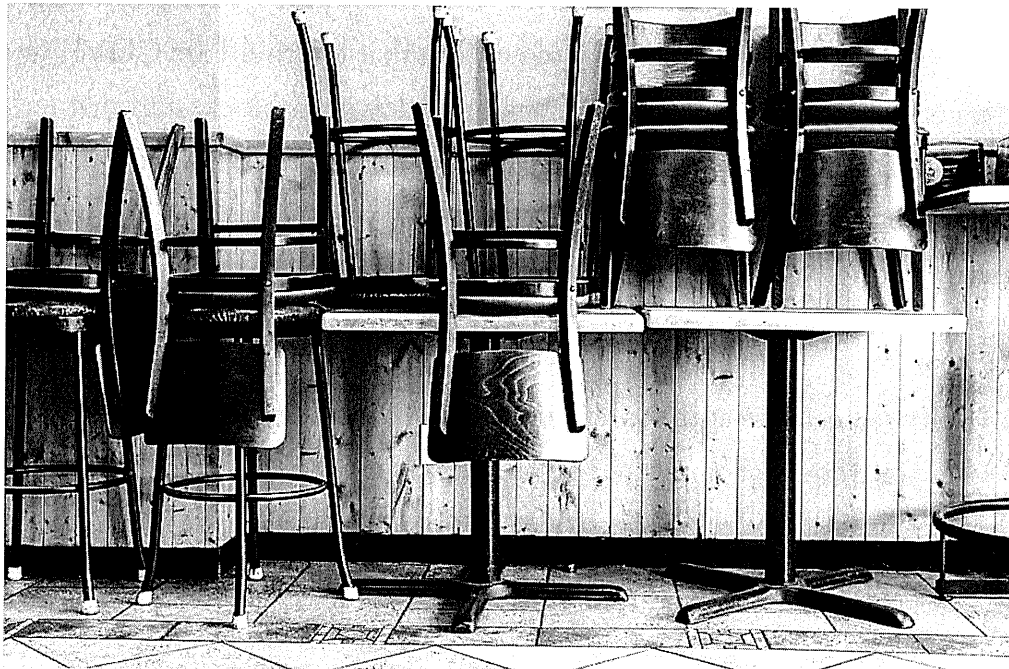


Restaurants Nationwide Temporarily Close as Staff Test Positive, Case Counts Rise

Restaurants are cancelling reservations and shutting down dining rooms as nation braces for winter surge

by Elazar Sontag | Dec 20, 2021, 4:17pm EST



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Restaurants are suddenly in a situation not dissimilar to that of the early pandemic, as the omicron variant of coronavirus sweeps the country: Case counts are shockingly high, staff and guests are testing positive, and restaurants — the responsible ones, at least — are choosing to close while staff are tested. Restaurants that would otherwise be experiencing some of their most profitable weeks are being forced to reckon with COVID surges. Again.

In New York, where new COVID cases are nearing their highest daily rate since the onset of the pandemic, restaurants started closing in droves during the week of December 13. Now, it's impossible to scroll Instagram without coming across a post from a favorite restaurant announcing a temporary closure. In some cases staff are testing positive, and in others, it's diners who have spent a prolonged time in the confines of a restaurant's dining room before discovering they had COVID. Since mid-August, New York City restaurants have required patrons to show proof of vaccination to dine indoors. "A lot of these [restaurants] are places that are very open about being masked all the time, their team is vaccinated, we're doing everything we need to do with the new mandate... We really can't catch a break," Stephanie Gallardo, co-owner of the bakery Love, Nelly, told Eater NY.

The dozens of restaurants that have closed across New York in the past week have, for the most part, announced that they'll reopen when they're able to confirm that their staff are COVID-negative. But with lines at nearly every testing site in New York wrapping down the block, staff that feel ill are left with few answers, and restaurants that desperately need to reopen may have as much trouble finding available tests as they do protecting their staff from COVID while they work. Eater NY notes that the closures come at a particularly unfortunate time of year, when most restaurants hope to see increased business and high profits before the quieter months of the new year.

Though New York City seems to be at the forefront, other cities are starting to witness similar closures. In Houston, Texas, where one hospital confirmed on December 19 that the omicron variant was responsible for 82 percent of new symptomatic cases, restaurants and bars are shutting down in response to exposures. Others are closing out of an abundance of caution, all too familiar with the open-close cycle that COVID fuels, and opting to avoid it entirely by extending their holiday closures. And while California has yet to feel the full impact of this latest surge, early signs point to what will likely be a similarly unpleasant situation unfolding there. According to Eater LA, the popular restaurant group Gjelina has reported 28 new COVID cases, and plans to operate with "a limited team." Eater LA notes that Los Angeles County has yet to announce plans to reinstate any mandates surrounding business restrictions or capacity limits. And while California public health officials announced a reinstated mask mandate last week, some counties have already made clear they will not enforce it.

In Chicago, surging cases and staff exposures have reignited political rifts and issues of worker safety. According to Eater Chicago, there's a sense of déjà vu as some restaurants take steps to close and protect their staff, and others are accused of staying open even after learning of possible COVID exposures. For restaurateurs like Alsonye Ugbebor, the owner of a catering company and associated taco business in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood, being flippant about COVID isn't an option. Ugbebor has an underlying health condition that increases the risks associated with contracting COVID, and is the mother of a young son. She'd already had COVID once when, even after being vaccinated, she was

diagnosed with a breakthrough case earlier this month. With the help of staff, she was able to keep her business operating for some time while she was out sick, but with Ugbebor and her son both fighting COVID, she announced recently that her business would be closing until she recovers and can get tested.

Omicron was classified as a “variant of concern” by the World Health Organization in November, and in the past two weeks has spread across the country. While scientists are still working to understand its lethality and what this means for the long fight to end the pandemic, it’s important to also note that this is not a repeat of March 2020 from a health perspective: The public knows more about how COVID spreads and what tools (namely masking, vaccination, ventilation, and testing) keep it in check.

But while the public may be better prepared, restaurants are in some ways in worse shape than they were during the first shutdowns of 2020. The months of reopenings and pivots and closures were costly. Supply shortages and inflation have made the cost of ingredients and materials needed to operate more expensive. There’s no Paycheck Protection Program on the horizon, and the Restaurant Revitalization Fund is in dire need of replenishment. The industry knows the story from here: Owners and workers are once again doing their best, with very little. And right now, that looks like shutting off the lights, canceling the reservations, and hoping for the best.

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