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 MENU



CAMPUS, CORONAVIRUS, NEWS

Lack of foot traffic continues to cripple small Comm. Ave. restaurants

October 13, 2020 10:28 pm

by Angela Yang

Behind a hand-drawn sign on the restaurant storefront that reads “Support Your Local Business,” the owners of University Grill and Pizza can often be found sitting at empty tables instead of preparing food behind the counter.

On the wall inside the once-lively comfort food joint hangs a mural depicting cartoon faces of the four brothers who founded the family restaurant 30 years ago. Of the four, two are no longer working.

The private restaurant had expected Boston University’s campus reopening to revitalize business after the pandemic-induced shutdown cut off its main source of revenue: students.

But more than a month into Fall semester, business is still down 60–70 percent for UGrill, according to owner Alexandros Michaelidis. He and his brother Lazarus Michaelidis are the two remaining workers.

When the “downward spiral” began in March, Alexandros said, faculty and staff who stayed in Boston no longer frequented



Crispy Crêpes Cafe, which has served the Boston University community for 18 years, has had to cut its hours and reduce staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic. SHANNON DAMIANO/ DAILY FREE PRESS STAFF

local businesses as the switch to remote work took hold, evidenced by “less and less traffic, less lights in buildings at night.”

Uncertain about the future and unable to find solutions, the brothers shuttered UGrill the first week of May. Then, like other small-business owners and employees across the country, they applied for unemployment — a “last resort” they hadn’t turned to in 35 years.

The place is their livelihood, Lazarus said. The brothers returned in August because they had to “give it another chance,” but business has continued to stay down.

“At lunch time, none of them are here, because they’re all working from home,” Lazarus said. “Usually around [evening], we have kids come in here for a quick slice. In and out, in and out, everybody in and out.”

They know, however, that businesses “from Boston Common all the way to Allston” are suffering, Alexandros said.

Among these is UGrill’s neighbor Crispy Crepes Cafe, which has served the BU community for 18 years. Having shut down in March and reopened early June, owner Brahim Bendok said Commonwealth Avenue appeared a “dead area” without students.

Similar to UGrill, business remains “way, way, way down,” having dropped around 60–65 percent compared to last year, Bendok said, despite school being back in session.

“It’s just because everybody stays home and just, nobody’s coming to classes,” Bendok said. “Hopefully things will change, but we don’t know how long we can stay in business.”

Previously staffed with five employees, Crispy Crepes used to open for 14 hours every day of the week. Now down to two workers, the Mediterranean cafe has cut to 12 hours a day for 5 ½ days per week.

The remaining employees — formerly full-time — must now work part-time, according to Bendok, who said he is left without choices when standard bill payments loom overhead.

If the slow rate of business continues, Bendok said, he must prepare to take further measures.

“To save money, I have to cut hours. I have to,” Bendok said. “It doesn’t make sense. I can’t borrow any more money to pay for all this.”

Crispy Crepes had obtained a federal Paycheck Protection Program loan of \$10,000, which Bendok said lasted the business two months. He said he cannot take on more loans without knowing when he will be able to pay the money back.

UGrill, once open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., has also had to cut hours: it now operates on weekdays only from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Keeping doors open when customers aren’t walking in is costly, the brothers said, with heat, electricity, gas, water and rent to account for.

But Alexandros said they weren't satisfied staying at home and living on unemployment.

"We were working since we were little kids," Alexandros said. "That's all we do. That's all we know. We don't have anything to fall back on, can't go online and flip a burger."

The two said they hope to bring their other two brothers back to work, but that doing so requires the volume of business to return to normal. Pre-pandemic, Alexandros said, life was good for the four of them.

"We were happy," Alexandros said. "This place was feeding four families."

The brothers still feel "very fortunate" to be operating at the heart of BU on Commonwealth Avenue, according to Alexandros. Over the decades, they've watched generations of Terriers pass through UGrill.

"It's the ideal location," Alexandros said. "We're getting older. Customers stay the same age. It's perfect."

In a time when more students may want to use food delivery apps such as Grubhub, Uber Eats and Doordash, Lazarus said these aren't making up for much of the revenue lost in foot traffic. Selling an item for \$10 through Grubhub, for example, will secure UGrill itself about \$7.

Lazarus said customers who question why prices are higher on delivery apps than in-store don't understand these apps take a 30–40-percent cut of commission. If menu prices didn't change to match that, Lazarus said, a restaurant "might as well shut down."

The apps' commission often equals or surpasses the profit made by the restaurant itself after each sale, so to not raise prices on delivery apps would mean netting zero or losing money on a sale.

With pandemic culture also promoting contactless in-person transactions, credit card companies are getting more cuts of payments via interchange fees. On top of that, any order through Google Maps reroutes the transaction to Google's business partners — big-name delivery services — who then take commissions.

"So I guess everybody gets paid but us. That's what I see lately. That's the new trend," Alexandros said. "We refer to it as parasites because everybody gets a piece of our labor, which I find funny."

Like UGrill, Crispy Crepes is on Grubhub — but orders through the delivery service aren't helping to sustain the cafe.

"Whatever the profit we make, it just goes back to them," Bendok said. "That's how it is."

In the three decades UGrill has overlooked Commonwealth Avenue, Alexandros said he and his brothers have witnessed many changes, but nothing like the number of "For Rent" and "For Sale" signs of late.

Bendok also said he feels the pandemic has affected nearly everybody, even if some businesses continue to thrive.

“I’ve never seen it like this in 18 years,” Bendok said.

He said he doesn’t blame students for not ordering food in person during a pandemic, but that coming out to grab a bite after class will generate “a lot more” business for local diners.

BU staff member James Trubiano, a 2013 alum of the College of Arts and Sciences, said he has noticed business at local restaurants turn “really slow” this year. He steps out to grab lunch two or three times throughout the five days he works each week.

The lack of revenue that may force these businesses to shut down would be a detriment not just to owners and their employees, Trubiano said, but to the BU community as a whole.

“It is really important to recognize that these are important sources of food for a lot of people and it definitely makes me feel sad,” he said.

For those without dining plans or who lack time to prepare their own food, these diners offer quick and convenient meals, Trubiano said. For those with meal swipes, they also serve as a break from traditional dining hall food.

“I definitely feel like I want to support the businesses any way I can,” he said, “and to be safe while I’m doing it, too.”

Trubiano said restaurants near campus have all been “very clear” with mask-wearing and physical-distancing guidelines, and that he feels safe entering these establishments while adhering to proper public health practices. He said he encourages students to visit in person.

“The people that work there are super nice,” Trubiano said. “They love getting to know the people that they serve and love striking up a conversation.”



Author: Angela Yang

2 Comments

Pedro Falci

October 15, 2020 at 12:29 pm



Crispy Crepes is one of my favorite Comm Ave restaurants. The staff and owner are such lovely people. We must support them!



Maria

October 16, 2020 at 4:18 pm

Every time I visit Boston since 2007 ,when my son Pedro was a freshman at BU and introduced us to Crispy Crepes, we always stop there for the delicious food and to say hi to the lovely owner and staff. Crispy Crepes became a family meal and gathering tradition for us. One year, we took our Christmas card picture there(inside their old location).

I hope to eat there soon, when I visit Boston in November.

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