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# With heaters, takeout, and ingenuity, Newton restaurants brave the winter

By **Angela Yang** Boston University journalist, Updated February 25, 2021, 2 hours ago



Customers dine outside on Baramor's patio under the warmth of heaters on a winter afternoon in Newton Centre. ANGELA YANG

In the corner of a city block blanketed by snow, a Newton Centre restaurant has transformed its outdoor dining space by pulling empty tables into parking spots and installing a lineup of heat lamps for warmth on its lighted patio.

Baramor, an American-style pub, took a major risk this month in the hopes of surviving a pandemic winter as a primarily sit-down restaurant. Despite dwindling revenue, it invested in about 12 new heaters and a supply of Thermoses branded with the restaurant logo.

Now, for \$15, patrons can reserve a table by a heater along with a Baramor Thermos, which comes with the first drink, each Saturday until at least March 9. Owner Arpit Patel launched the pilot program Feb. 13. It was initially set to run until the end of the month, but Patel added a fourth date due to popularity.

“Demand definitely picked up a lot more than we expected,” Patel said. “That interest shows a willingness for people to come out and support restaurants even in the middle of February.”

The event offers a menu of warm, winter-themed comfort food and drinks — from poutine to fudge brownies to apple cider. Its goal, Patel said, is to help customers feel the coziness by serving up fare so fresh from the oven they can still see the steam.



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Baramor is among the Newton eateries that have managed to continue outdoor dining well past its usual winter cutoff in the Commonwealth. Jay Spencer, chair of the Newton-Needham Dining Collaborative, said this kind of business has been a “lifeline” for restaurants throughout the pandemic.

While Massachusetts' winter weather can be unforgiving, temperatures can also ease up during certain timeframes of an otherwise frosty day. When that happens, he said, customers will call a restaurant and inquire about outdoor dining.

“You’ll fire up the heaters and clean off the tables and make sure that you have space to be able to accommodate folks,” Spencer said. “It’s interesting to see the number of patrons that want to go out and will dine outside during these frigid temperatures.”

Spencer, who also owns a bakery in Needham, said he thinks outdoor dining can be sustainable long-term if municipalities take action to encourage it by revising permitting processes, zoning rules, and parking regulations to make room for seating.

Some small businesses, however, have not been able to afford the investments needed to expand outdoor seating options for the winter.

Family-owned Pátzcuaro Taqueria and Bar had “put a lot on the line” to open its doors in Nonantum about a year and a half ago, according to manager Paula Saavedra-Alvarado, who also serves as the sole waitress, bartender, and host.

Before the pandemic, the restaurant employed two to three people to help at the front of the house, as well as a prep cook and a dishwasher. Now, it’s just Saavedra-Alvarado, her parents, and her brother.

Although the family offered outdoor dining this year from July until November, Saavedra-Alvarado said the prospect of winter was “scary.” They had looked into obtaining heaters, but the costs of purchase and maintenance would have been too high. The bills, she said, had to come first.

So instead, Pátzcuaro turned to takeout, which now makes up 90 percent of its business. Though it reopened indoor dining in February, Saavedra-Alvarado said she prefers to seat only those with reservations because managing all takeout orders alone is already overwhelming.

Some restaurants in the city now rely solely on takeout and delivery services. Farmstead Table in Newton Centre made the full switch by Christmas due to limited outdoor seating options and waning consumer demand for outdoor dining, combined with customers' safety concerns about indoor dining.

General manager Ericka Curley said she had felt a sense of "impending doom" in the fall as winter approached. Now, in the midst of the season, she said sales are down about 60 percent. In normal years, it would have dropped around 15 to 20 percent, she said.

"It's a situation where you feel helpless — you know that your business is going to suffer," Curley said. "Trying to find creative ways to make sure that you can still maintain a business through that period was what we were rushing to do in a little bit of a panic mode in the fall."

As part of Farmstead Table's effort to adapt to these pandemic-era obstacles, it piloted an initiative in December to sell meal kit subscriptions allowing customers to prepare the restaurant's dishes at home.

After seeing a positive response to the program, Curley said the diner may continue to offer meal kit options even if regular outdoor dining restarts in the spring.

"We have a following who really love our chef," Curley said. "So to get an opportunity to hear directly from him, these are recipes that they can keep at their house, that if they wanted to make later on, they could do."

Restaurants in Newton and across the state are currently battling a "three-headed monster," according to Steve Clark, vice president of Government Affairs for the Massachusetts Restaurant Association. In addition to the freezing temperatures that come with winter, a state-mandated curfew — now lifted — had discouraged people from dining in during evenings, and occupancy limits still restrict the flow of customers.

Clark said the food service industry is in a "dark period" right now, but with injections of government funding, capacity caps relaxing and more individuals receiving the COVID-

19 vaccine, restaurants are generally feeling optimistic about the coming months.

Some eateries, however, are hibernating for the winter, and because of financial losses from the past year, they may never reopen. The state may well see another wave of

closings, Clark said, but those that have stayed open so far have been generating some business.

“I think the demand is truly there to want to go out. That’s why as soon as we can, I think people will,” Clark said. “Once we get more vaccinations, I think consumer confidence will come back.”

In interviews, restaurant executives said the consistent support of clients has been key to their survival this winter. For a small business like Pátzcuaro, customer loyalty motivates the family to keep pushing forward.

“I know we’re doing something right,” Saavedra-Alvarado said. “This was a dream of my mom’s, so to make it a reality, it’s mind-blowing to us that we can do it.”

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