

FOOD&WINE

Is It Safe to Go to Restaurants Again During the Coronavirus Pandemic?

With new evidence of airborne transmission, it's essential to be cautious.

By [Andrea Strong](#) | March 13, 2020

Note: This post has been updated on 7/17/20 with the latest information on this rapidly changing situation.

As the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to ravage our country, with record-breaking numbers of cases recorded and new science indicating that the virus may be airborne, states across the country are rethinking and reversing their phased reopening plans, including those for indoor dining in bars and restaurants.

Both New York City and New Jersey have postponed plans to reopen for indoor dining, and states like California, which had reopened for indoor dining, have reversed course, ordering restaurants in 19 counties to suspend indoor dining services immediately.

We spoke to several public health officials to discuss the safety of eating out and best practices for those who do want to eat out, or have food delivered.

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Restaurants Are Taking Precautions

That said, for the restaurants that do remain open for indoor and outdoor dining, a roster of new safety procedures have been instituted including Plexiglass barriers for hosts, temperature checks for guests, reduced capacity with at least 6 feet between tables, regularly cleaning and sanitizing all surfaces in the restaurant, using disposable (and online) menus, offering advance payment, providing hand sanitizer throughout the dining room, and of course, sending home any employee who does not feel well (hopefully with full sick-day benefits).

Jeff Virojanapa, the owner of from [White Orchids Thai Cuisine](#) and Notch Modern Kitchen & Bar in Allentown, Pennsylvania, has been open for indoor and outdoor patio dining since Pennsylvania entered its Green Phase on June 25th. He only seats parties with reservations so he can contact trace, offers contactless payment options, and hands out disposable menus. Masked waiters wearing black gloves when they handle clean plates and blue when they handle dirty, and he has even erected plexiglass dividers separating every two seats at his 20-seat bar. "It's all about making people feel comfortable," he says. "That's what we need to do. It's about service, it's about food, and ambience, but that sense of comfort and safety is the next level of hospitality."

These safety precautions are critical to the dining public. According to a survey from OpenTable, nearly two thirds (72%) of respondents said it was extremely important to see strict cleaning policies in place. A BentoBox survey of 500 diners from across the nation found that a lack of PPE, being seated too close to other guests, the use of reusable items such as menus, and the unnecessary frequency of waitstaff visiting the table during a meal would be red flags that would deter dining out.

Despite the safety accommodations for indoor dining, Virojanapa says most of his diners choose to eat outside. "With news cycles talking about a second wave, it's a no-brainer to eat outside and enjoy the weather and feel safer too," he said.

