

GAMING & LEISURE



The Dining Out Experience: An Ally of Public Health During COVID-19

By Wade Koheler

Human beings are social animals and sharing in the preparation and consumption of food helps us build the connections we need to thrive and survive. In other words, eating together is a core part of our biological and sociological makeup, and it is something we took for granted — until now.

“Having grown up in a restaurant family, I took it for granted that our business was important to our neighbors. Everyone who worked in the family luncheonette in Brooklyn knew every customer who walked in the door,” said Arlene Spiegel, founder of foodservice and hospitality consultancy Arlene Spiegel & Associates. “We knew the customer’s name, the way they liked their coffee, and whether they liked mayo on their BLTs. There was a beautiful, unspoken connection with each customer that reassured all parties — including the cooks and the servers. Dining out is intended to be a restorative experience, and we treated it that way.”

“Our family didn’t know how much customers valued what we did until we had to close for a few weeks for repairs,” said Spiegel. “We posted our reopening date on a large handmade sign on the storefront. As we walked by each day to check on the construction, we noticed brief notes written on the sign by our customers. At first there were just a few, but when the sign had no more room customers began taping their messages to the windows for us to read. There were

hundreds in Yiddish and Spanish. That’s when we knew that our business was essential to the wellbeing of the neighborhood.”

“The idea of professional foodservice — whether in a restaurant, resort, casino, hospital, or university setting — as a restorative experience has been lost in the discussion of how to safely feed and nourish the public during the coronavirus pandemic,” said Spiegel.

Recognizing professional foodservice and shared dining experiences as a potential ally in the fight against COVID-19 is not just an opportunity to deploy another tool against the pandemic. It is also recognition of reality. People want to eat together. Visiting your favorite diner as a family to celebrate an achievement is not as trivial as it sounds. For most of us, shared meals defined our childhood. Family Thanksgivings and Fourth of July barbeques are memories most people cherish.

Policymakers and public health officials should engage the foodservice industry as a partner in the fight against coronavirus. Foodservice consultants have been designing kitchens and dining areas with public health and safety at the forefront of their concerns for as long as there has been a modern hospitality industry. They will continue to do that in the age of coronavirus, and the public will be safer, healthier, and better off because of it. ●