

# SECTOR FOCUS: THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Operators across the Americas share their opinion if outdoor dining is here to stay.

By Samantha Lande

The pandemic shook the restaurant industry in many ways, forcing operators to rethink just about every way they conducted business. For many, outdoor seating capacities exceeded indoors for a good majority of the year. So, instead of thinking of outdoor dining as a nice-to-have feature in the warmer months, it became a part of any restaurant's dining strategy.

"Everything we do moving forward in the business has to be engineered to be flexible," says Arlene Spiegel FCSI, founder and president of Arlene Spiegel and Associates. "That pop-up mentality – where things can be easily taken up, put down, expanded or changed."

## Outdoor Dining Room

This year became less about having a patio and more about getting creative to serve patrons while their dining room was closed entirely or at limited capacity. It also meant creating an environment where guests felt comfortable dining outside.

"Guests will give you some grace outside," says Spiegel, "but they still expect great service, great food and great ambience."

## Necessary Changes

Outdoor dining doesn't come without some unforeseen challenges like the distance servers need to walk (especially now with a full dining room and some outdoor spaces being in parking lots or in front of neighboring vacant storefronts). That also has an impact on menus as it's more difficult to maintain temperatures of certain dishes and often times diners eating outside want different options.

Many restaurants also had to reorganize their flow of traffic, add QR codes for diners to view menus and add outdoor service stations to make it easier on servers. Spiegel compares it to a "football coach who has to have many plays at the ready."

## Here to Stay?

Many cities have committed to an investment in outdoor dining at least for the duration of 2021, but what happens after that? It could be here to stay.

Spiegel has seen an added benefit – smaller restaurants that usually go unnoticed by pedestrians now have a street presence. "It's like free marketing for them," she says.