

Restaurant business *and* PANDEMIC



The easily observable fact that during iftar hours, most restaurants in Dhaka have around 100 percent occupancy, says a lot about the business opportunities of the culinary industry during Ramadan. But this year, the scene has completely flipped, with most restaurants shut or empty, and people stuck inside their homes, often resorting to posting online about the favourite platters and deals they miss from Ramadans past.

Star **LIFE** Style



The ongoing pandemic and lockdown have affected all sectors of the economy, including the restaurant industry. The otherwise busiest month of the year has turned out to be the most hard-hitting, especially in terms of lost projected revenues.

How is this sector coping? We decided to ask some insiders.



EERIE, EMPTY AND UNSETTLING

Usually, there is a sense of celebratory urgency — an air of festivity — around town during iftar.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the sights and sounds of Old Dhaka, from the time of iftar to the last hour of the night for sehri.

But things are obviously different this year. Abed Ali Khan, Vice Principal of Old Dhaka International School who is from Kayetuly, speaks of the bleak situation. “Ramadan has always been a time when not just Muslims, but both Muslims and non-Muslims alike relish the many culinary delights that Old Dhaka offers. But this year, the otherwise teeming streets are empty; creating an eerie atmosphere.”

There is also the worry about the hundreds of tiny iftar businesses that spring up throughout Dhaka. In a corner of an alley, for example, a small table is set up a few hours prior to iftar and typical iftar items are laid out on the table for sale. Such businesses, which are rather ubiquitous during Ramadan, operate on a relatively small scale.

Many of these pop-ups are run by people with limited income. Some of them run it,



simply with the aim of earning extra during the month so that they can have a decent Eid celebration.

Not only that, roadside tea-stalls all over Dhaka have been greatly affected.

Back to Old Dhaka, Khan says that being a resident, he misses the buzz and the community feeling. “No one can attend



the late-night prayers at the mosques nowadays. In other years, street vendors selling *maatha* and what not are seen busy catering to the crowds coming in for the congregations.”

According to a recent notice issued by Dhaka Metropolitan Police on its website, showcasing and selling iftar items on the footpaths is not allowed.

The same notice, which has come in the context of the ongoing pandemic and lockdown, informs that restaurants are allowed to prepare and sell iftar items as takeaways, but dine-in is not allowed.

“Allowing takeaways may be helpful to a certain extent. However, I am not very hopeful since a lot of potential customers are still unwilling to take the risk of coming out of the house. There is also a concern among customers regarding safety and handling of food, given the circumstances,” owner of a prominent biryani place in Old Dhaka said.

Preferring anonymity, he added, “Many restaurant owners in Old Dhaka are not generally keen to be on the online delivery apps; there is a question of feasibility and practicality for some, and a lack of basic awareness of the technology for others.”

Meanwhile, restaurants, being businesses, had to make that call about what to do with their employees in this harsh reality. “Letting go of employees in our sector actually started happening a few days prior to the lockdown, sensing what was to come,” says a veteran restaurateur anonymously. “But most of these workers have not been downright fired; many got leave-without-pay, many were compensated. And many workers have been called back again, to facilitate for takeaways.”

A sense of uncertainty looms over all stakeholders, from owners to employees, and customers, to a certain extent. **EMERGENCE OF CLOUD KITCHEN** Three friends, with restaurants at a prominent space in Dhanmondi, faced major dilemma when the lockdown was announced on 26 March, as their dine-in customer flow was eliminated to nothing overnight. “It was one of the scariest experiences of my life,” said one of the owners, wishing to remain anonymous.

Waiting for the pandemic to soon be over, all three friends, crossed the two-week quarantine period, ‘just waiting it out!’ “Meanwhile, some of our staff left for their hometowns, while the rest stayed back, but we had to pay all of their wages, and the expenses were piling up, with zero income in the backdrop,” the entrepreneur said.

To survive the pandemic, three of them got together to partner a new concept of a cloud kitchen, an online restaurant, to attract patrons who otherwise preferred to dine-in, under normal circumstances.

“Since our customers could no longer come to us, we decided to go to them, to sustain through the pandemic, pay wages and utility bills,” remarked the entrepreneur.

The concept of a cloud kitchen, already popular in many developed countries, was clear and concise. “We initiated service from the first day of Ramadan. Currently, we only have a set iftar menu, which will be elaborated once the concept gets traction. Our team in the kitchen strictly follows precautionary measures to keep the food healthy, safe and clean. Our delivery teams follow a similar protocol. This is for the current times; in the future, we have plans to take the concept forward, making it bigger and better,” the restaurateur said, looking to a better tomorrow, saying “The future is online.”

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

When every restaurant in the city was closing down, Mehreen Mansur stayed afloat with both her brands, Horse and Horse Patisserie and Sushi Samurai; she



credits ‘adaptability’ as her secret weapon.

“The effects of Covid-19 were first felt in the restaurant sector and this was long before the lockdown, sometime between mid-January and early February. Travellers stopped flying in and out of Bangladesh, causing a major interruption to the high-end dine-in facilities. Business was interrupted,” Mansur elaborated.

However, residents of the capital still frequented the restaurants, revealing an interesting statistic— dine-in for one of her restaurants, Horse and Horse Patisserie, actually increased for a duration.

“Maybe it was comfort that they were looking for! A way to stay away from the panic and the information overload; our fuchkas, cakes and latte served as comfort food to calm down the nerves. But of course, that wasn’t long-lived,” Mansur added.

The strategies changed as the government introduced a total lockdown. “It was a scary decision-making moment for me,” she said.

“All expats were being called back to their countries, and being a US citizen, I really didn’t know what to make of the announcement. But I decided to stay back, against all odds, because I had to take care of my employees, who depended largely on my restaurants for their living and welfare,” she added.

And maybe, that precise decision to stay back and her willingness to remain steadfast through uncertainty gave her a unique strength to endure the blow.

“And my struggle against the obstacles began! Half of my staff went back to their villages and half remained out of their own volition. I developed a system to pay all of their wages, in full, with an extra service charge, to those who stayed back to fight against the pandemic alongside me.”

Mansur thanked the landlord of one of her restaurants for being cooperative, allowing a significant reduction in rent for the time being. “While I have to pay in full for the other one, I do understand their constraints, as well. Nevertheless, I had to pick up the pace of the business to stay sustainable and things worked out well for us, ultimately. When the entire restaurant scenario was shut down, we were the only ones running in full form and delivering food to the customers,” revealed the restaurateur.

She also spoke of a few of the major barriers that business operations are facing for the crisis; such as the delivery team being harassed on the roads by law enforcement, to being reported to the police for keeping her restaurants open.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10