

Episode 88: The Struggle of Local Restaurants in the Twin Cities

 mndaily.com/268604/podcasts/pisode-88-the-struggle-of-local-restaurants-in-the-twin-cities

In this episode, our podcast reporter, Lexi Kiecker speaks to three different restaurant owners in the Twin Cities about their experiences running a small business during a pandemic.



by Lexi Kiecker

Published August 26, 2021

Lexi Kiecker: In March of 2020, restaurants across the nation that were once bustling with life, were quickly vacated due to the Covid-19 pandemic, left idle due to people staying at home. My name is Lexi Kiecker, and I sat down with three local restaurant and cafe owners in the Twin Cities who were able to stay open despite the challenges the last year and a half brought on them.

John Peterson: “My name is John Peterson, and my wife and I own Yellowbird.”

Jared Poling: “Yeah! So my name is Jared Poling. I am the co-owner of Honour.”

Michelle Kwan: “So, my full name is Michelle Kwan, I go by Kwan.”

Kiecker: Not everyone was as lucky. According to the Star Tribune, over 100 restaurants in the Twin Cities area have permanently closed their doors since March 2020. However, these 3 locally owned spots were able to get through the worst of the pandemic to see another day.

Kiecker: John Peterson and his wife opened Yellowbird about two years ago.

Peterson: “Back in 2003 when we bought our house, my wife and I were sitting on the front porch, like many of our neighbors do. And I said to her, ‘What this neighborhood needs is a coffee shop.’ So we’d bounce an idea off of that and just riff on that and life would get in the way so we’d sit the conversation down. So we did that for almost 20 years, and one day when I came home from work, I was a principal in North Minneapolis, and I just said ‘I can’t do this anymore, I don’t want to do this anymore. You can’t make me go back to school!’ I felt like I was an 8th grade kid just ‘I don’t want to go to school tomorrow.’ Anyway, my wife put together a list of to-dos, and slowly but surely I was checking them off, and eventually I did all the things on the to-do list. And, here we have Yellowbird.”

Kiecker: Co-owner John Peterson recounted when news of the coronavirus was first starting to be talked about seriously in the U.S.

Peterson: “So the lockdown hit I believe on a Wednesday. I might have the days wrong but um, that’s what sticks out in my mind. And um, before that it was – we’d get our coffee delivered on Tuesday. And I remember asking um, Bruce Olson who owns TruStone, ‘what do we do if we shut down? If we’re like California, if we’re like New York, if–?’ And he said, he just shrugged his shoulders and said ‘I don’t know what we do.’ And next thing you know we were shut down. And it was like a punch to the gut. It was just like- it knocked the wind out of me. I was like ‘Oof – ok.’”

Kiecker: The determined business owner had to strip back many aspects of Yellowbird in the last year, such as serving hot food and changing their hours. However, Peterson’s decisions helped the coffee bar stay afloat.

Peterson: “We couldn’t have been open if we had two shops, if we had three shops, if we had five shops. But we had one shop. And we could shrink our hours, we could control who was coming in, who was going to be here, and that was basically me. And then once it was ‘oh, ok this is good’ so then we put in our protocols about what we’re doing and our cleaning and all of that. And we made sure our staff followed it. And business was – business was solid. The neighbors really supported us.”

Kiecker: Peterson recognizes the need and place of large chains and online retailers, but wanted to highlight the importance and magic in supporting small local businesses not just during the pandemic, but always.

Peterson: “So I had this feeling before the pandemic hit, like I just want to support local, right? I just, I don’t really care about sending Jeff Bezos to space anymore. I just don’t want to do that. But when I have the choice, when I can, I will always go and support local, um, and I’ll try to get to know the owner. And it’s true, that there’s a little meme online going around that said someone’s doing a happy dance when you shop local. And it is true, it’s like when I’m serving coffee and people come in, I do a little happy dance inside. You can’t really see me, but it’s like I love to see people come and support me, and so why wouldn’t I then go out and support other locals?”

Kiecker: Like Peterson, Jared Poling, who owns Honour Coffee and Raw Juice with his brother, was thankful for the community that chose to show up for them throughout the pandemic.

Poling: “We started it about five years ago and yeah, we’ve grown the business over the last few years. And it used to be called Empyre Coffee so we bought the Empyre Coffee business and then had already started the Honour brand and really wanted a place to kind of apply our branding and our concept to an existing coffee shop so we bought Empyre and yeah, it’s been a few years of a lot of changes so, it’s been really fun though.

Kiecker: Poling had to put in many hours in order to find a way to keep his business running.

Poling: “And I’ve been doing this full time for a few years, so I had time to figure out how to make it work. But my brother is full time at Target down in Minneapolis. So we just kind of sat there and said ‘well what do we do?’ Also a lot of our employees left, they moved back home with their parents, they didn’t feel comfortable working. And so in order to stay open we had two employees stay with us, and then my brother and I literally worked 6 a.m to 6 p.m five days a week um, and weekends on the morning shift, our one barista who stayed with us worked in the afternoons thankfully, and our baker thankfully stayed so we were really able to stay open. We didn’t close.”

Kiecker: Throughout the last year, the Poling brothers were able to grow their business instead of having to take things away like so many other cafes around the Twin Cities have had to do.

Poling: “We just kinda followed what the CDC and the city of Minneapolis asked us to do. That really was enough for us. We felt really confident in following those guidelines, and then we opened up when we could open up, and we shut down when we shut down.”

Kiecker: Honour has recently added acai bowls to their menu, and are in the middle of expanding their outdoor seating area. Poling credits their ambition for being the driving force behind being able to grow during this unforgiving time.

Poling: “We saw it as an opportunity to really be kind of a beacon for people, like every other place was shut down and we were really small and very nimble, really, a growing brand. I think we were a little more hungry than other shops because we are a newer brand. And so looking at Spyhouse or Fivewatt or Dogwood, they’re all within a few miles of us. And so they all really closed for a few months, where we stayed open. So we gained a lot of new business.”

Kiecker: Keefer Court Bakery and Cafe is located in Cedar-Riverside, near the West Bank campus of the University of Minnesota. The business has a rich history, as it was created in the early 80s by Kwan’s parents.

Kwan: “I am the daughter of the original owners of Keefer Court, and I’m in the process of taking over the business. My parents moved to Minnesota in 1983 and started Keefer court in this location, on the corner of Cedar and Riverside. It originally started as a bakery, a chinese bakery. And they eventually expanded it to a Chinese bakery and restaurant. And then, they added a fortune cookie division to that.”

Kiecker: Kwan’s father grew his fortune cookie division, building a factory off of 27th and Minnehaha in 1997. He supplied the majority of the midwest area with fortune cookies through suppliers. In 2017, he sold the fortune cookie division, deciding to focus solely on Keefer Court’s bakery and restaurant.

Kiecker: A lot of Michelle Kwan’s staff and customers were students, and as many went back home during the lockdown, she and her family wrestled with the idea of closing their doors.

Kwan: “And so, um, so yeah. Things just slowly kinda came back, and I told a lot of customers you know, a lot of customers came and was appreciative that we were still open. And what I told them was like ‘Well if you come through the door, I’ll keep it open. It’s when you stop coming through the door, I don’t have a purpose to keep my doors open anymore.’ And so, our customer base and our clientele just really supported us in that, and really, you

know, I thank the customers for continually supporting us during all of that, because if it wasn't for them, Keefer Court would have perished during that pandemic like a lot of good, a lot of major restaurants did, especially locally owned ones, um, last year."

Kiecker: Kwan felt lucky that they had just set up a credit card machine when they were a cash only business prior to the pandemic, and set up third party delivery systems like DoorDash and Uber Eats in the January before the lockdown.

Kwan: "So once the lockdown happened, we were already set up and prepared to continue to serve people."

Kiecker: While Keefer Court was able to make a profit and continues to be open for business now, they are still closed for dine-in and have continued a mask policy for inside their store.

Kwan: "Pre-COVID it would be jam packed in there, we would be lifting trays of buns over people's heads. However, you know right now, we're – we're not feeling safe about packing so many people in such a small space without being able to socially distance, it is also really important to keep my staff safe and comfortable, and they were not really interested in doing dine-in. So, our plan is to kinda just wait and see how the fall and winter kind of play out, you know as students kind of come back to campus for classes and faculty is back. You know, we'll see what the demand is and what the request is for dine-in seating for them because that's kind of our major clientele during the school year, especially on the weekdays."

Kiecker: Kwan encouraged those that wish her store was open for in-store dining to find and support one of the many other locally owned restaurants that populate Cedar-Riverside.

Kwan: "And so part of me is kind of like 'Well I want to share the wealth, I want to share the love.' And so if you can't eat at Keefer Court for dine in but you really want to go dine-in, I would love for you to go find another local restaurant, um, that you can support, and help them get back up on their feet, and you know, help them make up for the lost from last year. You know I, for me it's like, I think of it as: It's nice to be at the top, right? But it gets lonely at the top when you're by yourself. And so I don't want to be greedy, I want everyone to come to the top with us and be successful and be profitable. Because it's better to have a party at the top then be alone by yourself."

Kiecker: Keefer Court, Yellowbird, and Honour are all currently open for business and are located in the Twin Cities. Special thanks to Michelle Kwan, John Peterson, and Jared Poling for sharing their stories.