



McCarthy Lodge in Alaska recently reopened with health precautions in place.

A PASSIONATE INDUSTRY FORGES AHEAD

By Cassia Schifter

For nearly 40 years, Wine Spectator has honored innovative and comprehensive lists with our Restaurant Awards program. Our Dining Guide has been a way for customers who value wine to find restaurants that share their enthusiasm, to the benefit of both the restaurateurs and the wine lovers.

The 2020 awards continue this effort: This year, 3,776 restaurants earned one of our three awards, including 100 Grand Awards. Of these, 564 are first-time winners. Overall, these establishments represent all 50 states and more than 79 countries and territories. The passion for fine wine has truly gone global.

During the course of these past four decades, restaurants have changed with the times and culture. Culinary trends have emerged and evolved; chefs and sommeliers have become media darlings; economic swings have both shuttered old favorites and shed light on new stars. Restaurateurs have proved scrappy and resourceful, facing challenges of all kinds, from social media to rising rents. But

no amount of courage or capital could defeat the coronavirus pandemic. By late March, government orders forced most restaurants around the world to close their doors.

The 2020 Restaurant Awards were caught in the crossfire. Wine lists and applications were in-house at our offices for judging by late February. Hundreds of owners, wine directors and sommeliers sent us self-portraits, proud to represent their wine-savvy restaurants. In early April, we reached out to applicants with a survey that asked about their situations and their business strategies going forward. Their responses, while reflecting the dire situation, were remarkably optimistic and inspiring. As Eric Willey, director of food and beverage at new Award of Excellence winner the American Reserve in Kansas City, Mo., put it, "Challenging times call for challenging decisions, but moments of crisis challenge us to think and innovate in ways we never thought of before." (For more insights from industry pros, see "Restaurateurs Speak," page 48.)

The initial question was at what level—if any—a restaurant could or should stay open. In our survey, fewer than 3% of respondents said they were open for regular service. The rest were split evenly between being fully closed and circumstantially open (offering takeout and/or delivery, or providing meals for those in need and on the front lines).

"People don't understand why some restaurants are closed and others are open for pickup and delivery," remarked Charlie Broder, owner of three restaurants in Minneapolis, including Best of Award of Excellence winner Terzo. "It's a complicated topic and one that is unique per business model and position in the market." Broder closed his restaurants in March but reopened one location for takeout only in April.

An obvious argument for closures is the health and safety of restaurant staff and their extended contacts. "I thought, well, if I'm not going to go to work because I'm afraid of bringing COVID home to my family, I can't ask my workers to do this," said chef Tom Colicchio, founder of Crafted Hospitality, which owns restaurants in New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas. "I'm not going to ask them to do something that I'm not comfortable doing."

For those restaurants shifting focus to pickup and delivery service, the need for a revenue stream is in many cases conjoined with the sentiment of wanting to give back to customers, often respecting long-term relationships with patrons. Grand Award-winning Canlis in Seattle ceased its fine dining operations and moved toward comfort food, initially via a drive-through burger joint and a pop-up bagel shop. Canlis has since shifted to a delivery and pickup model, seeing it as "a safer, smarter, more sustainable way to run our business at this time," said third-generation owner Mark Canlis, who operates the restaurant with his brother Brian. "This is our way of saying to Seattle: We got you." Canlis added that they would reopen the restaurant when the city was ready for fine dining again, and not a moment sooner.

Social responsibility has spurred many restaurateurs to great efforts. Chef José Andrés, owner of ThinkFoodGroup, which boasts 17 *Wine Spectator* award-winning venues, told *Wine Spectator*, "I'm just a cook," while en route from his home in Washington, D.C., to Baltimore, where his team was opening 10 new meal sites in partnership with that city's public school system. "But cooks know how to feed people," he went on. "Our goal is to address the blind spots in the system. We are serving health care providers, hospitals and nursing homes, police, firefighters and National Guard troops along with unemployed people, hungry families and the homeless."



Chef Tom Colicchio, founder of Crafted Hospitality

(For more on restaurateurs' relief efforts, see "Chefs Step Up," page 52; a news story featuring Andrés appears on page 20.)

Many restaurants rely on seasonal business, often summer visitors, to support an entire year of expenses. They are anxiously waiting for their state and local governments to give guidance on reopening. In Nantucket, Mass., Grand Award winner Topper's at the Wauwinet would typically have opened in mid-April. "We have pushed back our open date by two months," said wine director Jason Irving. "We are hopeful to open mid-June and continue until the end of October."

The few places that have remained open for sit-down dining—mostly outside the United States—have made drastic changes. "We separated all our tables 2 meters from each other, we clean our environment every 15 minutes and all our personnel are wearing masks and gloves," said Vadir Acuña Smith, owner of Best of Award of Excellence winner Vadiro's Pastas & Grill in Xalapa, Mexico, which is currently operating at 50% capacity.

Grand Award-winning Restaurant Mosaic in Pretoria, South Africa, had no choice but to close its doors in accordance with government mandates. An email from owner and wine director Cobus du Plessis advised: "Restaurant closed in adherence to State of Emergency issued in South Africa. All staff at home with their families on full pay for period of isolation. No alcohol (including wine) sales allowed and only fast food restaurants that can deliver food allowed to operate."

In contrast, many state and local governments in the U.S. relaxed on-premise laws, allowing restaurants to sell alcohol for takeout. In our survey, nearly 60% of respondents were selling wine to go. But while this has been a blessing for those looking for ways to generate revenue, others worry about depleting their cellars.

"We opened our wine cellar to move product at a discounted price," said Robin Puricelli, wine director at Best of Award of Excellence winner Lido at Dolphin Bay restaurant and resort in Pismo Beach, Calif., whose sales have been limited to takeout and room service. "It is effective. However, it will be interesting to see how large wine lists change, since [our upcoming] buying will be low while trying to sell [our existing] inventory."



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Despite the many challenges, restaurateurs remain committed and optimistic. The reboot will spring from an epic low: 81% of respondents to our survey reported that business is down more than 30% compared with 2019. But when asked if they planned to reopen once the crisis had passed, only two respondents said no. Ten percent were hopeful, if noncommittal. Nearly 90% were unequivocal in answering, "Definitely yes."

When restaurants do get back to business, in whatever form the new normal may take, nearly 4,000 establishments around the world can display a *Wine Spectator* award for their wine program.

This year, our Award of Excellence went to 2,289 restaurants that feature thoughtfully chosen lists offering quality and diversity as well as compatibility with the restaurant's style and menu. These lists range in size from about 100 to several hundred selections.

Nearly 1,400 restaurants achieved our Best of Award of Excellence. Of these, 139 are new entries, but it should also be noted that 140 of the new winners at this level were upgraded from a previous Award of Excellence, having worked hard to improve their programs. These lists are more expansive, offering an array of wines from top producers across a breadth of regions. They show a deeper commitment, such as extensive staff training, thoughtful presentation, innovative menu pairings and showcase cellars. These lists generally offer 350 selections or more.

The Grand Award is *Wine Spectator*'s highest honor, acknowledging the world's elite wine programs. Earning this award is a reflection of a passionate dedication to curating an exceptional wine list year after year. These generally have 1,000 selections or more, present wine lovers with a depth of vintages from world-class producers and include multiple bottle formats. In addition, Grand Award winners offer the ultimate dining experience, with extraordinary cuisine and flawless service.

Candidates for the Grand Award undergo rigorous inspection by our judges. This year, mandatory restaurant shutdowns and general



Vadiro's Pastas & Grill in Xalapa, Mexico, has remained open at 50% capacity.

travel restrictions made inspections impossible. As a result, there are no new Grand Award winners in the class of 2020. However, the 100 existing winners continue to carry the flag.

As we go to press in mid-June, some states have begun to restart their economies; in some cases, this allows restaurants to open, albeit with stringent conditions.

In Alaska, one of the first states to reduce restrictions, restaurants were allowed to resume business with added precautions as of April 24, reported Neil Darish, COO of Award of Excellence winner McCarthy Lodge Bistro. "These include reservation-only and family groups seated at least 10 feet apart," said Darish, noting that the bistro would be ready to reopen May 29 but that occupancy for both the hotel and the restaurant was restricted to no more than 25%.

The decision many now face as states reopen is whether the need to get up and running outweighs the risks. Restaurants in Texas could open at limited capacity as of May 1. June Rodil, partner and wine director of new Award of Excellence winner Rosie Cannonball in Houston, expressed concerns about reopening too soon. "We want to make sure we have and understand all safety precautions to ensure the best health for our guests and staff," she said. Rodil

also noted that opening at 25% capacity might not be worth it. "I'd like to be at a capacity that has a sustained outcome to longevity," she explained.

Ultimately, the restaurant industry will recover. People crave what restaurants offer: companionship and community, to share a table with friends and family while enjoying good food and a glass of wine. Breaking bread together is part of what makes us human and keeps us happy.

We hope that all of our award winners and the people who make them special will find their way through the crisis to once again welcome us through their doors. If you are a wine lover, our 2020 Restaurant Award winners await your return.



At Lido at Dolphin Bay in Pismo Beach, Calif., wine director Robin Puricelli has offered discounts on wine to go.