Moab restaurants reduce hours, close – and find ways to help

by Rachel Fixsen and Maggie McGuire Moab Sun News
March 27, 2020   Updated December 6, 2021

As the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic led to the mandatory closures of many public places, tourism was essentially halted just when Moab businesses were counting on an uptick in customers. Restaurants are one especially hard-hit sector and local owners are struggling to decide how to move forward in an uncertain time.

Delivery and to-go not options for some

Wes Shannon and his wife, Christie Pennellope Decaria, own two downtown restaurants: the Love Muffin Cafe and La Sal House. Both restaurants have shuttered due to the public health order closing dining rooms in Grand County.

Shannon said they tried operating on the still permissible “to-go” orders-only format, but that it isn’t a sustainable option for them.

“The to-go situation seems fairly bleak for most restaurants I have talked to,” Shannon said. “We have all these restaurants set up to serve the masses of tourists during the season and we are suddenly trying to serve a population of 6000. The numbers just don’t work out.”

Part of the appeal of their establishments, he said, is the atmosphere of the physical place.

“La Sal House was set up to be a neighborhood spot and the environment is what really sets it apart. We did a couple of nights of to-go orders there and realized quickly it was not going to be viable,” he said, echoing Erin Bird’s comment.

Shannon said he and Decaria had to lay off all 33 workers they employ between the two restaurants. He said they have encouraged employees to seek unemployment assistance during the health department restrictions.

“Some employees have reassured us they will be fine for a month or two, while others will be struggling pretty quickly,” said Shannon. “We are trying to help them out any way we can.”

As business owners, they are also contributing to the community. On March 23, Love Muffin brought in two staff members and made 265 burritos to donate to the Moab Valley Multicultural Center, who will distribute them to needy families and workers throughout the community.
Shannon noted they will also be doing work “for the hundreds of school students that will be without lunches during the week of spring break,” adding that the “school system has done a great job with the delivery of lunches through the bus routes.”

Shannon said he is also thinking of ways to offer resources from the La Sal House to support the community, possibly utilizing the commercial kitchens.

“We have access to fresh produce and foodservice products,” he said. “We are getting creative and hope to push forward in some capacity.”

**Restaurants give back to the community**

Faced with few customers and an inventory of ingredients and food, many restaurants in town have been putting their resources toward community support efforts. The Moab Brewery picked up supplies for the local food bank after an earthquake in Salt Lake City caused disruptions in delivery schedules. Red Rock Bakery delivered 100 sandwiches to the Grand Center for senior lunches.

On March 19, the recently established Main Street restaurant Doughbird, which serves doughnuts and fried chicken, gave away 500 doughnuts to the community.

“We were able to give a dozen to the police and the sheriff and the hospital and kind of take care of the front-line workers and they were all very grateful,” said Erin Bird, who, along with her husband Ryan Bird, owns Doughbird and Moab Garage Co.
Several days later, Moab Garage Co. partnered with local bookstore Back of Beyond Books to offer a free book and burrito to community members for as long as supplies last.

“We had food that we didn’t want to throw away,” explained Erin Bird, “and we figured we could either give it away or give it to staff—and we did give it to staff, but there was still some left—so we just wanted to make sure people had a meal.”

Both Doughbird and Moab Garage Co. are closed as of now.

“We don’t really feel like curbside or delivery are super viable,” explained Erin Bird.

Events like the doughnut and burrito giveaway are opportunities for restaurant staff to collect tips from community members while they are unable to collect a regular paycheck.

“We’re just trying to kind of check-in with our staff every few days and make sure they're doing okay,” said Erin Bird.

The outlook off Main Street

Milt’s Stop & Eat is an enduring Moab mainstay located on 400 East, offering burgers, fries, and shakes to mountain bikers, rock climbers and local workers after a long, active day. Usually packed on a spring or summer evening, owner B.C. Laprade says business is slow.
Milt’s is currently open for reduced hours from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day. Laprade told several employees that he can’t give them work right now; many of those he had to remove from the schedule are high school students and, he hopes, are likely to have fewer financial obligations than adult employees.

Rather than diners ordering at its walk-up window, Milt’s is encouraging customers to use its online menu and call in their orders. Payment via card, rather than cash, is encouraged. Servers use mobile card-swiping devices to process transactions and sanitize the machines with a bleach solution after each transaction.

“Luckily for me, I’m already set up for drive-up service,” Laprade said.

Laprade says he’s had doubts about whether staying open is the right thing to do; he’s been asking his customers and has received feedback that Moab residents appreciate having at least some dine-out options still open and available. He feels the uncertainty of an unprecedented situation.

“Who’s ever been through this before and knows how to do it?” he wondered.

Laprade emphasized that he supports the measures put in place by the Southeast Utah Health Department to protect the health of the Moab community.

“I’m proud of our town for reacting so quickly and making some good, hard decisions,” he said.

Local businesses uniting and adapting

Recently, Shannon and Ryan Bird formed a coalition of Moab businesses called the Downtown Main Street Alliance. The two saw a need for their niche to have a voice in downtown projects like the Highway 191 widening and the proposed downtown parking garage. Now, Shannon is considering how the group can be mobilized to respond to the economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I’m looking forward to getting in contact with [businesses in] the Alliance and working out the hard questions that are looming for our economic future,” Shannon said. “Small businesses are at great risk here in our town. The unknown is always looming, but I do know for a fact the effect that this pandemic is having on our community will bring us all closer together as a community.”

In this time of crisis, the Moab Sun News needs your support. Become a member today and receive a digital edition emailed directly to you each week. Every dollar supports our work. Show your support for independent community journalism and subscribe to our e-editions.