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Shelburne restaurants struggle under third lockdown

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From the outside, the beginning of April looked like a turning point for restaurants in Shelburne. The region had moved into the ?orange? zone of the reopening framework, and warmer weather saw the possibility of an early start to the patio season.

Now, only a few weeks into the month, they've once again closed their doors to the public as the province's recent stay-at-home orders cuts them back to delivery and take-out only.

?We've been doing it for a year, opening and closing so much that we just have to do it,? says Shannon Chahal, owner of Shannon's Tap + Grill about the third shutdown.

Although local restaurants have followed the shutdown orders from the government, pivoting the best they can to take-out and delivery options, some are saying the option is not nearly enough and the third shut down is making it harder for them stay open.

Dufferin Public House, or more fondly known as The Duffy, has focused their restaurant around fresh home cooked meals, a method that owner Chris Peterson says costs more and doesn't translate well to take-out.

?We designed the restaurant for people to come sit on the patio or sit inside, have a drink, listen to music, and have fun, so when you know you're not making much on the meal, but they have a couple drinks and dessert, all-in-all we make a few bucks,? explains Peterson. ?When it's just takeout, not everybody adds beer or wine to their meal because of course it costs more to buy from me than the LCBO or Beer Store, but without that in the equation it's pretty hard for us [with] the way we do things to really make money at take out.?

While the Duffy has been able to make it through the first two shutdowns of restaurants, Peterson adds that this time around has been particularly difficult.

?The first and second time we were somewhat busy, not making money but not completely losing my shirt, this past weekend and I don't blame people, they've been doing the take-out supporting us, but I think people this time are a little sick of it, so we certainly didn't see the same volume that we did before,? says Peterson.

The restrictions he says also feel ?arbitrary?.

?You can serve beer on a golf course, you can't serve beer outside on my patio, you can have people in Walmart, but I can't have 25 sit on my patio and we're cleaner and safer than most other business.?

With the arrival of warmer weather, the patio season for restaurants typically follows soon after, and for many last year, patio dining offered relief to their pandemic-battered restaurants.

?Last year, we got an extension for our patio, which was great, and it really helped save our summer because we weren't able to have anybody indoors,? says Chahal.

For The Duffy, patio season doesn't officially start until the May 24 long weekend. Peterson tells the Free Press he's already had customers out there this year. The barring of patios has becoming another financial hurdle he and his family have had to navigate.

?They've limited my hours, they've cut my capacity even when we're allowed to be open, when we're completely shot, we've lost I

would say 75 to 80 percent of our business,? says Peterson.

The provincial wide stay-at-home order is in effect until at least the end of April, which means the earliest surviving restaurants may see an opening is the beginning of May.

But for some restaurants in town, they will never reopen their doors to customers.

Brenda Gray, owner of Healthy Cravings Holistic Kitchen, made the decision to permanently close her café in January, after struggling through the first two shutdowns.

?I'm a café so I was meant to be a sit and enjoy a coffee, the whole experience is why I opened up the café,? says Gray, noting that her business method of farm to fresh foods didn't translate well to the take-out option.

The stay-at-home orders, Gray says, were significantly difficult for her, as majority of her business was garnered by traffic through Shelburne.

?80 percent of my business was traffic through Shelburne, you know the weekend warriors, the people who have houses from the city going up to the cottage country,? says Gray.

Restaurant owners are not only battling the financial implications of the shutdown but also the emotional impact.

?Every single day you go in, you're opening up and going ?today is going to be a good day', and it's not a good day, and you'd have maybe out of five days have one good one ? that's hard on a business owner,? says Gray, holding back tears. ?You have to think about how you pay, who doesn't get paid, all of my small suppliers I had to pay them. I hadn't made any money for all of 2020, I didn't take a pay check because I had to pay everybody else except for myself.?

Gray believes this stay-at-home order will shut Main Street in Shelburne down.

Despite the struggle of the pandemic, Gray is working on revamping her business into a food truck.

?With the way that things have been going, I decided because everything is take-out now, to do a food bus, I couldn't keep opening up my business and not having people come in,? she said.