

Unknown Speaker 0:01

Okay, so the first question is just to tell me a little bit about your business. What do you do on a day to day basis before COVID started?

Unknown Speaker 0:10

Okay, so my restaurant's name is Sixth and Vine. It's a wine bar and restaurant in downtown Winston. And we opened 15 years ago. So we had just celebrated our 15 year anniversary in February. And we were probably the second or third sort of big restaurant. Downtown. Definitely the second one in the arts district. We followed Sweet Potatoes which I think has been open 17 years. So before COVID you know, owning a restaurant, you do pretty much everything from marketing, to finances to management, hiring, you know, staffing, that's always an issue, and it was hard before COVID but post COVID it's gotten a lot more difficult. For sure.

Unknown Speaker 1:02

So

Unknown Speaker 1:04

you want to know about product? And you know, describe the place or?

Unknown Speaker 1:10

Um, no, that's fine. You just want to get a general idea of like who you are and what you do there. So now kind of walk me through and put me in your shoes what you were thinking, like late February, early March, when COVID was just starting to like become a thing here in the United States. How did you think it would affect your business? And did you take any steps preemptively to deal with it?

Unknown Speaker 1:35

Hmm, that's a great question. I don't know that I was taking steps preemptively. At the Well, that's not true at the restaurant. I mean, we definitely stepped up in late February, early March stepped up our sanitizing washing hands, you know, we were starting the sanitizing procedures because I was reading quite a bit about COVID and maybe the touch surfaces so we were certainly getting nervous. I also teach full time art history at the community college in town Forsyth Tech. So I was sort of juggling both roles. And, you know, certainly there we knew that we were headed probably to online classes maybe before it happened, but I was not really prepared in the restaurant for the closed down the shutdown on March 17. to happen as quickly as it did. We were really given no warning. I guess we did have two weeks of slow down before that. Were business wasn't quite as robust. We were still seeing our regular customers come in. I do remember sort of the two weeks prior being surprised when sort of our older customers would come in. Because I was feeling like that was risky for them even at that early date, and I have elderly parents who are both 80 and older. So I had sort of told them that they needed to stay at home and not go out probably early March. But when the governor closed the restaurants if I knew maybe it was coming that I thought it would be a couple of weeks. And I was the Monday before the shutdown Tuesday, the 17th. I was on the phone with

one of my managers thinking, should I just go ahead and close. I'm unsure if we should even be operating at this point. I was getting really nervous. And the next day was St. Patrick's Day. So he said, Just wait one day and see what happens. So the governor made the call that morning and we were shut down by 5pm. So that was, you know, seemed to be kind of a shock. I ended up with a lot of food inventory. So that day, I really literally gave away probably three to \$4,000 worth of food. to employees to we eventually once I gave out we we froze everything we could, we had a lot of perishable fruit and bread and, you know meats that we couldn't freeze. So I gave those to employees because I was unsure of what the unemployment situation would look like. So I sent all the employees home with a bus tub of food, I knew that we would be shut down for at least a month, probably more. And I knew the food wouldn't last. So we sort of did the best we could but we did lose quite a bit of product.

Unknown Speaker 4:40

Okay, so kind of looking at that. How long did you think you mentioned that you thought it would last at least a month but did you ever imagine like the shutdowns and stuff lasting this long or did you just see it as a little hiccup that would be worked out in a couple of months.

Unknown Speaker 4:58

I never saw it as a hiccup.

Unknown Speaker 5:01

That's for sure. I don't I think I told even my employees, I thought it would be two months that we would be shut down. They kind of thought I was crazy being over reactive, but I've been reading a lot at that point. So I didn't really imagine we'd be open. You know, maybe even now, I'm kind of surprised that, you know, the governor made the call to reopen certain places, but as a business owner, you know, I had to think about my business surviving. So I spent the two months that we were close down, you know, cutting every bill I could, applying for every grant applying for every loan I could get my hands on. So I applied for the PPP loan early on. I didn't get it right away, which, which was nerve racking, but I'm quite happy because I got it may be may 11, which was a week before the governor open And restaurants again which turned out to be a really good time. And we spent, you know, we spent a week cleaning the entire restaurant, spacing our huge patio getting that ready spacing out the tables, taking apart tables, preparing the inside. We did have the inside prepared to, you know limit tables. We only ended up with probably five tables in our back section and five tables in our front section. We bought plexiglass separations to put up the bar we fit it outfitted our host stand with a plexiglass shield. We spent a lot of money sort of with protective measures. But to be honest, we have a huge back patio at 6000 vines. So when he opened into half capacity, we ended up just opening our back patio at first and we can see our happiness As 90, and we can see ad outside if every seat is full, even six feet apart. So we just spread out we have an enormous sort of yard area that we spread into. And we ended up with enough seats outside my staff as we met and cleaned up there and work together. We tried to limit the number of people that were inside at any given time. We tried to, you know, make shifts throughout the day, so that you had limited contact because we were already nervous about staffing issues and COVID. And then by the time we opened the outside, it was really difficult to reopen the restaurant. And we just chose not to

open the inside and we've been open since May 28. And we've never allowed customers inside to sit. They come in and use the restroom and then they leave quickly, but we have never served how to dining room and indoors to serve so that's just been kind of a personal choice and my staff is really definitely behind that.

Unknown Speaker 8:12

So what I'm this is just if you have to make in terms of personnel, were you forced to lay off anyone? Um, and what were your employees doing during the lockdown?

Unknown Speaker 8:25

Well my employees immediately I didn't open for takeout or do any of that so they immediately applied for unemployment, which turned out to be a good thing they were well taken care of with the federal stimulus that was added to it. So I think you know, they were very much locked down and you know, really not working. I still had my teaching jobs, so I never really got a break at all. We ended up with, you know, six classes online, which is maybe harder to deal with than ending a regular semester. So I was busy with that until mid May when, you know, we got the call that probably the restaurant would start opening again. So, I've been, I never really got a break, but my employees definitely spent those two and a half months, quarantines and locked down and, you know, bored to death but very happy for the federal stimulus money. I don't think many of them would have been able to pay rent on the regular north on unemployment, which is, you know, terrible. And especially for sort of the lower wage workers, they were really probably would have made \$150 a week. If if that sometimes, um, so that would not have been enough to live on to pay their rent. So they did okay. And then once I got the payroll protection loan, I I like they said in the loan, I tried to hire every single employee back so I had Several that chose not to come back, they either got other jobs or one of my key managers quit because she just was sort of tired of the restaurant business. So she decided that in the sort of two and a half months that she had as downtime. So we it but I ended up with enough key employees and most of my staff came back since then, though, really the staffing issues, because you really need more staff to run the service right now. And we got our core group back, maybe minus about four or five employees. But we were sort of understaffed all the time we chose as a result of that too. We are always closed on Mondays but we chose to close on Tuesdays as well. Because once you make it through a weekend of waiting tables outside in the heat and dealing with all the new project protective measures and wearing a mask which was very hard to get used to, for a five hour shift out doors running around. I really felt like the employees needed a break. And I've we've stayed closed on Tuesdays just because really the two days off is, you know, very important when you're working that hard outside to wait tables. So I've been pretty happy with that decision as well. My staffing issues though, have been weird. We've lost good people that I never thought we would lose on for various issues. Maybe, you know, once you get back into the stress of working a restaurant job after having two and a half months off, you really think I don't, I can get another job. I don't need this one. So I've had two or three kitchen employees quit. I've had two or three servers quit as well and you know The staff the issues also surrounding

Unknown Speaker 12:04

possible exposure to covid are pretty intense. So we have 18 employees. And you know, each, probably every two weeks, I have an employee come to me and say, I was around this person outdoors. But you know, they were connected to a restaurant that had a covid positive case. So then that employee can't work for a week, and has to get tested or can't work during the time until their test comes back negative. So I've had five employees out of 18 with those issues over the last, what, eight or nine weeks, probably. So that is pretty significant. And that's been a challenge because you automatically lose an employee right away for a week or five days until their test comes back. And there have been a couple of times where that employee is connected to another employee. So I lose to four until and I get a half everybody get tested before they can return. But luckily, we've not had a positive COVID case. So I know and let me tell you, it's on my mind at all times, at which point, some restaurants in town have stayed open, even though they have a positive employee case. But in my mind, that would be irresponsible. So I would shut down for the 10 to 14 day period.

Unknown Speaker 13:30

All right, um, so you mentioned that you didn't do take out at all looking back. Do you think you would have done takeout? If you like had it? God forbid you have a chance to do it all over again. Yeah.

Unknown Speaker 13:42

I believe we'll have a chance to do it again, I believe will get shut down. Certainly by November again, but I could be wrong. We'll see. Now I'm pretty happy with the takeout um, choice I made because we weren't really a takeout Place. We weren't known for takeout. I think the pizza places have done pretty well. Some of the takeout places have done really well, but I don't think I would have been able to pay the bills. So I'm pretty happy that I just shut it down. And I actually don't know if we close in November, December again or October, you know, I'm, I'm not sure if I'll choose to do take out that'll still because I've talked to lots of restaurant owners that did take out and they said the first few weeks were great. You know, they would get, you know, 40 to 50, maybe 60 orders in a day, which is huge. That seems like a win for me. And I'm not even sure I would have done that well, but they said it trailed off and it just became really where they were working all the time. They had two employees on site to handle the takeout and that was it. So because of Have a whole nother full time job. I can't really be one of those employees on site. So, you know, I'm not sure I would choose to do it.

Unknown Speaker 15:12

Okay, do you have like, would you have any other thoughts? I mean, it sounds like you're expecting another lockdown. So do you have any other ideas for how to like increase business during lockdown? Or would you just shut down? And like, write it out?

Unknown Speaker 15:27

I'm not. I'm not sure I, you know, I've thought about that I've, you know what, what's kind of currently on my mind is let's prepare for a lockdown by having fewer inventory items that can go bad, because we lost, you know, five kegs of beer, probably. Probably 20 cases of beer, maybe, you know, maybe 10 or 15 cases of beer went bad. tons of food and prepared food. So

we've liked it. Everyone have opened with a smaller menu. So you have fewer food items that can go bad in case things change. And in case business changes, you know, because we have seen it slowed down in the past two weeks, and I'm not sure if that's because of heat, because I'm out doors only. That's possible. Um, a part of me thinks because these numbers keep rising, that people are continuing to be reticent to come out to a restaurant, and the, you know, the outdoor dining most people have been really happy with and when I tell them, they don't have indoor dining, they say that's okay. We wanted to sit outdoors anyway. So I think really for me, I'm known for that back patio. So people come to me for the outdoor dining and I think that's been a really big thing for me. In my mind, I think if I can ride this out through fall, and try to save as much money as I possibly can. I will would not have been able to open without this payroll protection loan that has saved me, I would not be making the bills. It is I've got maybe \$14,000 left of the \$75,000 loan that I had. So in the next couple of weeks, I will be able to see how hard it will be to run it slim and pay my bills with just the sales because sales are easily cut in half every night. I'm open one fewer night and you know, at least they're 50% and that I feel like is a good day, you know if I can get this 50% So for me, I'm working on how to minimize my bills because of the payroll protection and I've been open making sales. I've paid down all my loans and other loans that I had earlier. So I have very little and I've been open 15 years so I don't have much debt. On the business already, I didn't have much, but I've paid that down. And I'm hoping to once my payroll protection, money is finished, I hope to have zero debt. But I expect to use my lines of credit to run them back up because I won't be able to make my payroll probably with the sales that I'm currently having. So I'll sort of have to just see how that works.

Unknown Speaker 18:31

Okay, um, are there any new routes that you've been able to explore in your business like have you tried to do things that you never thought you would have done? And you like kind of use COVID as an opportunity to explore those or kind of like think them through?

Unknown Speaker 18:48

Not yet, because we weren't open for takeout. And once we opened, we were pretty busy outdoors. We've just been focused on the end. You know, the dining at the restaurant, I do have a few ideas that I'm hoping to try. Maybe sort of doing an A wine tasting out on our back patio for a limited number of people spaced out, and then sell the wines as a kit and do sort of a virtual wine tasting at the same time. So I think that's a really interesting idea. I got that from a customer who participated in an online tasting with the Justin vineyards. And they sold them three bottles and gave them a link to a zoom call. And they let it online and they said it would have been better if there had been people there. So that sort of got us all thinking I could do that outside and have a virtual component. So I'm hoping to try that in the next month or so. And you know, maybe I could segue that into a lockdown situation if I could sort of get that off the ground and make that really successful, maybe I could make that work with takeout. I'm just not sure that I will be open for takeout if we shut down, but I think I'll just have to, I'm trying to sort of make do my business as well as I can right now, which is hard staff at as well as I can, which is really hard and come up with ideas and try to implement them before we get shut down again, you know, so that's a lot.

Unknown Speaker 20:34

The wine tasting idea actually sounds like a really,

Unknown Speaker 20:36

yeah. Well, I need to start exploring that. This week. I, I did here's what we do every week, is we build something new for our patio or for our indoor dining. So we've put sunshades up and we're trying to waterproof an area of our patio so that when it rains, which it does every day, apparently in with Salem So when it rains that we can have diners that can still sit and enjoy their meals. So that's our newest thing. Of course, if it's thundering and lightning, I wouldn't have them stay. But so far we've had to really, we haven't let anybody inside. So we tell them as they sit if it rains, you know will pack your food up to go and they will have to go to their cars or run to their, you know, in spaces.

Unknown Speaker 21:30

Okay, so you mentioned earlier that you were talking with other like local restaurant owners. Have you found that you've drawn closer together as a community and kind of work together? More than you would have before all of this?

Unknown Speaker 21:45

Maybe not more. The one great thing about Winston Salem, especially the downtown area, is we've always had a really close knit restaurant community as far as owners. We talk all the time. Mary haglund to just close Her Mary's Of course, or breakfast, of course, however you knew it, after 20 years of business, which is huge. She just closed but she actually did interviews when the lockdown was happening with all the local business owners, and she was a voice of support and throwing out ideas. And since then I've run into several restaurant owners. I talk with Jennifer Smith from Moses wells and Andrew Adams from the first Cardinal, I think, and we sort of bounced ideas off of each other. And you know, it was first Parnell that told me about his takeout experience. So that was good information to have. And I really think we've always had this great exchange. We're not afraid to trade secrets to tell people where we purchase things or to give each other ideas and support. So Winston has always been a special place for that. For sure. Maybe even more so now.

Unknown Speaker 23:04

That's like nice and refreshing to hear kinda

Unknown Speaker 23:07

Yeah. Yeah, there's there's not it's not too competitive. I mean I'm sure there are other restaurant owners maybe that are but the ones that I talked to you know were competitive in a good way. And we're, you know, willing to Finnegan's opiate Finnegan's, we have always for 15 years. If you run out of something, you can run around the corner and get it from the, you know, the other restaurant. And I did that I ran out of linen napkins. So he gave me you know, two packages.

Unknown Speaker 23:38

That's nice. Um,

Unknown Speaker 23:42
see?

Unknown Speaker 23:44

So, um, I kind of want to go back to what you're saying earlier about, like November being a time where you might have to walk down again. What do you see happening that would cause that to happen? Like under what circumstances do you think I'm the governor I would actually say, Okay, we have to lock down again, because it's pretty bad already.

Unknown Speaker 24:04

Yeah, I know. I, you know, I know that he just stopped alcohol sales at 11pm. I think he's getting a lot of pushback. But I believe he's making the right decisions. Um, I also think maybe the worst case scenario for restaurants is if things get worse, in the next couple of months, maybe he'll go to only outdoor dining. Which, you know, I'm already doing. So I do have that in the back of my mind. I don't know. I am a little concerned that universities are coming back online. I don't think that's going to be a great experiment because I do think that the numbers are going to go up once our university you know, people are back in town and going to bars and restaurants and things like that. So I'm a little bit worried about that. I'm really happy that the school system, the secondary schools are going online first at first because I think that would be a disaster if they went face to face right away. So that's just kind of where my, you know, head is I'm really reading a lot of the science and the, you know, following the medical doctors who are saying really important things, and I just I don't know, I, I definitely seeing a getting worse before it gets better. Which is scary to say.

Unknown Speaker 25:34

Oh, yeah. So now I'm kind of transitioning from the business almost. And what do you think is leading to the situation that we find ourselves in today, where we have so many more cases than like anywhere else in the world? What do you think's unique about what's happened in this country that's caused that to happen?

Unknown Speaker 25:57

Um, well, we have unit Leadership right now. So I really think our mistakes have been coming from the federal level. The President not listening to guidance early on, I think if we had masked up in March, like, you know, all of Asia, they were already wearing masks. Nobody was arguing about it. And they were wearing masks in the street, you know, outside all the time, everybody young, old. And I think if we had done that, if we had been proactive about that, I get that the doctors initially said, That's not going to protect you. But it would have, you know, as soon as they knew better and said it will protect other people. And so everybody masked would help if we had jumped on board. And you know, as a restaurant owner, I've been able to see that firsthand where customers are adamant that they do not want to wear a mask because it takes their personal freedom and I I just honestly tell them to go eat somewhere else at that point. I don't put up with that. And I've had people cuss at me, we've had I mean, you would

not believe I had a lady cuss at me because I asked her to wear a mask outside until she got to her table. Um, you know, ridiculous things. So, I think definitely, you know, President Trump with his back and forth message about masks and not being willing to wear them and show an example like that has been a huge problem. I think that we should have had a federal, you know, lockdown, I actually think he should have, he should have led by example and said, here's what we're going to do, and I think he should have also before we reopened, there should have been guidelines that had to be met. So as a business owner, yes, I was happy in June when North Carolina was able to open but As a person, and even as a business owner, I didn't think it was the right call. I think they should have waited until the numbers went down more until they had more contact tracing in place until they have more PP in place, you know, I mean, they the county just gave us these great PP packages. But I, as a business owner had to spend the first two months finding paper masks and finding rubber gloves and find and paying for it myself. And, you know, the prices were going up. And so I think everything's just been delayed because the federal government has not led by example, and has not done much to mitigate anything.

Unknown Speaker 28:46
Absolutely, that all makes sense.

Unknown Speaker 28:50
Unfortunately,

Unknown Speaker 28:51
yeah, well,

Unknown Speaker 28:54
um, so that's kind of the extent of the questions I've had. So are there any other thoughts or things you wanted to share or hope this year in this interview?

Unknown Speaker 29:05
No, you know, I think as a business owner, I'm in a kind of strange place because I want my business to survive. But I also am looking out for the safety of my staff and myself and my customers and that, on a personal level has been incredibly stressful. The responsibility that business owners have to take on as far as you know, trying to protect everyone around them trying to enforce the mask wearing you know, in when we're indoors at the restaurant, we always wear our masks, but you'll find an employee that pulls it down so they can breathe better. And I'm like, nope, come on, put the mouse back up. So you just have to stay vigilant. And you know, I think I've done the best I can. I don't think I think I've been lucky because other restaurants have had positive things. And I don't think they're doing anything different. You know, I don't think I'm better than they are. I just think I've been incredibly lucky. I'm going to knock on wood right now, because that's what I do. And, you know, I just hope my business will survive. I think it might, if we shut down again, take another federal program for small businesses This time, I think a lot of money was wasted on, you know, hedge fund operators and large restaurants that didn't need the capital. So, you know, I hope that the government's able to fix some of the problems with the payroll protection plan if they do it again, any, you

know, I think we're all just sitting on pins and needles trying to do the best we can until there's a vaccine but, you know, that might not be foolproof. So, we might just have to change our way of, you know, experiencing things. So It's gonna be, you know, an interesting year. It was really interesting for me because in February, I was at the top of my game 15 years in the restaurant business and I had customers showering affection on me and within almost really literally a month, I was closed down and I never would have guessed that. never would have guessed a complete shutdown. But I support the governor, whatever he chooses to do. And our mayor I think, is doing a nice job and Winston Salem as well. So I think the sort of stricter We are the better and as a business owner, I'm willing to take the hit and try to protect the public.

Unknown Speaker 31:44

And that's all great. Um, so if that's all I can stop the recording now and that was just a couple housekeeping things. Sure.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>