

Miami restaurants rush to turn parking spaces into outdoor seating



A restaurant in Miami's Wynwood turned street parking spaces into an oasis of outdoor seating in an area where outdoor seating was limited prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thirteen tables now border the sidewalk in front of KYU as restaurants in Miami-Dade County can no longer offer inside dining due to restrictions put in place to slow down the spread of the virus.

KYU owner **Steven Haigh** said even before County Mayor **Carlos Giménez restricted restaurants to outdoor service**, he was preparing for an increase in capacity along N.W. 25 St. Through the Wynwood Business Improvement District (BID) he was able to get permits for outdoor seating in street parking spaces.

While the BID helped supply free barricades, Haigh said he's spent about \$10,000 dollars on tenting, decorations, lighting, flooring and outdoor fans to make the space more comfortable for guests.

Dine-in service is vital to KYU's business model, so he hopes the investment will pay dividends with a steady stream of customers supplemented by delivery and takeout sales. Over the past week, Haigh said outdoor dining accounted for around 70% of sales.

“With the outdoor dining, even with delivery, we have a long way to go before we start making

any money," Haigh said. "We're just trying to lose not as much money as we were before."

Omar Ali-Shamaa, a lawyer at Miami-based Wolfe Pincavage, said Miami and Miami Beach have been the most willing to work with restaurant owners to expand the capacity for outdoor seating.

Besides allowing owners to place tables over parking spaces, he said the cities now let eateries extend seating in front of neighboring businesses, as long as they get written consent from their neighbor.

Additionally, Ali-Shamaa said municipalities have streamlined the permitting process so that businesses can be approved for outdoor seating permits in two to three days. Cities have also waived the associated fee to apply for a permit.

However, restaurant owners are still required to submit plans for the outdoor seating in order to be approved for the permit. This often entails enlisting an architecture or engineering firm, which could cost between \$1,000 to \$5,000, he said.

But some restaurateurs have found a way around this requirement.

Maria Banjac, owner of Rakija Grill in Miami, said she asked a friend who is an architect to quickly draw up plans, while **Cristian D'oria**, owner of Soya e Pomodoro in Miami, said he drew up plans with the help of the Miami Downtown Development Authority (DDA).

That process hasn't always been smooth, however.

Banjacsaid on July 1, a representative from the Miami Parking Authority asked her to take down her newly set-up terrace. The seating area takes up two-and-a-half parking spaces in front of her restaurant on N.E. Third Ave. where she can fit up to 16 guests. Banjac had the proper permitting when the representative came, she said, and the structure was only a day old.

"The only thing that's not helping situation now is the 10 p.m. curfew," she said. "People are coming in at 9 p.m., and by 9:45 we already have to start packing up."

D'oria said the biggest hurdle has been attracting customers.

Spiking case numbers throughout Miami-Dade County have caused a decline in people willing to dine in at a restaurant, even outdoors, he said.

His restaurant only has 20 available seats, so not being able to fill those tables up for weeks on end could spell doom for the business, D'oria said.