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GETTING BACK TO THE BEACH

Two experts talk about how Jersey Shore bars and restaurants might rebound from the COVID-19 shutdown

BY GABRIELLE SAULSBERY

John Taffer spent his summers growing up in Ocean Grove, moshing on the boardwalk on food from his uncle's burger joint. He's best known for his candor on Paramount Network's "Bar Rescue." Chef-owner Nick Liberato is the executive producer of the Netflix travel food show "Restaurants on the Edge" and a "Bar Rescue" chef-producer-alum. The Bucks County native also spent summers at the shore, and now has a beach house in Seaside Park. He is also the executive chef at two restaurants in Venice, Calif., the Venice Whaler and the Pier House. NJBIZ recently spoke to both about the prospects for the bar and restaurant industry along the Jersey Shore ahead of what is likely to be a subdued opening to the summer season. The questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.

NJBIZ: The economy at the Jersey Shore stands on the shoulders of its bars and restaurants. At some point, they're all going to be open again. When people are allowed to come into restaurants for table service, how do you see from of house changing?

JOHN TAFFER: I think it's gonna change a lot. Something that's interesting to me is that people have bunched bars and restaurant together. They have very different issues. Bars have standup areas, but in almost every [occupancy limitation projection] you can't stand at the bar [or] other areas. It all has to be filled with seating, 50 or 75 percent. This creates a very difficult situation for a walk-up bar.

We're finding here in Las Vegas that the success of the Jersey Shore is going to be based on all drive-in business. I believe a third of the marketplace will come very quickly—the younger, less at risk. The second third is more reserved. They'll wait until the middle of the season, wait to see if there's a resurgence, to see if they're coming back.

Then there's the third third, and they're not coming out until there's a vaccine. Now that third third — they're the ones who have money, because they're older, and they have higher levels of disposable income. Destinations like the Jersey Shore have to consider whether it's going to be a value destination. A fine steak house doesn't have it as good post-pandemic as a walk-up hamburger joint.

Also, your server can't touch money and then touch your plate, and they can't run and wash their hands when they do. If



Taffer

your server is picking up your dirty plate, she can't run food to another table. Food running becomes compartmentalized so it's sanitary, as does food service, and transactions — I see separate individuals [for all three].

That creates a challenge. Smaller little places on the boardwalk that don't have much square footage, they're going to have a real struggle separating those things and creating social distancing.

Another thing we're finding here in Nevada is what are the government policies going to be? If there's no regulation on customers wearing masks at the Jersey Shore, so some people are wearing and some aren't, you gotta realize less people are going to come. The people who are choosing not to wear a mask, they're not wearing mask for vanity.

There's a large part of our population that will come because they're comfortable with how the Jersey Shore is operating. To trust my safety when I come to the shore, I have to trust the behavior of the customers and the tourists, and the restaurateurs and the bar owners aren't going to be able to control that. If people come without masks and act in irresponsible ways, the Jersey Shore is going to be challenged to get people to come. On the other hand, if [the media] shows people in masks having fun and transmits the imagery of fun and safety, the

Jersey Shore has a much better chance of having a good summer.

But that has to be managed by the people and the government, not the restaurateurs, and that's what concerns me.

NJBIZ: How will back of house change?

JT: It'll look a lot more like an operating room than a kitchen. I don't think that people are going to be wearing street clothes in kitchens. Some of these things that we're talking about are going to add operating expenses. There will be a uniform program for kitchens. When you arrive, you put on your kitchen uniform; and at the end of your shift, you dump it in a bin and go out in street clothes.

We as an industry have been managing bacteria and E.coli colonies for many years. Good restaurant operators, we clean our surfaces. It's a shift in the chemicals we use because now we're using anti-viral chemicals, not just anti-bacterial, but the changes in the back-of-house aren't as big as the ones in the front.

NJBIZ: People go to bars for an experience rather than just to drink, to mingle and dance with strangers, to be part of a crowd. How will that be different if bars have, say, a 50 percent capacity limit? How will bars attract people without other people?

JT: You can say that about the whole Jersey Shore destination. When people are there, it's relevant. There's a subliminal message — subliminally, it makes you feel important. There's people here, there's an energy, there's a dynamic. In many cases, that's why you're there, or you'd be drinking at home with friends.

For the dynamic of a dance floor, the energy center is destroyed. At many bars, they have an activity center design. It has a square of land in the middle, and that's the bar or center of activity in the middle of the room. But that doesn't work anymore. Rather than an energy source, it becomes a sore thumb.

That's why the bar industry is in more trouble than restaurants. The average bar will make 70 percent of its revenue 16 hours a week. During those 16 hours, it has to be freaking packed. I've lost my potential in those hours and now I've gotta fill my bar in other times.

What I say to restaurants is they can make lunch go three hours by including early bird specials and late lunch specials, but a bar that's busy from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m., they're stuck with those few hours. They have no extra hours. That worries me.

NJBIZ: How do you see bars, post-COVID-19?

JT: The whole premise of social interaction is destroyed from social distancing. Then put music on, I can't talk to you at all, and put a mask on, how can I tell if you're smiling at me or telling me to go away?

We've thought about separating seating and allowing people to dance at their tables because we can't have a dance floor. I can still have a DJ, I can still have some energy, I can even point some of my lighting at your table. How can we create fun with distancing? "Sterile" is the word we use [to describe] restaurants and bars that aren't fun. It means it's not dynamic, not physically fun, it's a lousy concept.

We use the word sterile to define bad concepts, but now the word has a different meaning. The problem is, sterile and fun compete with each other. When they're wiping things down every 30 seconds, and people can't enter until others leave, that sucks the fun right out of it.

At the Jersey Shore, we have to sit down at a table and figure out how to make sterile fun again. It's the bars that figure out how to make sterile fun somehow that bring these bars back and get someone to want to come in.

The second public building built in America was a bar. The first was a church. The first distiller was George Washington. Bars go back to the first stages of America - at the time, they were called public houses, and they were important in the community. That's where priests and business leaders went, that's where state lines were created. There were no meeting rooms, they went to the public houses. These community bars have to be protected. I'm glad we have the National Restaurant Association and others who are working to support the industry now.

NIBB: Is it a benefit or a drawback to be on the shore as a bar or restaurant post-COVID19?

JB: Any bar that's in a destination area is disadvantaged as compared to a local-driven business. There's two steps involved. The locally driven business, there's one step between me going to bar or restaurant there, but I have to make the decision to go to the Jersey Shore in order to go to a bar at the Jersey Shore. There are many people who would go to their local bar rather than a destination.