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Jay Coldren helps restaurants weather Covid-19 by focusing on design

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Jay Coldren says he went to the “school of hard knocks” for restaurants. A graduate of American University with a degree in theater, Coldren had quickly learned how to immerse himself in his industry. And now, his arts skills have been coming in handy as he navigates one of the most difficult periods for the hospitality sector.

Coldren is managing director for design and strategy firm Streetsense’s Eat + Drink Studio, which works with developers, hoteliers and independent restaurateurs. Dining experiences that are both compelling and financially viable during the pandemic are hard to come by, but Coldren and his team help their clients pivot business models to survive — from expanding outdoor dining to outfitting a restaurant’s interior to ensure it’s safe for customers. He also faces



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Jay Coldren, managing director, Hospitality / Eat + Drink at Streetsense, posing for a portrait at his residence in Arlington

this era having previously backed restaurants around the country himself with his own group, Coldren Hospitality.

Now counting more than 30 years of experience in the hospitality industry, Coldren previously served in administrative roles at Dean & DeLuca, Edition Hotels, Marriott International Inc. and the famed Inn at Little Washington, the region's only three-star Michelin restaurant.

Biggest challenge facing the restaurant industry: The customers have gone away. The foot traffic is gone at many downtown locations, and that's where everyone got their business. Now, they've got to get good at digital and delivery. Unless they've been able to make that transition, then they're really struggling.

What is a recent change to the industry that's here to stay?

Delivery has just gone through the roof and every restaurant should be good at that now. They have to be. But other things, like technology, are important too. QR codes were dead 12 months ago. Now, it's a very innovative and cool thing to use. It has a lot of capabilities that we haven't explored before.

How has the pandemic made your job more difficult?

It's emotionally heavier. I don't know a way forward for some of the people we talk to. We try to give them the best advice we possibly can for their situation, but some people have lost all of their clientele. Some of these conversations we have are really more about venting their frustration with what's going on.

Next big goal: My goal with Streetsense is to build our discipline in a way that we can really have an impact, not only in North America but globally. We're attempting to scale the business so we have a little bit more reach throughout the United States, but also internationally.

How has your field of work changed since you started your career?

I think the good thing is it's become more equitable, more diverse, more fair and more civilized since I started. Things have become a lot more professional, a lot more inclusive and creative and really positive in that way. It was a rough, rough industry, and it was a sort of locker room-style of communication in a lot of places. I think a lot of that has gone away, and that needed to happen.

How do you handle stress during the pandemic? I went to arts school and so I've actually picked up painting again. I don't have a two-hour commute now, so I have a little bit more time to spend with that. Also, the ability to spend time with the family, the dog and just go out for walks around the neighborhood.

Favorite D.C. restaurants: I would say I've had a wonderful meal at Seven Reasons. Rose's Luxury has been amazing. I miss going to the Old Ebbitt Grill for oysters and I miss a lot of the iconic institutions.

What would you be doing if not this? I would probably be unemployed. They say you do restaurants because you can't do anything else. I've been doing it for probably 35 years and I can't imagine doing anything else. It's really home for me.

Pet peeves: My patience for fine dining over my life has probably gone down. A lot of the affectations of dining — don't open my menu for me, don't put a napkin in my lap; I'm perfectly capable of that — those kind of things.

Who are the major influences in your life? Most recently, I spent a lot of time with Giorgio DeLuca, the founder of Dean & DeLuca. I spent a day or so a week for a couple years with him, going through products and all that. Prior to that, I spent a lot of time working with [hotelier] Ian Schrager who is blindly creative, brilliant and also loves the numbers. From a creative and dining perspective, Patrick O'Connell from the Inn at Little Washington just looks at every aspect and nuance and moment of the guest experience and just cares about it all.

The basics

Jay Coldren

Managing director, Streetsense Eat + Drink Studio

Age: 51

Residence: Lyon Park

Education: Bachelor's in theater, American University

Family: Wife, two daughters and a French bulldog named Zeke

First job: Beach attendant at Steger Beach Service in Cape May, New Jersey.

Katishi Maake

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