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Culture

The Indoorification of Outdoor Dining

Restaurants are enclosing outdoor spaces with tents and domes ahead of the winter months. At what point does eating outside become no different from eating inside?



Pedestrians walk past social distancing bubble dining tents at West Fulton Market in Chicago on Nov. 13. *Photographer: Taylor Glascock/Bloomberg*

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It started with the outdoor heaters. As temperatures slipped in northern U.S. cities, the mushroom heat lamps were the first to materialize as a ubiquitous outdoor feature at restaurants. Then came the pop-up tents. Simple in structure at first, vinyl screens protecting diners from piercing winds arrived as a second wintertime hospitality must. The most sophisticated of these structures have taken on a decidedly permanent look.

Fashioned out of plywood or plastic, or specially commissioned from high-end outdoor event suppliers, the architecture of the outdoor dining age has advanced to a point where diners might never notice that they're sitting outside. With coronavirus counts rising, the case for outdoor dining has never been stronger. Some restaurants have invested in robust outdoor additions, including winter yurts, bubble tents and geodesic domes.

However, the idea behind pandemic-era outdoor seating is not just to reduce the capacity inside. The goal is to increase airflow between guests and quell the transmission of a deadly respiratory disease. Some winterized spaces may be reducing that natural ventilation in favor of warmth and comfort. So what exactly *is* a Covid-safe outdoor space?

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New York City is one of the few jurisdictions with its own definition: It only permits one-table igloos with “adequate ventilation,” and treats outdoor spaces walled in on three or more sides as indoor restaurants, capped at 25% capacity. (Whether these guidelines are enforced is another question.) But when it comes to finding the line, restaurants in most places are on their own – and some of them have made sizable investments in solutions that could come to naught, if cities decide that even outdoor dining is unsafe.

“City to city, county to county, state to state, it’s all over the map,” says Jay Coldren, managing director for the Eat + Drink Studio at Streetsense, a hospitality design and strategy firm. He wrote a comprehensive winter dining guide because so few resources exist. “There isn’t a single cohesive guideline for the way that restaurants or food-service operators can behave responsibly both with indoor and outdoor dining.”

Coldren adds, “The guidelines in New York are very clear. The guidelines in other places are mud.”

Absent consistent national guidance, the U.S. hospitality industry has made big investments to adapt to the changing rules – and to the weather. Some interventions are as simple as freestanding curtains to block the wind, which is often a bigger impediment to al-fresco dining than the temperature. (One Connecticut town is embracing a BYOB campaign: Bring your own blanket.) Costs and scale rise from there. At the highest end of the scale, greenhouses, bubble tents and geodesic domes are some of the strategies that restaurants are trying.



Some restaurants have invested thousands of dollars to remain open in the winter months. *Photographer: Taylor Glascock/Bloomberg*

Between buying pop-up tents from REI to ordering custom inflatable solutions, restaurateurs are spending between \$1,500 to \$5,000 for each four-top, Coldren says – a cost on top of heaters and any changes for outdoor service. Many municipalities have made hospitality grants available to restaurant owners, he adds. But success is a moving target: Some municipalities are already pushing back against the larger four-sided or even three-sided enclosures.

For restaurant owners who decide to spend more outdoors, it’s a risky investment, as cities ratchet up restrictions that may eliminate or severely limit outdoor options. Philadelphia diners can eat outdoors,

but only with members of their own household. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has put in place shutdown zones affecting certain neighborhoods in New York City, while Los Angeles County's public health director banned outdoor dining countywide for the next three weeks, citing the need to "limit mixing in settings where people are not wearing masks."

Timothy Applegate factored in local restrictions in Silverthorne, Colorado, when he decided to invest in yurts at his Italian restaurant, Sauce on the Blue. Indoor dining was only allowed at 25% capacity in Summit County, and the outdoor patio was going to get a battering of heavy wind and, eventually, snow.

“I don't think there's a kind of a solution where perfect comfort and perfect safety will be achieved.”

Applegate, the restaurant's managing partner and owner, decided to buy four fully-enclosed, “very solid” outdoor dining yurts designed by WeatherPort Shelter Systems, each equipped with an electric heater. Six people can eat in the rooms at a time, but only if they're from the same household. “You have to ask people,” Applegate says. “Is there a way of people lying to you? I'm sure there is. But I'd rather not comment on that.”

Before the pandemic, WeatherPort's outdoor structures were used for everything from base camps at Mount Everest to wedding tents. As the events business slowed, the company has been outfitting restaurants with custom-made canopies, gazebos, and yurts like Sauce on the Blue's, allowing openings like curtains to be rolled up or down depending on how much airflow clients want. William J. Hansen, a marketing director for WeatherPort, wouldn't give a ballpark figure on the cost, but says the structures are supposed to be investments for 20 to 30 years.

Economic limitations can also guide design decisions. “Obviously we want to provide the safest building solution possible,” says Hansen. “But especially right now with restaurants hurting so bad, being shut down for so long, and now having to reduce capacity by 75% or more, and only have a handful of tables available, we understand there's not a whole lot of money there to go crazy on the design.”

Paul Linden, a professor at the University of Cambridge and an expert in environmental fluid mechanics, says that the best way to design an outdoor dining experience is to have fresh air coming in through vents or windows low to the ground, and another opening high up to let particles out as air rises. But even enclosed spaces that fall short of that ideal, such as canvas tents with only one opening,

are safer than indoor spaces with all the doors and windows closed because they allow more air flow, he says.

“There's no sort of standard way to respond to this,” Linden says. “That's partly because these problems are not very well understood, for one thing. And secondly, there are a lot of different situations: Different restaurants have different configurations, and occupancy. And so it's probably quite difficult actually, to say, ‘Well, if everybody does this, we're all fine.’”



Diners on the outdoor patio at Espita Mezcaleria in Washington, D.C. *Photo Courtesy of Leah Judson*

For Espita Mezcaleria, a neighborhood eatery in Washington, D.C., weatherizing its ample patio meant adding heat lamps and plastic panels, but also plants and other decorative elements to make the outdoor area as inviting as the interior. Indeed, it looks like it could be a separate cafe adjacent to the restaurant. Josh Phillips, general manager and partner for Espita, says that the plastic window panels along Espita's patio enclose less than 40% of its perimeter, leaving much of it open. For added safety and comfort, most of the tables are spaced at least 9 feet apart.

Sauce on the Blue is only seating three parties in each yurt a night, and waiters open up the domed roof between each party to air out the space and clean it. Epidemiologists suggest such set-ups only

work if diners are indeed seated with members of their household, and wear masks when interacting with waiters.

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For Kakani Katija, who lives in Monterey, California, evidence of ample airflow has become as important a factor in choosing a place to eat as the dessert menu. “I understand that in order for air to pass into a space it also has to have a place to go,” she says. “If you have a tent with just a single door open, that doesn’t present a way for air to exit that space.” Katija is a bioengineer specializing in fluid mechanics, but she says you don’t need to be a scientist to grasp this concept; after posting a [tweet](#) decrying the enclosure of outdoor spaces, she got hundreds of replies from people who’d noticed the trend around the world.

For better or worse, restaurant owners will need to strike the perfect balance to keep their staffers both safe and employed. Outdoor winter service is a trial with little margin for error. “I don't think there's a kind of a solution where perfect comfort and perfect safety will be achieved,” Linden says.

For many restaurants, it’s also beside the point: Only a few restaurants are in a position, financially and spatially, to even add these kinds of structures. With new restrictions coming in most cities, the situation is perilous for many restaurants – especially if they are forced to close, since Congress has yet to agree on another round of bailouts.

Espita already transformed itself once during the pandemic. Back in August, the Oaxacan restaurant opened up a ghost kitchen to add smashburgers, cheesesteaks and boozy milkshakes to its fares. Nailing down the takeout pop-up was the first step to prepare for colder weather.

“That was our whole plan to winterize the business,” Phillips says. “Winterizing a business involves protecting your revenues.”

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