



ARTICLE

From Dining Out to Take Out

Restaurants Scramble to Offer Safe Dining Choices

The majority of us have noticed a significant shift in our eating habits while under various stages of lockdowns. Initially, while states were in Phase 1, most of us could not go out to restaurants and fast food options were the only option for outsourcing meals.

Since states have opened up in various stages, restaurant options have increased. Considering we are now spending a significant portion of our time at home, heading outside the house for food is an oft-welcomed field trip for the entire household.

Having said that, we were interested in how the pandemic has affected restaurants and their employees, what restaurants were able to stay open, and how these factors compare against number of reported cases.

Open Restaurants as Compared to New Cases

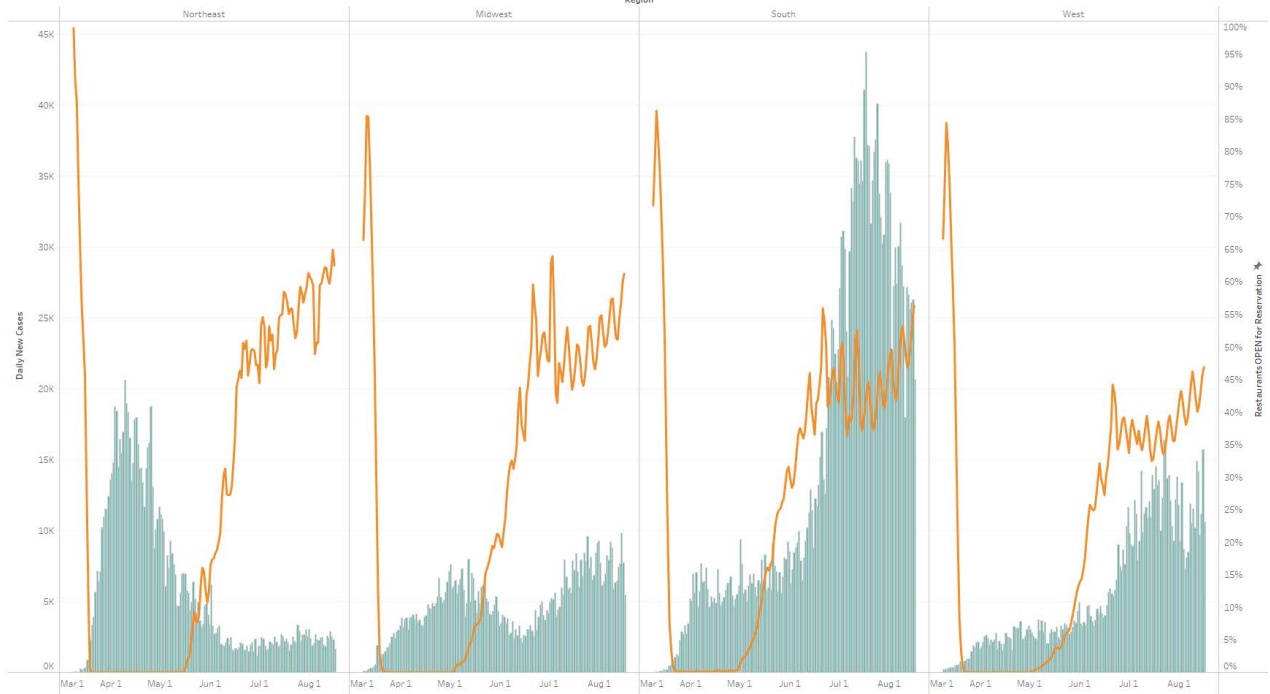
The first data set we examined was sourced from Open Table.¹ We looked at restaurants that were open for reservations and compared that to the number of cases in

the region.² We divided the country into four regions. As shown in the table below, where the green bars represent the daily new cases and the orange line represents the percent of restaurants available for reservations, the South region, which includes the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and the District of Columbia, shows the most significant number of new cases, exceeding the number of cases in the other three regions combined. By comparison, however, the number of closed restaurants was approximately 65 percent, the highest number in all three regions. This implies that restaurants are not the most significant source of transmission of new cases.

¹ <https://www.opentable.com/state-of-industry>

² <https://covidtracking.com/data/download>

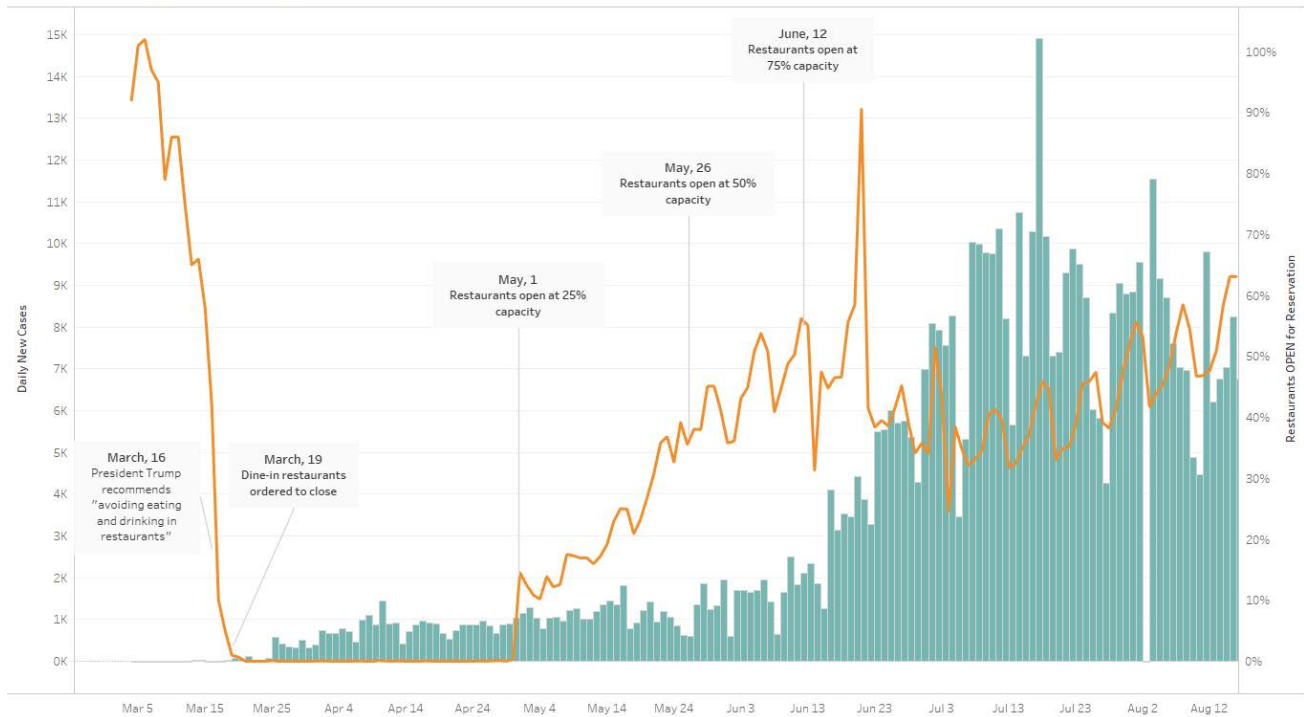
Open Restaurants vs. COVID-19 Cases by Region



Source: Open Table Seated diners from online, phone, and walk-in reservation & The COVID Tracking Project cases by state

Breaking this down a little further, we reviewed cases as compared to open restaurants for Texas and New York. When viewed on a state-by-state basis, the comparisons are not as clear cut. In Texas, there is a definite increase in cases over time correlating with restaurants that have been allowed to open their seating capacity.

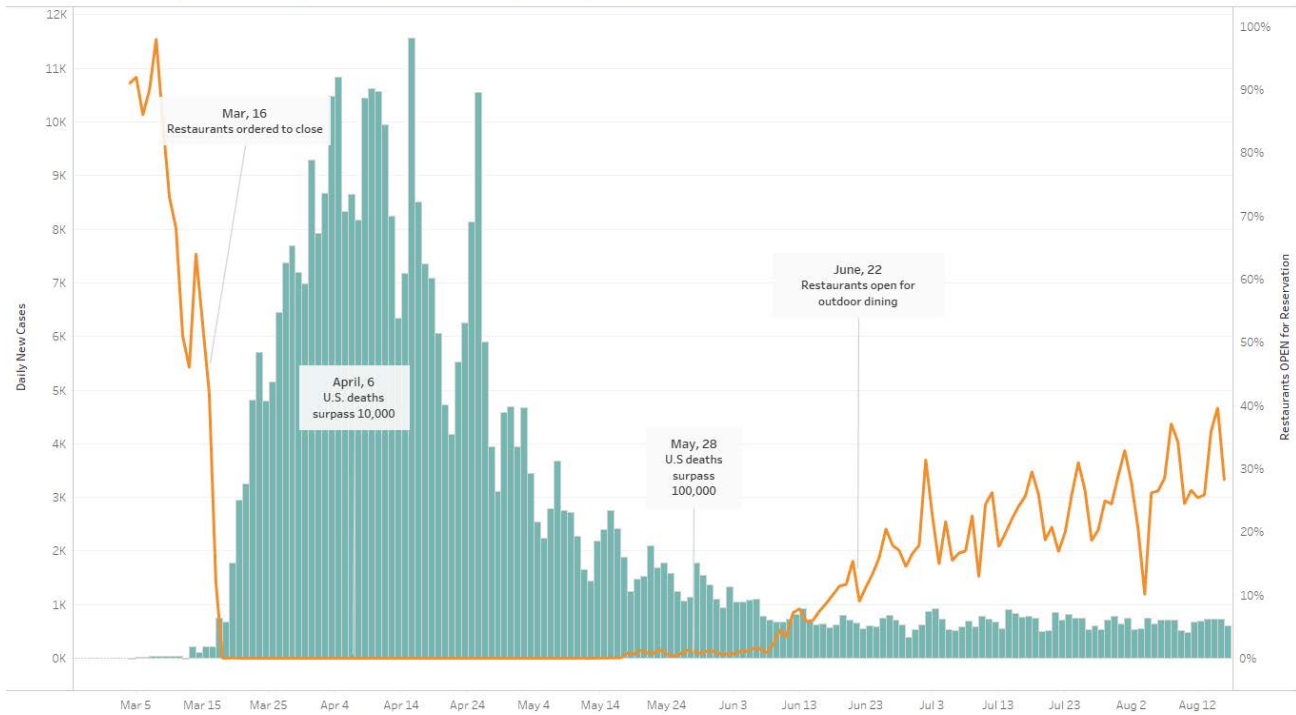
Texas State - Open restaurants vs. COVID-19 Cases source data: Open Table



Source: Open Table Seated diners from online, phone, and walk-in reservations & The COVID Tracking Project cases by state

When we look at New York state, the number of cases is increasing, as is the number of open restaurants. However, both cases and open restaurants are far lower than cases and open restaurants in Texas. This also indicates that open restaurants are not a primary source of COVID transmission.

New York State - Open restaurants vs. COVID-19 Cases Source data: Open Table



Source: Open Table Seated diners from online, phone, and walk-in reservations & The COVID Tracking Project cases by state

NYC Fine [Pandemic] Dining

Our next step was to examine what restaurants were open, by cuisine and by borough, figuring out what options were available to New York City residents.³ We first noted that 53 percent of the restaurants that were able to submit for a permit to open in Manhattan did so the first day the portal was open on June 19. This indicates that not only are New Yorkers ready to eat out, restaurants are also eager to open their doors to patrons. Interestingly, the number of restaurants that applied through the portal in Brooklyn was only 25 percent and this was even lower in Queens with only 15 percent of restaurants applying.

According to New York Open Restaurant data,⁴ pursuant to the applications for opening being granted, as of August 18, 2020 there were approximately 10,310 open restaurants in New York City. However, despite New York City broadly entering Phase 4 on July 20, 2020, restaurants were held back. Restaurants in New York City still cannot offer indoor dining and are limited in use to outdoor space on sidewalks and roads. A third (34 percent) of restaurants received a permit for sidewalk dining, 11 percent for a roadway dining area and 53 percent for both, while 2 percent received authorization as part of the Open Street program.⁵ Coming out of isolation, New Yorkers can rely on their restaurants to enjoy the summer outside and have a drink with social distancing restrictions in mind. Seventy percent of open restaurants qualify to serve alcohol.

³ <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Transportation/Open-Restaurant-Applications/pitm-atqc>

⁴ <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/ba953db7d541423a8e67ae1cf52bc698>

⁵ <https://ny.eater.com/2020/7/31/21349785/nyc-outdoor-dining-open-streets-weekends-traffic>

Here is a timeline of dining options in NYC:

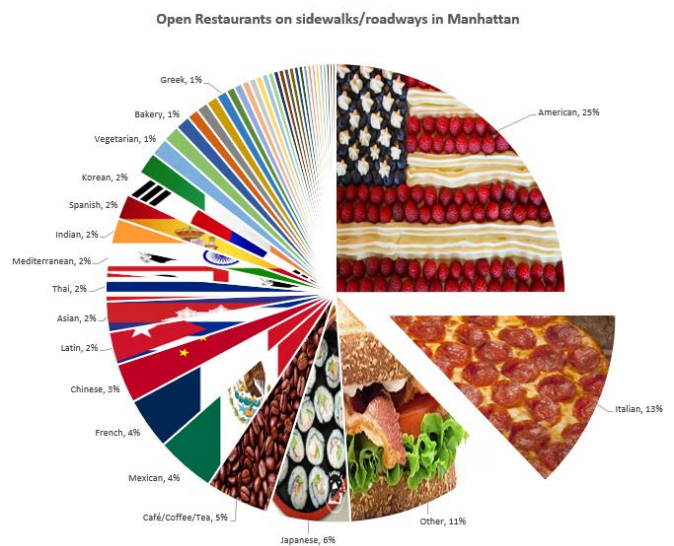
- June 8 – Phase 1 – Take-out and delivery food services on
- June 22 – Phase 2 – Qualifying restaurants can use sidewalks, roadways and other outdoor space to allow for social distance among customers
- July 6 – Phase 3 – Indoor dining postponed; for most restaurants, rules were the same as Phase 2
- July 20 – Phase 4 – Status quo in NYC for restaurants; indoor dining still banned
- September 30 – Indoor restaurants can reopen at 25 percent capacity, providing they can also check customer temperatures at the door and collect personal details for contact tracing



Given the outdoor nature of NYC dining, we were interested in whether this correlated with an increase in the number of noise complaints. Again, drawing on 311 data⁶ for August 2020 and comparing this to the corresponding outdoor permits that were granted in this month, we noted 943 noise complaints for 235 unique restaurants – a relatively small number compared to the 10,310 permits issued. Nearly half (43 percent) of these complaints were in Manhattan. By cuisine type, 22 percent of the complaints related to restaurants offering “American” fare, followed by Spanish/tapas (10 percent), Italian (9 percent), Latin, including Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, South & Central American (8 percent), Mediterranean (6 percent), Middle Eastern (4 percent), Caribbean (4 percent) and French (1 percent).

Anecdotally, the restaurant receiving the most complaints is located in Astoria, Queens and neighbors filed 33 different complaints (almost one every other day). This is closely followed by a Mexican restaurant in Manhattan, a Hookah bar in Queens and a pizza joint in Brooklyn.

We also wanted to know what types of restaurants are open during this period of al fresco dining.⁷ Not surprisingly, New Yorkers appear to eat a lot of American and Italian cuisine. Aside from American, Italian and “Other” food (which includes delis, wine bars or pubs) each of the five boroughs has a different kind of popular restaurants. Manhattan favors Japanese food and Brooklyn hipsters rely on coffee shops. Bronx and Queens enjoy Latin cuisine such as Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, South & Central American while Staten Island prefers Mexican food.



Source: NYC DOT Open Restaurants permits under Phase Two of the State's New York Forward Plan⁸

Finally, we were curious as to what the health grades were for these open restaurants – were they able to keep the sidewalks as clean as the interiors? However, we found that inspectors were on hiatus starting March 16. Based on the lack of inspection results in the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene dataset on NYC Open Data, it appears they are not back at work yet. Given the public's more pressing concern of becoming ill from COVID-19 as opposed to ill from salmonella, perhaps this is an appropriate re-prioritization of resources.

⁶ <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/311-Service-Requests-from-2010-to-Present/erm2-nwe9>

⁷ <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Health/DOHMH-New-York-City-Restaurant-Inspection-Results/43nn-pn8j>

⁸ nyc.gov/openrestaurants

Open Air is Not Enough

NYC and other major cities have made efforts to keep some options available for restaurants and bars to serve patrons – allowing these establishments to limp along until indoor dining is permitted. However, this might not be enough. According to Yelp data scientists,

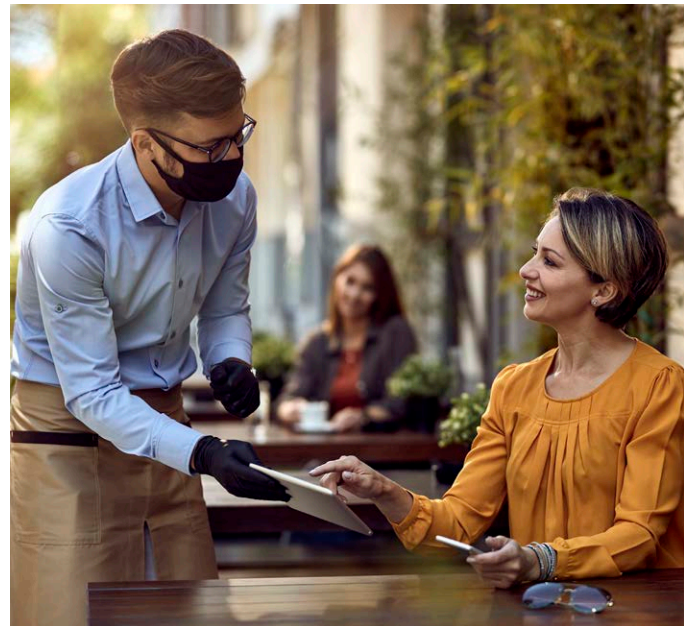
The restaurant industry now reflects the highest total business closures, recently surpassing retail. As of July 10, there have been 26,160 total restaurant closures, an increase of 2,179 since June 15. Of the all closed restaurants in July, 15,770 have permanently closed (60%), accounting for 2,956 more permanent closures, a 23% increase since June 15. Meanwhile, bars and nightlife, an industry 6X smaller than restaurants, have endured an especially high closure rate, with 5,454 total business closures, 2,429 (44%) of which are permanent closures.⁹

Various websites are keeping track of restaurant closings in their region. Eater New York has a running list of closures since the pandemic,¹⁰ each with a small writeup, akin to a tombstone for the establishment.

⁹ <https://www.yelpeconomicaverage.com/yea-q2-2020.html>

¹⁰ <https://ny.eater.com/2020/5/8/21248604/nyc-restaurant-closings-coronavirus>

As we near the end of summer, we can still enjoy the outdoor options available to us. However, the fall is only a few short weeks away, when temperatures will start to drop and al fresco dining could truly be ‘fresh.’ This may drive customers away from eating out, pushing even more restaurants into bankruptcy. This pandemic is difficult in a multitude of ways for every individual, including restaurant owners, their staff and the people that frequented them. Let us all hope that some endure past this time so we can continue to enjoy their gastronomic delights.



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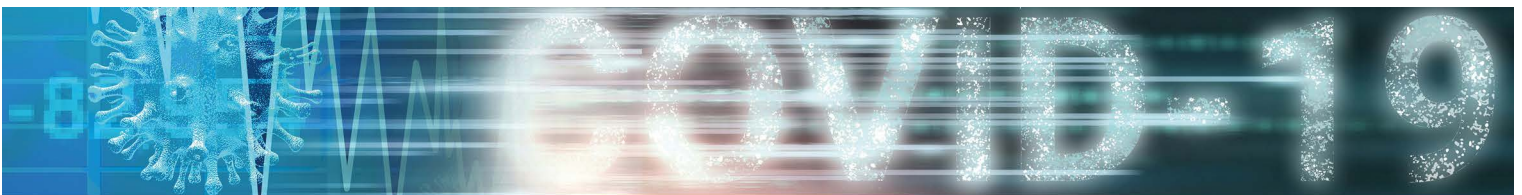
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