

REINVENTING BUSINESS IN THE COVID-19 AGE

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A sense of normalcy begins to take shape as Ontario loosens some COVID-19 restrictions, but not all shuttered businesses have fully emerged from the lockdown slumber and some are still grappling with what it would mean to operate in a post-pandemic future.

For restaurateur Jody Palubiski, shutting down his restaurants in March — including the Beertown Public House in Burlington and Oakville — was the "worst day" of his 30-year career.

But the CEO of the Charcoal Group, which operates several restaurants across the province, said there's now a feeling of optimism, where the national discussions have shifted toward reopening the economy.

"We're talking about how to get better and how to repair things. So that provides us certainly as a company with optimism as well," he said.

Palubiski has been preparing to open the doors to their restaurants.

To start with, they might run at a lower capacity — possibly at 50 per cent — to take into account physical distancing in dining rooms.

"That's the first step in starting to get people back to work, getting the econo-

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- restaurateur Jody Palubiski

my going and doing it in a way that people are still safe from a health perspective (even if it means the firm losing a little bit of money)," he said.

Gloves and masks and temperature checks are among the likely safety measures on the table.

"You have to build comfort and you have to take steps to now accommodate for new concerns and I think it's going to be up to a lot of the industry professionals," he said.

In Georgetown, Valerie Leachman, owner of women's boutique The Way We Were, said businesses have to find ways to adapt to the pandemic. Like many others, she's taking her business online to make up for the loss of in-store customers.

"We're making enough that I can pay my phone bills and pay my internet, you know just basically



Graham Paine/Torstar

Jody Palubiski works on new table distancing rules for when restaurants like Beertown Public House reopen.

keep the store alive, but we're certainly not making money," she said.

With more retailers being allowed to open by the provincial government, she said she'd be opening her consignment shop with limited hours and by appointment only for a few weeks — with a plan to install Plexiglas barriers.

Still, she said it will take months for small businesses like hers to recover — if it happens at all.

"It's a little scary, but

we've been here going into our 11th year," she said, adding that the store has built quite a loyal customer base.

Different businesses have different takes on the changing landscape.

According to president and CEO of the Milton Chamber of Commerce, Scott McCammon, the ingenuity and creativity that they have shown through all the challenges have been amazing.

"A lot of the businesspe-

ople have found ways to survive," he said, though not necessarily thrive. "Everyone is looking forward to this ending that they can get back to normal operations."

The chamber — like other similar organizations across Halton — is doing its part by gathering and disseminating information that the business community needs, so that they're fully informed about not just safety requirements but also available subsidies

and opportunities to help cope through the crisis.

"We've been doing as much as we can," he said.

Navigating the unknowns has been "quite challenging" for Parul Patel, who owns the Blo Blow Dry Bar in Milton along with husband Bijal.

"I was completely heartbroken when we had to go ahead and lay off employees being less than a year in. It's not something you want to have to deal with," she said. "It's important to do whatever we can ... to flatten the curve."

Hopeful that she'd get to welcome back staff and customers by mid-June, the Milton resident said a different hair salon experience awaits. The changes include limiting the number of guests in the bar, having stylists and guests wear masks, and installing Plexiglas.

"We're going to allow for time between appointments now to let our staff to go ahead and do the disinfection thoroughly before the next appointment," she said.

Her hope is for the community to continue to support local establishments to build a stronger Milton.

"There's a lot of small business in the area just like mine, this is our livelihood," she said.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With countless shuttered businesses just now starting to reopen, owners must adapt to the changing economic landscape.

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