

# ways Covid-19 has changed the face of food in Suffolk

Food trucks, gourmet takeaway and year-round alfresco dining - will dining change forever in Suffolk? Local business owners have their say. By **Danielle Lett**

The past 10 months have seen businesses within the hospitality sector drastically change how they operate in order to cope with the restrictions and challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. But are these changes here to stay, even once coronavirus has gone?

## Takeaways

One of the first major changes this sector saw was the uptake in the number of establishments offering takeaway and delivery services.

Maria Broadbent, owner of Bury St Edmunds restaurant Casa has shifted towards a takeaway-focussed business model - and hasn't looked back.

"We'd dabbled in takeaway before, but with what third-party delivery companies were charging for their cut, it just wasn't worth it," she explains.

"But due to lockdown, we brought on our own delivery drivers and decided to give takeaway a go again. Everything we make is cooked fresh to order, and goes out just as if we were serving it to customers at their table."

Casa has since received an overwhelmingly positive response from customers and has said it will continue to offer a takeaway service in future - with Maria even going as far as to expand her restaurant's premises to create more space dedicated to takeaways.

"During the first lockdown, the adjacent building became available so we gained an abundance of extra space, but rather than using it for seating, we'll use it for takeaway prep."

With lockdown showing no signs of easing just yet, Maria is

rolling out a handful of new initiatives at Casa - including vacuum-packed cold platters, and recipe meal boxes which will allow customers to make their own Spanish meatballs from scratch.

But with such a focus on at-home dining at the moment, will there be the demand for restaurant experiences again once lockdown ends? Maria certainly thinks so.

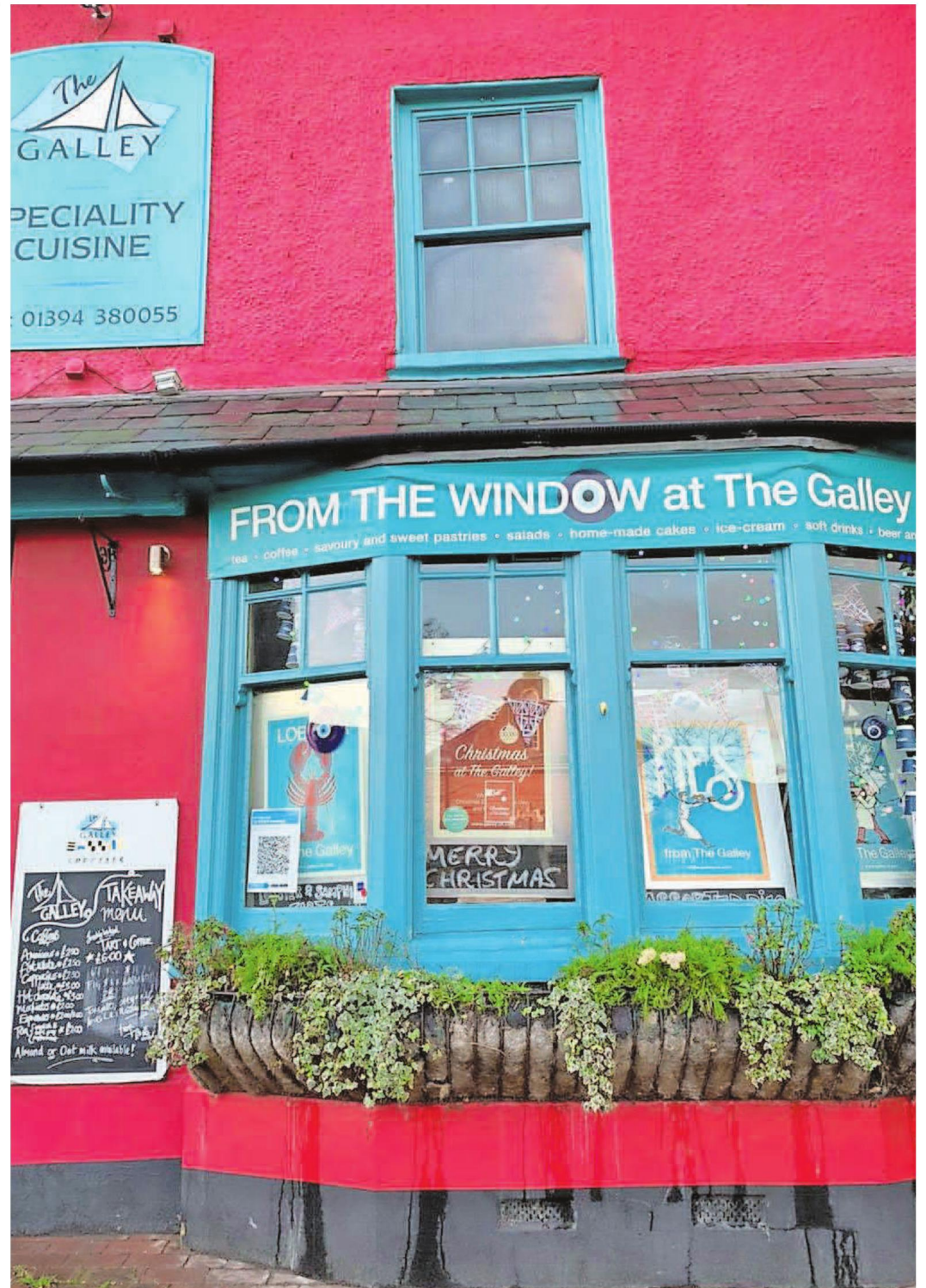
"I think people will be more selective with where they go, but they will definitely go back out to dine - just look at Eat Out to Help Out back in August. No matter how hard you try at home, you just can't replicate that same experience as when you dine out in a restaurant.

"But we'll definitely still have people continuing to eat home well after lockdown ends, because they might be too scared to come out, or they've got kids and it's cheaper than getting a babysitter. I think lockdown has opened up alternatives not just to us, but to the consumer as well."

Woodbridge restaurateur Ugur Vata of The Galley has also been serving freshly-cooked gourmet meals to his loyal clientele throughout lockdown - but he's not so sure people are eager to dine out again, even once restrictions lift.

Ugur says he's not planning to open his restaurant at all in 2021, and will continue with a delivery service on Fridays and Saturdays.

"Even though we're a 120-seater restaurant, and I could've opened when lockdown eased, I just don't think people's confidence is there. People are very nervous, and I think in the long-term, I'm not going to see people coming out in big parties. It will be difficult for people to go back to old habits."



Woodbridge's The Galley, which focussed solely on takeaways and deliveries rather than reopening between lockdowns

Picture: THE GALLEY

Ugur's takeaway menu, which changes weekly, features an array of meals using locally-sourced ingredients which can be easily reheated at home - giving customers an at-home restaurant experience while safely shielding. Previous dishes include grilled halibut, pan-fried duck breast and homemade baklava.

"Our business has dropped slightly, but cases have been so high, I can't take the risk for myself and my team by opening between lockdowns. It's not worth it," Ugur adds.

## Afternoon tea - at home

Over the last 12 months a number of catering businesses have expanded their reach by

delivering homemade cakes, savouries and afternoon teas.

Rachel Halls, owner of BMC Cakery in Ipswich says: "When lockdown first happened, we thought the best thing to do would be to give deliveries another try. We took on four drivers who had been furloughed, and we did incredibly well - delivering on average 180 orders a day."

Following her successes, Rachel has decided to make deliveries a permanent mainstay to her business - and has been experimenting with other box ideas ahead of what looks to be a lockdown Valentine's Day.

"Lockdown has been exhausting, but it's given us the drive to launch so many new

products we would have otherwise waited longer to put in place, so I'm quite thankful for the push in that sense."

While currently closed during this third phase of lockdown, Tracey Ball's Nourish Café in Woodbridge offered takeaway picnic boxes during the spring and summer months - something she'd never done before.

"It wasn't even planned, I made one for a neighbour and posted a photo of it on our social media, and was soon inundated with requests. In the end, we sent out over 500. With the picnic boxes, it soon became clear that our customers ordered them for

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In autumn last year, many pubs, like The Crown in Stoke by Nayland, began to shift towards outdoor dining due to government restrictions on indoor socialising

Picture: THE CHESTNUT GROUP

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celebrations or just wanted to treat themselves, and being unable to dine out, this was the perfect solution.

“Although it did get super busy for us, it was enjoyable, especially knowing that we were spreading some happiness in such uncertain times. It’s difficult to know what the future holds. However, I do feel people will prefer to stay local and support Suffolk businesses, whether they eat out or stay in and order.”

### Eating outside

Another huge change to the dining sphere was the emphasis on year-round outdoor seating, and according to Tori Dexter, group growth manager at the Chestnut Group, this certainly looks to stay - even once the pandemic is over.

“Throughout lockdown, our pubs were doing okay, but we did see a bit of a downturn in trade, as I think most people did, but it depends which lockdown you’re referring to. The second one hit us harder as people weren’t able to socialise indoors with those they didn’t live with, so that’s when our outdoor gardens really took off.”

In September last year, government restrictions prohibited groups of more than six people meeting socially indoors.

Chestnut Group, which owns a number of pubs across East

Anglia, made the decision to erect a number of ‘winter gardens’ throughout their venues, meaning groups of up to six could socialise with those outside of their household between the second and third lockdown.

“It was something we were thinking about doing anyway, so we put them up in September, but when it started to get colder, we put up fairy lights and heaters inside of them.”

Tori believes outdoor dining in particular will make a permanent return once restrictions have been lifted and pubs can reopen their doors, no matter the season.

“I think more people would rather eat that way regardless, away from enclosed spaces. The winter gardens provide a different dining experience, and there’s a nice feeling about eating al fresco.”

### The rise of street food

As more people embrace outdoor dining, food trucks and street food markets also saw a huge resurgence during the pandemic - with many still trading successfully while restaurants and pubs have closed their doors.

Hadleigh resident Joshua Wright launched a gourmet burger truck before Christmas with business partner Johnathan Nicolson - with the aim of bringing something different to the town.

“Food is fashion and street food is so fashionable right now, so



Afternoon tea at home has seen a sharp rise due to lockdown

Picture: RACHEL HALLS

that’s what we built our concept around,” explains Joshua.

Dishes on Wagyu Burgers and Street Food’s menu include burgers made from ground wagyu

beef, chicken wings, triple cooked chips and breakfast baps.

“We found a supplier of wagyu and just ran with it, so that became our USP. Where we’re

pitched up, there’s nothing like it.”

The truck is currently situated on the Hadleigh bypass, and due to its overnight success, Joshua is





The winter garden at The Weeping Willow pub in Barrow showing that al fresco dining can be done all year-round now

Picture: CHESTNUT GROUP



The Queen at Brandeston is one of the many Suffolk pubs that became a makeshift shop during lockdown, selling regional produce to local residents

Picture: THE QUEEN AT BRANDESTON

planning to launch a second van near Woodbridge.

Could gourmet food vans and a demand for street food be something we see more of going forwards?

"I would like to think so. The response from customers has been amazing so far, and most nights, we're at about 70% capacity. Food

vans are more of a low-risk venture for both the staff and the customers, as we have a van rather than a restaurant."

**Pubs become shops... and more**  
Lockdown restrictions have seen people not only shy away from crowded places such as indoor restaurants, but also

supermarkets. A number of pubs across the county quickly transformed into makeshift shops and even delis to ensure local residents could still stock up on essentials, with some even doing deliveries for those shielding.

The Queen in Brandeston opened up a shop within its pub at the start of the first lockdown, working closely with local suppliers to stock fresh fruit, vegetables, bread and other essentials.

"I think in terms of opening the shop, it was really to adapt to the landscape and to also support the community in Brandeston," explains Mark Waters.

"We've got a pretty local supply chain, and we've been working with local businesses such as Fen Farm Dairy, Havensfield Eggs, Fairfield Farm crisps and Adnams."

The pub's shop, which is open five days a week, is set up with the vulnerable in mind and only allows two people in at a time, to allow for better social distancing. It also does delivery boxes for anyone who may be shielding in the local village.

"The shop will probably continue post-lockdown, as we've been utilising any produce we have an oversupply of within the takeaways, so it helps us cut down on food waste too."



Casa's Tex-Mex sharing menu with wine - one of the many gourmet meals the Bury St Edmunds restaurant has made available for takeaway during lockdown

Picture: CASA