

SUFFOLK PUB OWNERS SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS AHEAD OF MONDAY'S BIG REOPENING

Thousands of pubs across the region are getting ready to welcome back customers for the first time since December, reports **Danielle Lett**

It's been over three months since Boris Johnson ordered the temporary closure of pubs across the country as the majority of England was plunged into tier 4 lockdown restrictions back in December.

Fast forward to this month however, and following the government announcement on Monday, April 5 that pubs and restaurants can open their outdoor areas for either groups of up to six people or two households, tens of thousands who work in the hospitality sector can finally get back to work after a long period of uncertainty.

A handful of pub landlords here in the county share their hopes – and reservations – in regards to this current phase of lockdown easing, and what it means for them over the next month.

Like many publicans, **Steve Lomas**, managing director of Suffolk pub group Deben Inns, is thrilled to be reopening his doors this week.

"We're opening three of our venues on Monday – The Maybush, The Butt and Oyster, and The Fox. We're very excited, we've already taken beer deliveries in and things are moving pretty quickly.

"We're keeping our fingers crossed for the weather though – there's a certain reliance on reasonable weather at this time of year," he adds.

Steve says that like last year when the pubs were open for outdoor mixing, many of his Covid precautions will remain the same – including staff wearing masks, full table service and customers remaining seated at all

times.

He also notes how excited both his staff and loyal clientele are to get back to the pub, following the extended period of closure.

"Our staff are desperate to get back to work, and we can't wait to get back to doing what we do best. There have certainly been comments from people wandering around the villages that our pubs are in, asking when we're opening, what the restrictions will be, and how it'll all work.

"It's very much a positive attitude from all of the locals who are desperately keen to get back to a sense of normality and see us back open and thriving once again."

As of Monday, pubs are not bound by opening hour restrictions, unlike last time when pubs had to close by a strict 11pm curfew. Last winter's substantial meal rule has also been scrapped this time around.

"That certainly helps, as at the end of the day, we are a pub restaurant, but the word 'pub' should mean you can come in for just a drink if you so wish. We operated through the substantial meal rule, but I'm glad it's been simplified this time," Steve adds.

In similarly high spirits is **Chris Theobald**, director of The Parrot in Aldringham and The Dolphin in Thorpeness.

He's not only excited for the local trade to return, but is hopeful for an eventual influx of holidaymakers over the coming weeks.



This latest phase of lockdown restrictions easing means that as of Monday April 12, people are also permitted to stay overnight in self-contained accommodation, as long as it's with those in their household or support bubble.

"We hope the village is going to be full of people again. We're a bit apprehensive about how busy we're going to be – the bookings have been flooding in and both pubs are looking to be extremely busy all week, but it's so weather dependent due to the outdoor rule," he says.

"I just pray for sunshine every day. Once the sun is out, we hope people will just wrap up and embrace the British weather."

Chris has ensured both of his venues are Covid-compliant by erecting open marquees in case of inclement weather.

"At both pubs, we built large wooden structures but because they're too enclosed, we're not able to use them from Monday so we've got to wait until May – but we have got marquees, and we'll do the best we can in the meantime."

Monday May 17 is the date the government has said the hospitality sector can seat customers indoors once again.



The Nutshell believes it will benefit greatly this month due to its large al fresco outdoor area

Patrons will however still have to remain seated while ordering, eating and drinking.

One Suffolk landlord who believes he will benefit greatly from the new outdoor seating rule is **Geoff Page**.

Owner of The Nutshell in Bury St Edmunds, his pubs lays claim to being one of the smallest pubs in the country – with a bar that measures just 15 feet by seven feet. However, with an expansive outdoor seating area, he believes business could boom over the coming weeks and is optimistic as

lockdown restrictions slowly ease.

"We're both excited and relieved, and the staff are chomping at the bit to get back at it. Having customers solely outdoors is actually more capacity for us, and if all of those seats are taken all of the time, then we'll be busier than if we could have people inside," he says.

"It's going to be tricky if the weather turns, as we just have standard pub garden umbrellas, but it's absolutely worth going for. I'm hoping we have a summer that's just as good as it was last



Main, The Dolphin in Thorpness
Picture: THE DOLPHIN

Inset top left, Steve Lomas of Deben Inns is opening three of his venues this Monday following the go-ahead from the government that will allow pubs to serve customers who are seated outdoors
Picture: DEBEN INNS

Inset bottom left, Geoff Page, landlord of The Nutshell in Bury St Edmunds. He is one of many pub owners opening its doors this Monday as lockdown restrictions ease
Picture: MARIAM GHAEMI

Picture: MARIAM GHAEMI



The Butt & Oyster at Pin Mill will reopen from Monday

year.” However, not all local businesses owners share similar sentiments. **Ben Hutton**, owner of Queens Bar and Grill in Bury St Edmunds, says it is simply not viable to open at full outdoor capacity due to the unpredictability of the weather at this time of year.

He says: “It’s just not the same as being open fully – there’s a lot of factors to consider. It’s too high risk if it rains or gets cold – so instead we’re going to be opening just on weekends and seeing how that goes.”

Ben will instead be focusing his efforts on the May 17 reopening date, when pubs and restaurants

can welcome customers indoors as well as outdoors.

“That date in May is definitely where our priorities lie. To open and bring your full staff back, for it to rain and for all of your bookings to cancel – that’s just no way to run a business, otherwise people would have fully outdoor catering all year round.”

“Luckily, we’ve still got furlough, so that makes up for the shifts my staff won’t be working. It’s only one more month, then hopefully it’s back to normality and everyone should have their full shifts back. I’m predicting we’ll be very busy throughout summer come May,” he adds.

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