

Ottawa's Only Malaysian Eatery to Close

The sole Malaysian eatery in Ottawa, celebrated for its authentic, spiced, and savory cuisine, is set to close after the property is sold, as the owners face post-pandemic stressors and competition from big-chain restaurants.

Succeeding 3 months on the market, owners Subut and Margaret Abdullah strain to find a potential buyer, “We’ve had a few calls and inquiries,” Margaret Abdullah said. “But no solid takers. It’s quite a tedious and exhausting process.”

As the only upstanding Malaysian Restaurant in Ottawa, the departure of Chahaya Malaysia will ‘create a void’ of true Malaysian dishes. “I grew up eating at this place, my family and I bonded over the food here,” customer Tammy Luong said. “It’ll be upsetting to see it go, but I guess all things have to come to an end at some point.”

After operating their restaurant for 39 years, the Abdullahs found it ‘difficult to recover’ from the COVID-19 pandemic. “It was a matter of not being able to keep up. The economy keeps fluctuating, you know, inflation and COVID really impacted our business,” Subut Abdullah said of their decision to sell. “I honestly don’t really think there’s room for small restaurants like ours, no matter how successful we may be, we just can’t keep up with big multi-million-dollar chains.”

The business and economic world was ‘heavily impaired’ as a result of COVID-19. The consequences of such are a trend of closures throughout the Ottawa area. John O’Hara, an economics and finance expert, says the city will ‘see a contraction of restaurants.’ O’Hara advises business owners to anticipate indicators such as consumer debt: “When people start to carry high levels of debt, then they become very conscious of what their disposable income goes to … our debt levels are increasing per capita.”

Consumer debt has been an area of struggle for the Abdullahs. “I mean we have struggled with debt ourselves, I think it’s unavoidable in today’s state. So, I can understand where the decrease in customer traffic, for all restaurants, has come from,” Margaret Abdullah said.

O’Hara predicts big restaurant chains, primarily in the fast-food sector, will continue to prosper. However, small businesses, like Chahaya Malaysia, are bound to struggle in the evolving economy. “We’re going to see foreclosures and bankruptcies in that space,” O’Hara said. “And they’re probably going to be more punitive than not.”

“I mean, we are selling because we’ve been in business for almost 40 years, and we want a break. I’m old, you know, we can pass the torch to the next generation,” Subut Abdullah said. “It’s sad, we adore this place and our customers, but we just can’t go on anymore. We look forward to the next chapter of our lives,” Margaret Abdullah added. “As for the future of small restaurants, well, I pray for their success.”