



Pilot closed for a week before pivoting to takeaway



Fink has one venue in QLD and six in NSW



Pilot kept their entire kitchen team on to manage takeaway demand



Fink worked with an academic to develop their COVID-Safe plan



“Communication was a really big part of our plan during the shutdown so the staff remained connected to the businesses, connected to the culture and to each other,” says Courmadias. “We quickly created communication groups, so we could talk to particular restaurants, particularly groups in each restaurant, or everyone. We also had a regular eDM that went out to staff to ensure they knew what was going on from a bigger picture point of view, but also with each other.”

While the venues had ceased trading, there was more than enough to communicate. Going from 450 to four staff in the space of a week meant the skeleton team had an enormous amount of work to do.

“I never realised how much there is to do to run a restaurant group with no restaurants,” says Courmadias. “We really

pushed ourselves through that shutdown period to ensure staff were well cared for and assessed where the business was at and how we were going to reopen. We really made sure that when we reopened, we reopened with a slightly different model, knowing that it has to be so much more viable than it was.”

Whether staff were utilised in other roles while offering takeaway and retail services or temporarily stood down, returning to dine-in operations required retraining for front of house staff.

“Restaurants need momentum, they need to be constantly moving; they’re an organic beast,” says Courmadias. “You can’t just turn them off and come back and expect them to be in as good a state as you left them.”

At Pilot, selling wine and condiments through the bottle shop format kept front of house staff in touch with their service skills, but everyone was still a little rusty when it came time to welcome guests back to the venue. “During the break, we definitely retained our wine knowledge,” says Rumble. “But in terms of serving people, we had to figure out how to do that in a takeaway environment.”

Pilot is known for its paired-back menu, so guests usually trust wait staff to guide them through the experience. Takeaway, on the other hand, saw the team simply recording customer orders over the phone. There was less back and forth and less knowledge transfer. “We all really missed serving people and using those skills to make someone’s night,” says Rumble.

Fink’s biggest challenge wasn’t rusty staff when selected restaurants opened after months of hibernation. Instead, many of the more experienced team members were pushed to unlearn processes that previously made them part of a well-oiled machine. “Restaurant staff follow very strict rules about the way in which particular tasks need to be done in the order of service,” says Courmadias. “It’s a very well-documented and trained sequence. Now, the challenge is around changing new protocols for staff who were a little more experienced in the sequence.”

And new protocols abound in the era of COVID-19 dining. The Pilot team has eased the transition for both front and back of house staff by tweaking their model. À la carte and share-style set

menus are on the backburner for the time being, with a degustation-only sitting the new order.

“With restrictions, we can only have a certain amount of people in; how do we make sure we’re making money or surviving during this time?” says Rumble. “We don’t know how long this is going to go for, so we may as well make the business model work indefinitely.”

It means staff have less on their plates, making room for new concerns, such as keeping an eye on capacity, spacing, sanitising and contact tracing. Digesting all the new health information has been confusing at times, but ACT Health has been hands on and responsive to queries. Thankfully, many of the requirements — such as sanitising tables — have always been a part of staff duties at Pilot. So it has been smooth sailing once staff have wrapped their heads around the COVID-Safe plan and square meterage rules.

Fink began working on a plan before the 22 March shutdown, after a regular at Otto Sydney approached the team about what they could be doing to mitigate some of the risks around the transmission of COVID-19.

Although the conversation was put on hold when trading ceased, Otto Sydney General Manager Graham Ackling and Courmadias began collaborating with University of Sydney Clinical Associate Professor Eugen Molodysky three to four weeks into the shutdown. Associate Professor Molodysky, who specialises in preventive and primary health care medicine, helped the team work out how to make their restaurants a safe environment. The goal was to reopen in a way that was safe and sustainable. “I think the challenge is not around reopening; it’s around staying open,” says Courmadias. “What’s happening in Melbourne at the moment with suburbs closing down is exactly what we’re trying to avoid.”

There are a number of key components to the COVID-Safe House Plans being implemented at Fink venues, all of which are guided by an overarching principle: assume everyone has COVID-19 in an asymptomatic form.



Jeremy Courmadias.

“Restaurants need momentum, they need to be constantly moving; they’re an organic beast.” – Jeremy Courmadias

“It was about running the restaurant safely, but running it like a restaurant and not a hospital,” says Courmadias. “We didn’t want to go too far. We did a lot of research around whether PPE was necessary. We explored whether gloves were going to be necessary or face masks, because they really change the whole dynamic within a restaurant space.”

The plan has affected the all-important order of service, with staff now designated pre- or post-guest tasks. A waiter who runs food won’t collect used tableware, for example. “That’s about mitigating cross-contamination

by allocating particular tasks to particular people,” explains Courmadias.

To ensure accurate implementation of Fink’s COVID-Safe House Plan, COVID-Safe officers have been appointed; one for back of house and one for front of house on every shift. Staff received one-on-one training so they understand their responsibilities and can check off the tasks they need to deliver on.

It’s a complicated world, but for both Pilot and Fink, one thing is clear: from retaining staff to maintaining their skill sets and retraining them for work in the COVID era, communication is a must. ■

