

# Next

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WRITTEN BY CHRISTINA NIFONG | ROANOKE'S RESTAURANTS SHOW WHAT IT TAKES TO SURVIVE.

**T**hink back to early March. Whispers of an unheard of virus had begun circling the globe. Though it seemed far away, Roanoke's restaurants were listening. "I would say that I freaked out," FarmBurguesa co-owner Kat Pascal remembers. "Jimmy, not so much."

FarmBurguesa had recently opened a second location in Roanoke's Grandin Village. Couple Jimmy Delgado and Kat Pascal, with Pascal's brother Andres Pascal and wife Ashley Overbay, own the Grandin Village and Vinton burger spots.

Pascal recalls asking: "What are we going to do? Do we have to close down?"

"We were all hanging on to that hope Jimmy had." He was saying: "I think we're going to be okay, we just have to make some changes."

## Really, no one had *any* idea.

In the months that followed, millions would lose their jobs — nationwide, 5.5 million restaurant positions vanished by April's end. Experts estimate that in the next year 20% of independently owned restaurants could close for good.

The unthinkable descended across the globe: famed French bakeries rushed to sell the contents of their storerooms before locking their doors, craft distilleries pivoted to produce hard-to-find hand sanitizer, celebrity chefs put laid-off restaurant servers to work growing food in urban gardens.

Closer to home, Virginia Employment Commission data show that restaurant workers were the hardest hit group of employees in the Roanoke Valley, with 5,405 food industry workers filing for unemployment in the first six weeks of the pandemic. By July, Virginia's leisure and hospitality sector had shed 91,300 jobs or 22.3% of its workforce, compared with July 2019.

And yet, most of the region's restaurants have survived. Amid shifting government regulations and fluttering customer demand, Roanoke-area eateries did whatever it took to keep the lights on:

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# rise

## There was...

Downtown Roanoke's **Bread Craft** creating make-your-own cinnamon bun kits for pickup or delivery.

**The Village Grill** closed its doors for six weeks but staff volunteered to cook donated food for area kids, through a partnership with the Humble Hustle Company.

When **Pop's Ice Cream and Soda Bar** in Grandin Village reopened July 1, they'd constructed a counter at their front door for sliding milkshakes and grilled cheese sandwiches to customers.

And when protests of police killings focused the country's attention on racism, downtown Roanoke's **Fortunato** joined with Wasena's **Roasters Next Door** in a bake sale to raise money for the Black Lives Matter organization.



Some brave restaurants even launched openings: Salty's Lobster & Co. in downtown Roanoke, Hang 10 Hawaiian Ice and Cream in Wasena, Old Southwest Bar and Grill and Grandin Village's Jolly Grape. A few shuttered their doors for good, most notably, Wall Street Tavern in Roanoke's City Market Building.

Many restaurants — including FarmBurguesa and The Village Grill — had employees test positive for coronavirus. That meant closing, testing workers, and getting the health department's okay to open again.

Bumpy as it's been, 2020 has shown the resiliency and creativity of the region's restaurants — who created patios out of parking lots, adapted new technology on the fly and rethought every menu item for portability and profitability.

"It is exhausting," says The River and Rail's general manager Aaron Deal. "We've been working twice as hard to make half as much money and it's not over yet."



**“We’re just one giant experiment right now.”**

—Dustin Eshelman,  
Sweet Donkey Coffee

Here’s a look at how three local restaurants forged ahead in one of the most heart-wrenching years in memory.

### » Using What You’ve Got

For South Roanoke’s Sweet Donkey Coffee, good timing smoothed the transition to to-go orders after Governor Northam mandated restaurants shut their dining spaces by March 25.

Co-owner Dustin Eshelman had been in conversations for a year with an online ordering app, then known as Cloosiv and now rebranded as Odeko. She was interested but hadn’t locked in. As the coronavirus drumbeat sounded louder every day, Eshelman remembered her Cloosiv contact.

“I called him and I said: ‘I think now would be a good time,’” Eshelman remembers. “We were able to launch it the next day.”

Customers could order, pay and schedule a pickup without walking into the restaurant.

“I knew that if we shut our doors, we would change people’s behavior. People

would find a new place to go,” Eshelman says. “We never closed. Not one hour. We were able to roll quickly and stay busy.”

As restrictions eased, Sweet Donkey benefited from the porch, patio and yard that wrap around the restaurant. By mid-May, Sweet Donkey moved picnic tables six feet apart and invited customers to enjoy orders outside. Soon, the coffee shop’s beloved Friday night events returned. Patrons were asked to stay seated, leave small children at home and forego reusable cups. But Sweet Donkey’s Friday Food Truck N Tunes was one of the first community events back on the calendar.

“We’re not anywhere near the volume we once had, but it’s an opportunity for people to get out of the house and listen to some live music,” she says.

Eshelman is worried about what happens when the fire pit and heaters can no longer entice customers to linger. Aside from reserving meeting spaces, Sweet Donkey is not planning to seat customers inside this winter.

“We’re just one giant experiment right now,” she says.

### » Making Opportunities

As one of Roanoke’s finest dining establishments, The River and Rail’s shift from picturesque platings to compostable to-go boxes required rethinking every step of their operation.

In a matter of days, the South Roanoke bistro swapped herb-topped scallops for mac and cheese, embracing a family meal program that was better suited for take-out. They served barbecue and burger kits and sold uncooked cuts of meat — locally-raised steaks, house-made sausages, smoked pork chops.

The restaurant looked for any opportunity to connect local food providers with customers. For a time, The River and Rail became a pickup location for Thornfield Farm vegetables. They sold dried goods like grits and even hand-cut ice cubes. The restaurant drafted its first kids menu, complete with chicken tenders and a Virginia-grown apple.

“All of a sudden we’ve got four or five things,” Deal explains. “Each one was adding a little bit to the bucket in terms of keeping us going.”

In July, Deal borrowed chairs and tables from Blue Ridge Catering and created a sidewalk patio where patrons could enjoy their pickup orders — complete with a bottle of wine or to-go cocktail.

By September, management felt ready to open the dining room — though with restrictions.

“It’s just the reality,” Deal says. “You’re going to have to pour your own wine and water. I think most folks understand at this point.”

If there was a silver lining, it’s that The River and Rail already had plans to open Crystal Spring Grocery Co. next door.

Many of the provisions-type offerings and the pre-packaged meals River and Rail cooked up during COVID worked as test runs for the grocery.

Open this fall, the store will offer grab-and-go sandwiches and salads, a made-to-order lunch counter and packaged ingredients — such as cocktail bitters and fine chocolate.

“I’ve dug deep to say: Okay, this is going to be a challenging time,” Deal says. “I want to be here to support our staff and the neighborhood. We’re just going to do our best. And we’ll continue doing it as long as possible.”

## » Connecting with Community

FarmBurguesa’s first move was letting customers know their plan. They announced they would keep all staff on the payroll, double down on sanitizing, offer their menu to-go and put servers to work providing free delivery.

“Orders were coming in like crazy,” Pascal says. “I was like, ohmygosh, I think we’re going to make this work!”

Like Bread Craft and The River and Rail, FarmBurguesa stepped in to help customers however they could, selling meat from local farms (at one point 12 chest freezers filled their dining area), offering burger kits to make cooking from home fun. They had already begun a FarmBurguesa Friends Facebook group; now they connected regularly with their community.

Once outdoor dining was allowed, FarmBurguesa joined forces with other Grandin Village businesses to create a patio in the parking lot. Each restaurant offered menus with QR codes. One table could buy Grace’s pizza for the kids and Middle Eastern food and wine from Taaza, all by ordering from their phones.

“Lowe’s donated the buckets. We got little lights. Grace’s husband poured concrete,” Pascal recalls. Tables and chairs came from FarmBurguesa’s dining room, arranged under big white canopies.

In July, when a FarmBurguesa employee tested positive for COVID, it was the restaurant’s honest communication that built trust with customers.

“We had way more encouraging messages and support than anything negative,” Pascal says.

Despite the pandemic, FarmBurguesa is moving ahead with plans to expand their Vinton location.

“We’re just going to continue giving to the community,” Pascal says. “It’s going to come back full circle.”

No one knows how the next months will unfurl, but if the last eight months show anything, it’s that Roanoke’s restaurants will keep setting their tables and serving their diners. ☆



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