

Port in the Storm: Weathering the COVID-19 Crisis as a Restaurant Worker

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I first came to Oxford, Mississippi, in 2017.

As Hurricane Irma bore down on my hometown in Florida, I threw a duffle bag into my trunk and a birthday cake onto the front seat. It was 9 p.m. and the rains had already started, but I manically decided I couldn't wait another minute. I had been planning for weeks to go to the Southern Foodways Alliance graduate conference in Mississippi, and I wasn't going to let a hurricane derail those plans. Life had to go on.

I finally made it to Oxford after relaying from St. Petersburg to Tallahassee to Pensacola and on up, a trip that, on a good day, takes me around thirteen hours. This time, it took me three days. I'd kept moving since leaving St. Pete, but when I walked into a two-hour wait at Saint Leo, a bustling Italian restaurant on the Oxford Square, I stalled for what felt like the first time and finally felt the panic settling in.

The hostess must have seen something on my face, because twenty minutes later I was sitting at the white marble-top bar, scanning the dinner menu. I ordered a Madame Negroni—a gin, Campari, and sweet vermouth concoction topped with sparkling rosé—from the bartender. His pleasant smile dropped a little when he looked at my Florida ID.

"Happy birthday!" he said cheerily, but I found it hard to return his smile. Looking over at the TV, I saw that the football game had been replaced by breaking news, and I watched as Irma's rain and wind pummeled Miami.

I didn't notice I was crying until the bartender—Joe Stinchcomb, a celebrated local mixologist, I would later learn—quietly changed the channel. He turned around with that bright smile and asked if I wanted to start with an appetizer. I ordered the burrata antipasto and another cocktail. I told him to keep them coming.

Joe and I would later work together. First, as I served tables at Saint Leo the following July, when I moved to Oxford nearly a year later. Then, as a bartender when we switched off making mimosas and Bloody Marys during brunch shifts. Finally, he showed me where to put the money from the

drawers at the end of the night as I trained to manage the Saint Leo Lounge, a bar that the owners recently opened across the street.

In March, Emily Blount and Joie Blount announced that they would temporarily close Saint Leo and the Saint Leo Lounge due to health and safety concerns following the COVID-19 outbreak. I sat with the leadership team through two meetings and again in another meeting where the full staff received the news that we were being laid off. I tried to answer questions from security and servers and saute cooks when they asked me what to do. I boxed up food to be donated. I held people and let myself be held.

The mantra was that we would reopen. It was not a question of if, but when. I could barely hear it.

A few days earlier, I received notification that the University of Mississippi campus, where I'm a graduate student in the Southern Studies program, was closing. I would finish my master's thesis and work on projects as an SFA Nathalie Dupree Graduate Fellow from home. I made a few trips to the store to stock up in preparation, gathering essentials but generally trying not to worry. I went through this kind of thing all the time at home, I told myself; it was like getting ready for a hurricane. *If worse comes to worst I'll just start pickling stuff*, I thought. *Maybe make some kimchi or sauerkraut or something that lasts a while. I'll be alright.*

As I continued to receive emails about closures and the import of social distancing, I clung to the idea that the restaurant would stay open. That not only would I continue to receive a paycheck, but that I would have a place to go as the rest of my life spun out of control. I craved the consistency and normalcy of opening and closing the Lounge, even as I found myself sanitizing door handles and reminding staff to wash their hands every thirty minutes. My anxiety ever mounting, I was pulled between two realities: wanting to stay home so that I wouldn't get myself or others sick but also needing to work—to store up money and to be around people I'd come to love, to lean on them and be leaned on, as we got through this together.

When Emily and Joie announced we would be closing, the floor fell out from under me.

In a place where my experience now feels bookended by crises, I find myself—like many folks—on unsteady ground. The grocery stores in Oxford look like they did in St. Pete as Irma spun closer and closer; the shelves are clear of pasta, potatoes, and canned vegetables. Rather than worrying about whether I'd have a home to come back to, I now worry about having a job on the other side of a global pandemic.

At Saint Leo, I've weathered storms of smaller magnitudes with my coworkers. Football seasons when, on weekends, the small town of Oxford swells with tens of thousands of people and each shift is a frenzied rush from start to finish. A boil-water notice when heavy rain one weekend caused several water main breaks across town, and we had to use bottled

water throughout service. A handful of tornados and power outages that, once past, brought hordes of people in all at once.

In those times, we leaned on each other—to walk food to a table for the server who was too busy, to hop in the dishpit for the dishwasher who was sick, to grab something from the walk-in for the bartender who had fifteen tickets. That kind of mentality is what will get us through this storm now. Leaning on each other and being leaned on is something that restaurant workers are good at because it's something we do during every shift. It's something we all have to do now. Reach out for help and help others in return.

And when the storm blows over and we're faced with rebuilding, it's something we all will have to continue to do. Because it's not a question of if, but when. 🍷