

So Far, Not Much Has Changed

APRIL 4, 2020: KYLE OF LOCHALSH, SCOTLAND

It feels absurd to say this at a time when so many people have had their lives derailed, but my existence has hardly changed. Living on the fringe of a small community in the Scottish Highlands, I spend my time now in much the same way as I usually do, or at least that's how it feels most days. The winter season around here is always quiet, with very little happening and few people around, so this feels like an extension of it. I'm doing in the spring what I did all winter: testing recipes, planning menus, working on personal projects, and waiting for the work to pick up. I guess the only difference now is not knowing when it will end.

It is almost Easter and usually it would be very busy right now. Instead it feels like the fog of the "off season" is still over us. Just a twenty-minute drive to the Isle of Skye bridge, we are a tourism hot spot that, whether we like it or not, is an integral part of the local economy, so the lack of visitors is being acutely felt by those whose winter savings are starting to dwindle. My husband and I started our own catering business last year and work part-time at a local cafe. Our first event of the season should have been one week into the lockdown and the cafe has been closed since mid-March, so we are all missing out on the usually substantial Easter trade.

A twenty-minute drive away is Kyle of Lochalsh, with its small Co-op supermarket, butcher, and fishmonger, and a short

drive farther a Spar convenience store. I don't think much of the local Coop at the best of times. It feels more like a glorified corner store, with an entire aisle dedicated to biscuits, crisps, chocolate, and other ultra-processed foods, while only a half an aisle is dedicated to fresh fruit and vegetables. This is also the only place to buy fresh produce for, well, farther than would be reasonable to drive for a cabbage. I visited the Co-op on March 18 and 26 and on April 3, and while I wouldn't say that there has been a lot of clearing of shelves, there has been a marked decline in what has been available from one visit to the next, the most recent having the poorest selection by my eye. What was especially different about yesterday's visit were the blue gloves for use by the front door and the intense anxiety we experienced as the shop got busier—a two-meter distance was impossible as the number of customers was unregulated by staff. However, in all of this, the way we eat hasn't changed much yet—we cook almost every meal from scratch and put a lot of emphasis on fresh vegetables.

I am not only geographically isolated but also feel removed in the sense that I don't know anyone who is a key worker or who has tested positive for the virus. Most of the time I swing between thinking it might just pass us by and feeling the knot in my gut in anticipation that it will be here soon and there's very little I can do about it. I strongly get the sense that while I feel my existence has hardly been altered by COVID-19, it is only a matter of time. ©