

Dispatch from an Essential Worker

MARCH 24, 2020: BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Since I decided to go back to school to study food, I've also had to work. While the books I devour sustain me spiritually, they don't contribute much in the way of calories, and I need to feed myself somehow. I was grateful to get a job at a local specialty food store as a cheesemonger. Coming from a dairy farming background, the job was an opportunity to learn about and support small farms like my family's while sampling some tasty treats along the way.

I quickly found myself navigating the contradictions of being a food service worker in a super-elite context. The shop is located in the wealthiest neighborhood in the city. Patrons include Ivy League professors, billionaire businessmen, and the owner of the city's ice hockey franchise. While I get to perform the noble duty of selling artisan cheeses hand-crafted by the humble goatherd character in my farm-hero fantasy, I also sometimes sell \$50 worth of cheddar to a man who feeds it to his dog. I sell \$150 of lomo ibérico to the same customer every week. I guide customers looking to splurge on everything from a nice bean-to-bar chocolate for \$12 to a \$500 bottle of authentic balsamic vinegar from Modena.

Shopping at the store, I have learned, is itself a symbol of status. It's like a swanky country club turned grocery store. It's a wonderland for the type of people who self-identify as gourmands, loudly, publicly, and often. Their wealth is flagrantly displayed for others to observe. And the workers who serve them? We observe.

When I learned that the shop qualified as "essential," as defined by the government in the context of COVID-19, I laughed. We're essential in the same way private jets are essential to people who have never had to fly commercial and never will. Still, I was relieved to have a job. The early days of the outbreak were filled with uncertainty and anxiety. The store manager was very transparent about the imminent labor cuts. I looked into whether unemployment checks would cover my rent. I researched teaching English online

to kids still under quarantine in China. I considered what it would look like to spend my entire savings, which has taken years to build up, on surviving the next few months.

Instead, I get to go to work. And I get to observe. How are some of the wealthiest people in the country handling this global crisis?

In the beginning, there's good old-fashioned denial. They come into the shop, business as usual, peruse and touch and crowd into every corner despite the signs to Keep Your Distance. I overhear one man musing that he didn't think *It* would ever make it to this part of town (*It* already had). I watch a woman in a matching tracksuit sneeze all over our display of citrus, inciting in me not mild irritation but momentary rage-induced blindness. A customer spits on the sidewalk inches from where my coworker is standing. They leave sampling spoons and cups on the cheese counters and wine shelves. I watch in horror as the bodily fluids of strangers cover the interior of the store.

I no longer feel safe at work. My coworkers compulsively sanitize every hard surface and every inch of exposed skin while our carefree customers shop for the "essentials."

After three more days of attempting to police a public that has been exempt from the rules all their lives, we move operations to pickup and delivery only. We do it long before any state or national mandate. We do it to protect ourselves from those who believe they are immune.

Panic sets in, followed by rage, as if we have chosen out of malice or spite to disrupt the comfort and control of their rhythms and routines. Hordes of people gather outside. Some demand to come in. Some demand their orders are filled immediately, despite the backlog. One after another, they press their noses against windows and breathe on the glass and watch us, like circus performers, scrambling and struggling to appease them.

I take phone calls and fill orders and take phone calls while filling orders. The phone rings nonstop for hours. We don't have enough phones in the building to answer every call. We don't have the infrastructure to meet this kind of demand.

I listen for five minutes as a customer complains about how disappointed she is that we closed and she only lives a block away and why can't we make an exception for her? I apologize and comfort her as incoming calls go unanswered.

Woven into this fundamental inability to cope with inconvenience, I also notice a profuse outpouring of misplaced gratitude. While some customers insult and berate us, others assume a performative thankfulness for providing them with both necessary sustenance and the joy of familiar novelty treats. I begin to wonder if they really believe we are putting ourselves and our families at risk, out of the goodness of our hearts, to deliver carrot cake to their doorsteps. They seem unaware that we don't have a choice in the matter.

We're the ones the system failed, the ones without protection, left out of government provisions, expected to show up anyway. We're not here because we believe in feeding the wealthy at our own expense. We're here because we need to feed ourselves, we need to live, even though it could kill us.

I look around me at the chaos and find clarity. Someone cracks a joke and we all laugh. Someone plays Céline Dion and we start to sing. My coworkers handle the outrage with grace, shrugging off indifference and disdain and working through fear. They remind me to drink water and take breaks, and that my safety comes first, always. I want to hug everyone in the store in exasperation and solidarity, but Social Distancing, and also there's no time. 