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First of all, what is the state of the restaurant business right now?

To be honest, hanging by a thread, after a year of stay at home orders, take out and Alfresco only and limited seating indoors we are struggling to survive.

I personally think losing inside dining in December was our biggest blow of this incredibly difficult year, December/ Christmas season is the biggest single month for most restaurants and to lose 90% of all that business just crippled most restaurants in Bermuda. I know a lot of restaurant owners that were counting on December to limit the losses of the previous 11 months and unfortunately that didn't happen.

Does it seem like restaurants are going to shut, and if so what is going to be the community impact of that?

In short yes, whilst I'm not privy to any actual imminent closures, I do know talking to several business owners over the last few months, the single biggest feedback is "I don't know how much longer the business can sustain this"

For the employees this is devastating, where else where they go? Most people in the hospitality business do this because they love it - they're people persons!

Restaurant closures will have far reaching implications across our economy and the community Unemployment, adding more strain to an already overburdened government, empty buildings, reducing payment of taxes, insurance premiums, default in bank loans, it will affect our food & beverage suppliers, plumbers, Air conditioner technicians and much more...not to mention the multitude of dining choices we have now, which results in a healthy competition and helps competitive pricing.

How many jobs, Bermudian and non-Bermudian jobs are on the line right now

We currently have approximately 2,600 Bermudians and 1,400 work permit holders employed in our restaurants across Bermuda, for a year now nearly 95% of those have either been on lay off at some point or underemployed, the staff that are working are on reduced hours resulting in reduced pay.

Probably the worst affected are bartenders which are all Bermudian, those that have been working haven't seen customers at their bars in nearly 6 months.

Honestly, restaurants are nothing without our dedicated staff and the hardships they are facing is heartbreaking, young families struggling to put food on their tables. We have many stories between us of employees coming to owners for loans or racking up massive health insurance debts, many of us have kept paying the employees side of health insurance premiums whilst they have not been working or underemployed.

Probably the most difficult part of my job over the last year as been when I've had to sit with employees to tell them they are being made redundant, having their hours or pay reduced, or sitting with them as they tell me their hardships. I believe it's why you haven't seen more restaurants closures as yet, owners feel compelled to keep going, if not just for their businesses but for their employees. Restaurants are like families, it's hard to see each other struggle

I don't know what figures you might have, but can you quantify how much businesses the restaurants have lost in the past year?

I don't have firm figures, and results vary greatly depending on location and style.

The numbers that we do have are frightening though. Sales losses for the last year are ranging from 50% to 80%. Obviously, a decrease in sales doesn't tell the whole story, but when your fixed costs have stayed the same as before the decrease in revenue, simple economics dictate that a restaurant or any business in the same situation will be unable to survive.

What kind of support do restaurants need to keep going? Have there been conversations with Government, and are you optimistic that some sort of solution to save restaurants can be found?

For the first part of the pandemic, restaurant owners tried to negotiate their own support with limited success, talking to their landlords, insurance companies, suppliers etc

With the prolonged situation, loss of Christmas sales and the latest Covid outbreak, the restaurants with the help of the Chamber of Commerce have now come together to negotiate as one entity.

We are reaching out to all our partners including government to discuss creative ways to support our industry

With the support of our partners at the banks, insurance companies, landlords, suppliers of utilities, food & beverage suppliers, government and most importantly the public, yes, we can survive!