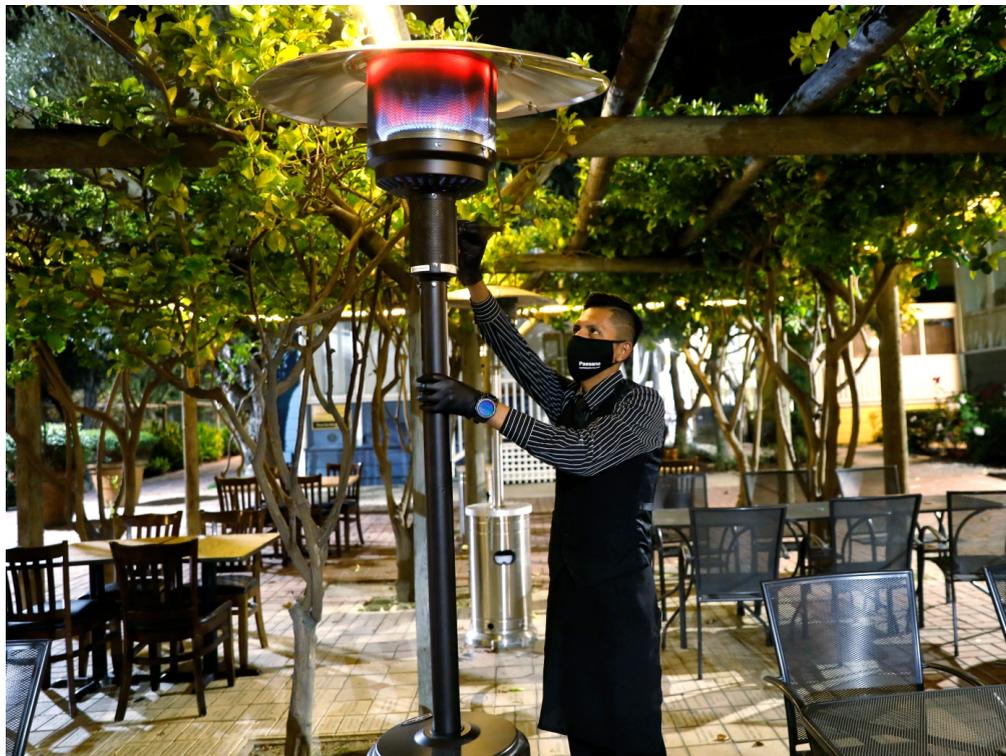


THINGS TO DO > RESTAURANTS, FOOD AND DRINK

Brrrrrrrrr: Bay Area restaurants, customers scramble to cope with cold-weather dining

Propane heaters top the menu of must-haves this time of year



SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA – NOVEMBER 9: Ruben Mejia turns off a heating lamp in the outside dining area at Paesano Ristorante Italiano in San Jose, Calif., on Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. (Nhat V. Meyer/Bay Area News Group)

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Chef-owner Pino Spatola of Paesano Ristorante in San Jose's Little Italy has positioned the propane lamps on the courtyard and turned on the heat in the dining room — even though all the doors and windows are wide open for ventilation.

He and his staff are now welcoming customers with a question that they never thought they'd be asking during the chilly months of the year:

Inside or outside?

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With temperatures plummeting in recent days, restaurant owners are scrambling to winterize their patios and put social distancing measures into effect indoors in hopes of weathering the coronavirus-caused loss of business.

So far, many say, Californians may be a hardier breed than the stereotype would indicate. As long as the propane heaters keep humming, that is.

"They are quite a hot commodity," said Gina Seghi, general manager of Oakland's Belcampo, whose Southern California colleagues shipped eight heaters to this Jack London Square location to supplement the eight gas-fed stationary ones. "We were lucky to get in under the wire."

At the Taplands brewpub in Santa Clara, owner Matt Hartenstein has been scrambling to find a solution to his patio heating problem.

"By sheer coincidence, at the end of last winter we decided to get rid of the heaters we had. They were getting kind of ratty. We figured, we'll get new ones this winter. Now we're kind of stuck," he said. "Who knew?"



He searched unsuccessfully here and in Colorado, Utah and Nevada for propane heaters, the latest in a long line of pandemic-related product shortages to occur since March, when the coronavirus created new consumer priorities.

A customer donated one propane heater, and Hartenstein now has pivoted and is having new wiring installed for electric heaters.

Chef Paul and Laura Magu of Lafayette's Rêve Bistro also had to come up with solutions besides French onion soup to keep their customers toasty when they discovered large propane heaters sold out at most stores.

"We've purchased 15 personal heaters meant for camping. They also supplement the large heaters for that one person who is 'always cold,'" Laura said.

The Magus now have lap blankets available upon request — they're washed after each use — and are encouraging diners to bring their own.

And in Campbell, Sushi Confidential owner Randy Musterer is ready not just for the cold but the rain too, with new additions to his back patio.

"Because we know COVID cases are going to increase through the wintertime I did not want to rely on indoor dining," Musterer said. "So while the weather was nice, I purchased three pergolas that are made out of metal and can be weatherproof with built-in rain gutters."

All he has to do is roll a few heaters into that space, he said, to keep up to 30 customers both warm and dry.

But will the added measures keep customers coming?

When deciding whether to dine alfresco, customer Tariq Bright said he and friend Jason Piamonte "make the judgment on the fly," surveying both the inside and outside options.

On this chilly evening they did just that and decided that Campbell's spacious Pacific Catch was doing a superior job of social distancing just a handful of tables indoors.

Good thing, Piamonte said. "It's too cold to eat outside."

At Paesano, Spatola offers tables inside, under a tent awning and in the heated courtyard under the lighted lemon-tree arbor, where people clamored to sit during the summer.

"Whatever it takes. The important thing is to stay healthy and keep the business alive," he said.



Longtime customer Antonio Morales, who was dining with his wife, Patricia, declared: “We have to support them.” Knowing they’d be sitting in a chilly room, the San Jose couple dressed to the nines but warmly — he in an overcoat with a silk handkerchief tucked in the breast pocket and she in a cheetah-print sweater with matching handbag — and even lingered long after finishing their entrees of halibut and pasta.

Belcampo’s Seghi feels they have done everything they can to provide a “comfy, cozy, quality experience” but is still pleased to see that diners are doing their part and “coming bundled up” to eat at the Oakland waterfront.

Ditto for Laura Magu at Rêve. “I must say, in the four years we’ve had the patio, this is the first year people are coming actually dressed for cold weather patio dining. We’ve seen more jackets than ever before, and it’s great.”

Still, she and her chef husband believe it’s crucial to make plans for an expanded takeout menu for December and January.

“The temperature will dip into the 40s, and no heater will help then. We’re bracing for a 50 percent loss in reservations at least.”

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