

# Through the Eyes of the Food Service Operator:

*A survey of Alameda County food businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic*

## Executive Summary

The food service industry was among the hardest hit by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Recent numbers show that 61% of restaurants in the U.S. have closed permanently due to challenges presented by shelter in place orders and social distancing requirements.<sup>1</sup> The establishments that have remained in business have been forced to shift their operations to provide take-out and delivery and have been in survival mode.

Over the course of 2 months, between September 1, 2020 and October 29, 2020, Clean Water Fund (CWF) contacted 142 restaurants that had previously adopted reusable options through the ReThink Disposable source reduction process to better understand if and how their commitment to and use of reusables had been impacted by the pandemic. Of the 142 businesses contacted, CWF recorded 49 responses.

The Alameda County Department of Environmental Health provided guidance to food service operators in response to COVID-19, which included standard operating procedures to lower the risk of exposure to both customers and employees (i.e., social distancing, face covering, sanitizing, etc).<sup>2,3</sup> During the survey period, outdoor and low-capacity indoor dining had become more widely available in Alameda County. According to county guidelines during the survey time frame, reusable foodware for dine-in and bring-your-own (BYO) bags, mugs, and utensils were allowed if they were handled by the customers. However, due to concerns from the general public and food service providers about surface transmission of the novel coronavirus from touching reusable foodware and skeleton crews with no capacity to wash dishes, many food operators did not provide reusable foodware. Instead, they chose single-use disposable foodware for onsite guests. Fear of transmission, staffing cuts, and the uptick of take-out have all resulted in an increase of single-use disposable plastic product usage of more than 250%-300% in the United States since the start of the pandemic, as estimated by The International Solid Waste Association.<sup>4</sup> The results of this survey have, however, uncovered a handful of food service providers who have stayed on a sustainable course.

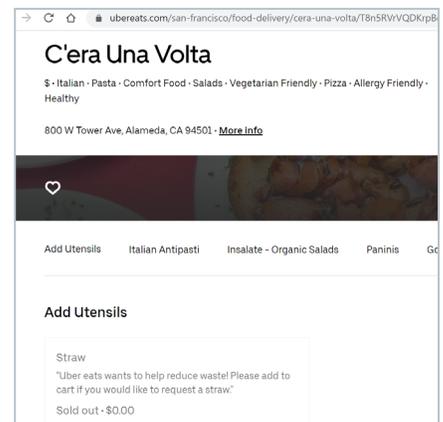
Seventy-six percent (76%) of respondents have continued to implement inventive source reduction practices in the midst of the pandemic. More than a third of the businesses who responded (36%) use some form of customer opt-in for accessory disposables. There



Figure 1. Graph showing closures for U.S. business since March 1. Source: Yelp.



Reusable bottles for to-go beverages — Shakewell, Oakland, CA



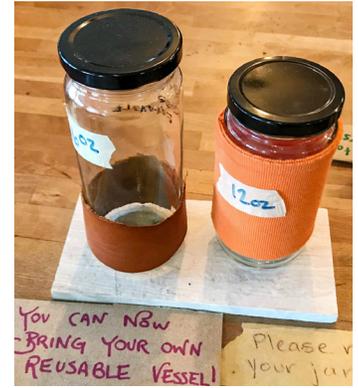
When ordering C'era Una Volta on Uber Eats, customers can opt-in for utensils.

were also a few that served cocktails in reusable drinkware, offered contactless pour coffee into BYO containers, and served meals in bulk to minimize packaging. A solid contingent indicated an interest in third-party reusable take-out services (35%, 17 respondents) and technical assistance (61%, 22 respondents) for switching to reusable foodware.

Since the pandemic began, 79% of respondents have reverted to single-use disposable food packaging for onsite dining. Out of all material types, 53% percent used petroleum-based plastic and 31% used bio-plastic. Most (78%) supplemented plastics use with some paper products. However, 50% had a plan to reinstate reusables for dine-in guests and 29% had a desire to return to reusables but needed help to develop a plan.

Surveyed food operators named environmental benefits and waste reduction as the top two benefits for using reusable foodware, highlighting the fact that *core values around sustainability remain strong*.

However, there is a *clear need to educate both food operators and the public that reusables are just as safe as disposables* — a finding supported by the FDA,<sup>5</sup> the federal agency that regulates food safety, and 125 medical experts.<sup>6</sup> It's also clear that operators need continuing education and outreach to understand that significant cost savings can be achieved when they prioritize reusables.



*MudLab in Oakland, offers contactless pours and returnable cups for coffee, tea, and boba*

*“We have created a system where we pour coffee directly into [customer] mugs with a pitcher and with no contact with the travel mug at all.”*

— The Beanery, City of Alameda

*“We use returnable glass containers, if you bring them back you get a bonification, if you bring your own cup you get a 10% discount.”*

— Matcha Mama, Tulum (Oceanic Global The Oceanic Standard (TOS) venue)

*“We would like to look into no-waste take-out if available in our area since dine in will not be available in the foreseeable future. Like a third-party container sanitizing company?”*

— Monkey King, City of Alameda

## Notes

- 1 Sundaram, Anjali. “Yelp data shows 60% of business closures due to the coronavirus pandemic are now permanent.” CNBC, September 16, 2020, [www.cnbc.com/2020/09/16/yelp-data-shows-60percent-of-business-closures-due-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-are-now-permanent.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/16/yelp-data-shows-60percent-of-business-closures-due-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-are-now-permanent.html). Accessed October 24, 2020.
- 2 <https://deh.acgov.org/covid-19.page>
- 3 <https://deh.acgov.org/deh-assets/docs/AlcoRestaurantOperatingProcedures.pdf>
- 4 “Covid-19 has led to a pandemic of plastic pollution.” The Economist, June 22, 2020, [www.economist.com/international/2020/06/22/covid-19-has-led-to-a-pandemic-of-plastic-pollution](http://www.economist.com/international/2020/06/22/covid-19-has-led-to-a-pandemic-of-plastic-pollution). Accessed October 24, 2020.
- 5 <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/best-practices-retail-food-stores-restaurants-and-food-pick-up-delivery-services-during-covid-19>
- 6 [https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-international-stateless/2020/06/9592036c-health-expert-statement\\_125.pdf](https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-international-stateless/2020/06/9592036c-health-expert-statement_125.pdf)

