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When the Going Gets Tough 迎難而上

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The present time of crisis, from a global health emergency to widespread social protests, has forced restaurateurs and bar owners to innovate as never before. We find out how. 面對全球衛生危機和社會活動頻繁等重重困難下，餐廳和酒吧老闆發揮史無前例的創意，意圖突破困局。 By Melissa Twigg

When the going gets tough...

迎難而上

Owning a restaurant has always been a risky business, but COVID-19 has made the rollercoaster ride much more adrenaline-charged. Across Europe, the US and Asia, restaurants – once the heartbeat of dynamic cities – have been forced to innovate by morphing into take-out joints, or by creating content for Instagram and food parcels for the hungry.

Even the most successful, critically acclaimed restaurants – the ones with queues snaking around the block and month-long waiting lists – run on tight margins. And over the last few tumultuous months, it's the managers and chefs who think outside the box that have generated headlines and stayed afloat.

"We realised early on that physical distancing was here to stay for the foreseeable future, so we learned how to make our restaurants work under these conditions," says Syed Asim Hussain, the co-founder of Hong Kong's hugely successful Black Sheep consortium. "We looked into permanent floorplan changes and partition screens between tables. We've also been monitoring the news coming out regarding air conditioning spreading the virus, and adapted our airflow systems.

"In terms of the guest experience, we've realised that when masks cover our faces, guests can no longer see you smile, so body language is key. And we've also discovered that we all do a lot more lip reading than we realise, so we're reminding the team to speak up."

Along with his colleagues, Hussain has used this knowledge to create a now-widely-shared COVID-19 handbook that's being used by restaurateurs around the world. As regional industry leaders, they felt a responsibility to help independent joints without the same resources, arguing that everybody benefits if cities retain a reputation as culinary hubs.

飲食生意從來不容易做，而新冠病毒疫情更是雪上加霜。不管是在歐美還是在亞洲，曾經是城市活力指標的餐廳無奈變身外賣店，或是改到Instagram上宏揚烹調藝術或為捱飢抵餓的人提供食物包。

即使是曾經店外等候人龍長不見尾或需提早幾個月訂座的知名餐廳，也只能賺取微薄利潤。不過，在過去動盪的數月裡，敢打破陳規的餐廳經理和大廚卻能突圍而出，逆風飛翔。

Syed Asim Hussain是香港大為成功的餐飲集團Black Sheep的創辦人之一，他表示：「我們很早就意識到，在可見的將來，人與人之間得繼續保持社交距離，因此我們想到重新編排餐桌的分佈，以及在餐桌與餐桌之間加入屏風等解決方法，好讓餐廳能在這情況下盡量如常運作。此外，我們亦留意到關於空調會傳播病毒的新聞，並改善空氣流動的路線。」

「在服務方面，由於口罩會將笑容遮蓋，身體語言便成為待客關鍵。另外，我們也發現大家平時其實很多時候會看口形，於是提醒員工說話盡量大聲一點。」

Hussain跟同事一起將這些知識歸納成一本新冠病毒手冊，並受到全球各地餐廳廣泛採用。作為區內餐飲業翹楚，他們覺得有責任協助資源不足的獨立餐廳，因為他們深信，只要一個城市能保持美食之都的美譽，所有餐廳都能受惠。



Italian chef Massimo Bottura recently launched the series "Kitchen Quarantine" on Instagram
意國名廚Massimo Bottura最近在Instagram推出「隔離廚房」系列



Behind-the-scenes with Italian Chef Massimo Bottura of three-Michelin star Osteria Francescana
米芝蓮三星餐廳 Osteria Francescana 的意籍主廚 Massimo Bottura 在廚房裡忙碌的身影

“Hong Kong has established itself as a major dining city and right now we’re at risk of losing that,” explains Hussein. We primarily thought that by sharing what’s working for us we might help a few other operators in our city, but we’ve been receiving messages from all over the world. The response has really surprised and touched us.”

Elsewhere in the city, eateries which had previously eschewed online deliveries joined popular delivery platforms to boost business. Restaurant group JIA, which operates 12 establishments around the city, set up an online delivery site – complete with a WhatsApp customer service chat – for the first time in its history as part of its “JIA Everywhere” initiative. Besides à la carte menu items, the group offered new office- and family-friendly catering options, do-it-yourself meal kits, and a custom-ordering function that allowed diners to select dishes across multiple restaurants – including the group’s exclusive ten-seater, MONO.

In an unprecedented move, JIA also introduced a “Chefs at Home” service, opening up its roster of star chefs, like MONO’s Ricardo Chaneton, Andō’s Agustin Balbi, and Duddell’s Li Man-Lung, for private events at diners’ homes.

They’re not the only ones that have been adapting with aplomb. As well as putting safety measures in place, restaurants across the globe have used the time off to forge new links between the hospitality industry and technology – a relationship that hasn’t been particularly well-developed until now.

Massimo Bottura is a good example. At the height of lockdown, back when Italy was battling thousands of new cases a day, the chef of three-

Michelin-star Osteria Francescana fame launched an Instagram series called “Kitchen Quarantine”. In it, he guides viewers through step-by-step recipes, including Thai curry, warm bollito salad, tortellini and even mac and cheese. Hundreds of thousands of people watched them, and online groups sprung up for fans to compare their triumphs and failures.

If sipping a glass of wine while surveying the dappled green-and-purple vineyards of Napa Valley is what you were craving, then Instagram had a solution for that too. Five days a week, Californian Caroline Conner taught wannabe wine experts how to fall in love with the humble grape. “My tastings are snobbery-free,” she says. “I’m teaching people how to taste wine from the ground up – don’t be intimidated. I prefer newbies.” Newbies flocked in, glass of wine in hand, and she became a lockdown-evening staple.

Making it even easier to get tipsy when unable to drink or dine out was the Tell Camellia bar in Hong Kong. For the last five months, it’s been delivering its most famous cocktails to apartments around the city – bottled, chilled and ready-to-drink. These include the Darjeeling negroni, the matcha martini, the matcha vodka, and the mango and strawberry T- tonic, the bar’s signature take on the classic gin and tonic.

“By delivering cocktails we stayed connected with our guests and went all over Hong Kong if they couldn’t come to us – we got to them. The team and I have gone everywhere from Discovery Bay to Yuen Long,” says founder Sandeep Hathiraman. “We continue to sell and deliver them – and now Hong Kong is experiencing another wave, requests by groups of friends having digital gatherings is up again.”

他解釋：「香港已奠定了美食之都的地位，但目前卻有可能失去這名銜。我們最初分享這些成功經驗時，只想著或許可以藉此幫助本地的其他餐廳，想不到會收到來自全球各地的訊息，反應真的是出乎意料，也讓我們大為感動。」

本港其他昔日對線上外賣速遞興趣缺缺的食肆也紛紛加入受歡迎的線上外賣平台，以促進業務。在香港有12家餐廳的餐飲集團JIA也史無前例地設立JIA Everywhere網站，並配合WhatsApp客戶服務，提供線上外賣服務。客人可藉此訂購單點美食，以至新增的辦公室或住家到會套餐、自煮餐點套裝等，甚至可從集團旗下任何一間餐廳，包括只設十個座位的頂級尊貴食府MONO，挑選菜式，自訂套餐內容。

JIA亦破天荒推出「大廚上門」服務，讓旗下的星級名廚，包括MONO的Ricardo Chaneton、Andō的Agustin Balbi和都多利會館的李文龍等，親自到客人府上為私人活動炮製美食。

沉著應戰的不只有Black Sheep和JIA。全球各地餐廳亦趁著這段「閒暇」時間建立餐飲款待業與科技之間的新連繫，改善這個過去一直積弱的環節。

Massimo Bottura是當中佼佼者。在意大利面對每天新增數千感染病例的疫情高峰期，這位執掌米芝蓮三星餐廳Osteria Francescana的名廚，開始在Instagram上推出名為「隔離廚房」的系列，分享泰式咖喱、意式熱沙律、意大利雲吞以至芝士通粉等菜式的食譜，一步步教讀者烹調這些美食。這些食譜吸引數以十萬計的讀者，更因此湧現粉絲互相分享成功和失敗經驗的網上群組。

如果你渴望的是在納帕谷滿園青色和紫色的葡萄園裡舉杯，Instagram也可以幫你止渴。加州人Caroline Conner推出每週五日的視像教學課程，讓想要成為葡萄酒專家的人愛上這種醇樸的佳釀。她說：「我的品酒課程從基本開始教授品酒方法，不會予人高不可攀的感覺，所以不用怕。我喜歡教新手。」這課程吸引了大量品酒初哥拿起酒杯，並成為封城期間備受追捧的晚間節目。

香港酒吧Tell Camellia則為不能外出喝酒或吃飯的客人，提供簡便的解決辦法。他們在過去五個月，將酒吧著名的雞尾酒，如大吉嶺negroni、抹茶馬天尼、抹茶伏特加，以及酒吧招牌的氈湯力——芒果士多啤梨湯力等，變成冰涼的瓶裝飲品，速遞到香港各區的住宅。



This page, from left: Tell Camellia’s Sandeep Hathiramani and Gagan Gurung; cocktails on delivery
本頁左至右：Tell Camellia的 Sandeep Hathiramani及 Gagan Gurung；速遞到府的美味雞尾酒

It's going to be a hard few years. Young hopefuls face an uphill battle

未來幾年一定非常艱難，有志從事這行業的年輕人將要迎難而上

- Sandeep Hathiramani

For some businesses, it wasn't a question of introducing technology, but rather incorporating more of it. Since opening in 2018, San Francisco burger restaurant Creator has employed robotics to automate its entire food preparation process. While Creator's founders originally developed the technology to ensure consistency and save on labour costs (allowing them to use more expensive ingredients), the pandemic has reframed it as the future of food safety.

When California was in lockdown in March, Creator's team of engineers designed a sealed takeout window complete with a positive pressure system and self-sanitizing conveyor belt that would allow its staff to transfer orders to customers without ever coming into contact with their food.

The meals, which are prepared entirely by robots directly inside the takeout containers, are hermetically heat-sealed, double-bagged, and tagged with a tamper evidence sticker for good measure.



Opposite page: Signature sharing set at JIA Group's French restaurant Louise; This page: Meal box from JIA Group's Thai restaurant Mak Mak
對頁：JIA集團旗下法國餐廳Louise供應的招牌套餐
本頁：JIA集團旗下泰國餐廳Mak Mak的外賣便當



While this all sounds futuristic, the engineers designed and built the transfer chamber within three days, using readily available materials from the hardware store. The transfer mechanism itself is powered manually by a hand-crank, which kept the design relatively simple and easy to replicate – the importance of which became clear when Creator shared the plans free of charge on its website.

In the hopes of helping other businesses introduce similar measures, the Creator team has also set up a page where other businesses can submit relevant questions and material-sourcing requests to their engineers.

All this has shown a thoughtful, uplifting side of an industry that's been seen as cutthroat and male-dominated for far too long. Yes, it's undeniable that restaurants around the world will take a hit – but as diners, we owe them the same generosity and willingness to adapt that they've shown fellow business owners and even bored adults stuck at home with nothing to cook. Whether it's ordering a take-out cocktail or having a socially distant dinner, every bit helps.

"It's going to be a hard few years. Young hopefuls face an uphill battle, with tough landlords and red-tape government licences, along with an uncertain climate," says Hathiramani. "Businesses will have to re-evaluate their target audience, particularly hotels or businesses who cater to tourists. But the real positive is that when Hong Kong went back to normal, everything was thriving, and restaurants and bars were packed."

And so they will be again. 🍷

酒吧創辦人Sandeep Hathiraman表示：「速遞雞尾酒可以跟客人保持聯繫，既然他們不能來酒吧，那就改由我們把產品送到他們手上吧。我和員工走遍香港各個角落，足跡遍及愉景灣以至元朗。我們會繼續售賣和速遞雞尾酒；香港正興起一股新浪潮，由網上聚會帶起的需求再次上升。」

對部分餐廳來說，問題不是採用科學技術，而是增加科技應用。三藩市漢堡包店Creator自2018年開業以來，整個食物製造流程均由機械人操作。餐廳創辦人最初採用這些科技時，原意是為了確保食物品質的穩定，以及節省人工，好將更多資源投放在真價實食材上面，但在疫情下，這反而成為食物安全的未來指標。

在3月加州封城期間，Creator工程人員設計了封閉式的外賣窗口，配備正壓系統和可自行消毒的輸送帶，讓員工可在無需碰觸食物的情況下將美食送到客人手上。

全由機械人製作的食物會放在保溫的密封式外賣盒裡，並用兩重紙袋包裝，袋口貼上一次性封口貼紙以確保中途沒有開封。

雖然聽起來有點科幻，但實際上，工程人員只花了三天時間，利用從一般五金店購買的材料，便完成外賣窗口的改造。輸送系統由人手操作的曲柄控制，設計因此相對簡單及容易複製——當Creator於公司網站免費分享設計圖時，相對簡單及容易複製的優點便分外明顯。

為了協助其他餐廳製造類似的設施，Creator更設立網頁，讓這些餐廳可向他們的工程師提出相關問題和查詢購買材料的途徑等。

餐飲業向來予人男性主導、競爭劇烈的印象，但這次卻展示了細心和勵志的一面。雖然全球餐廳無可否認會受到嚴重打擊，但他們仍然慷慨地向同業以至被困在家裡缺乏食物的人伸出援手，並積極應變，作為顧客的我們自然也應該投桃報李，透過訂購外賣雞尾酒或舉辦保持社交距離的晚宴等，略盡綿力。

Hathiraman寄語：「未來幾年一定非常艱難，面對無情的業主、繁瑣的政府規管和不安的氣候，有志從事這行業的年輕人將要迎難而上。業界需重新評估其目標顧客，特別是酒店及以遊客為主的行業，但樂觀的看，香港在之前的正常日子裡，各行業均蓬勃發展，餐廳酒吧亦座無虛設。」

因此，各行業定必會再次欣欣向榮。🍷