

ACADIANA'S RESTAURANTS AND BARS FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL AMID UNCERTAINTY

LUNA BAR AND GRILL CHEF AND OWNER DAVE EVANS was on top of the world on Jan. 30, 2020. He attended the Louisiana Travel Association's annual meeting at Cypress Bayou Casino Hotel in Charenton. During an awards ceremony, Evans was poised to receive a Louey Award as Restaurateur of the Year for his Lake Charles eatery success. This accolade was the culmination of three decades of work for the inventive chef.

Evans, the unofficial father of Lake Charles "cool" cuisine — a fusing of Cajun and Creole culinary traditions with inspiration from California, the Gulf Coast and astronomy — was feeling good about his kitchen and business prowess.

The timing of the association's recognition was perfect. Evans had just pulled the proverbial trigger on a new Luna Bar and Grill location in Lafayette's downtown area. A marketing plan

for the restaurant's opening was being prepared with Evans' award as a key piece of telling the Luna story.

At the same time, world health experts and leaders were slowly addressing an unseen pathogen whose symptoms were strange and unpredictable outcomes ranged from no symptoms to sudden death. In early March, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards held a meeting with cabinet officials and other leaders which eventually led to the creation of the COVID-19 Task Force.

On March 16, 2020, Governor Edwards signed a proclamation aimed at stymying the growing health threat COVID-19 was becoming. To date, in Louisiana, the contagious respiratory illness has killed thousands and sickened tens of thousands.

Evans along with other restaurant and bar owners around the state were caught off guard by COVID-19's impacts on their customer base, supply chain and financial bottom lines. Safety measures taken by Louisiana's government to protect the public while managing stress to hospital infrastructure intensified the negative outcomes experienced by the food and beverage industry.

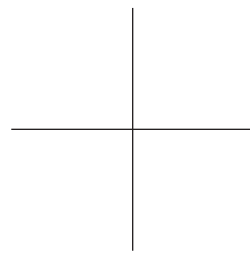
"I had a short-lived victory lap," Evans said. "[The tourism award] was an awesome feat for my family and restaurant staff. Shit. Then we had the rug ripped out from under us."

Medical officials on the state and national level have had a simple message about COVID-19. In order for people to protect themselves and others: washing hands, wearing a face covering and social distancing are imperative. Restaurant

BY
ERIC CORMIER

PHOTOS BY
ROMERO & ROMERO

G R I T



G L O R Y

Star Power

Prior to opening Luna Bar and Grill in Lake Charles, Chef Dave Evans had a satori. He conceived of the notion of selling sandwiches named after the planets. The Earth Burger, Venus, Neptune, Mercury, Saturn, Uranus, Mars and Jupiter are all fan favorites. Evans' muse is in music and above the clouds.





and bar owners have tried to pivot away from pre-COVID-19 operations and habits during the pandemic. Some are adjusting and existing, while others are closing, filing for bankruptcy or filing lawsuits.

Bloomberg reported in July that as a result of COVID-19 “As many as 231,000 of the nation’s roughly 660,000 eateries will likely shut down this year.” In August, Louisiana Network reported that the Louisiana Restaurant Association estimated one in four restaurants in Louisiana will close due to the economic impact of the pandemic.

Essentially, COVID-19 has forced the state’s food and beverage industry, which already operates on slim profit margins, to figure out how to provide service daily, pay bills, ensure safety for employees and customers and contend with government regulations that some believe are

beneficial while others interpret as draconian.

Gov. Edwards’ first proclamation in the spring limited gatherings to no more than 50 people, closed casinos, bars and movie theaters and forced restaurants to suspended dine-in options in favor of the use of drive-throughs and delivery.

Evans complied with all of the state’s orders but eventually closed Luna’s Lake Charles restaurant temporarily after a number of staff members tested positive for COVID-19 as a result of attending off-premise social gatherings. He also delayed the opening of Luna in Lafayette. The Lake Charles restaurant’s profit margin was split in half due to controlled seating regulations inside Luna’s, but Evans admits, “we are blessed with the business we do have now. When I look at the books, we have fantastic Fridays and Saturdays and customers are normally buying food from the time we open.”

Almost two hours south and located on the Vermillion River in Abbeville, SHUCK’S! Restaurant has remained open throughout the pandemic. During the ordeal, owners David Bertrand and Bert Istre’s customer base has grown and they solidified a decision to move forward with the construction of a new restaurant in Lake Charles near the city’s retail, hotel, and casino complex near Interstate 210.

Bertrand and Istre made two strategic operational decisions when the pandemic started.

“First, we would not limit the menu at all,” Bertrand said. “We would serve the full menu but just cut back on the amount of food and ingredients we ordered. Our second major decision was to begin running specials and complimentary homemade bread pudding with hot white chocolate buttered rum.”

The dessert is a SHUCK’S! fan favorite.

SHUCK’S! customers have been able to access the restaurant’s drive-through and curbside service, along with outside eating options with an important amenity — live music.

“Burt and I said since we have fine and loyal customers and good friends who are coming to support us during the pandemic, let’s have a musician play outside,” Bertrand said. “Our first performer brought in a ton of people and the parking lot was full.”

Louisiana state troopers and representatives from the state fire marshal and the Abbeville fire chief have worked closely with Bertrand and Istre to mitigate safety issues during the pandemic. Bertrand and Istre utilized a recommendation from state officials to hire private security in order to assist customers to observe face covering mandates and social distancing guidelines.

“They [state and municipal officials] assured us they had no desire to shut us down and it has worked out like a charm,” Bertrand said.

About three years ago, hotel owner Ty Boudoin and his wife Sherdell Landry bought the Quarter Tavern in New Iberia. As with any venture, they knew some difficulties would follow, but COVID-19 and state government actions have created a maddening situation for them and other bar owners.

“We are lucky. I have another business, but with my bar just sitting (it is closed), I’m losing \$6,000 a month,” Boudoin said. “I just can’t turn the building off. I don’t want to have to pay on that money to get the business back on when this passes.”

Boudoin said he is concerned about customers’ safety and that his business is designed to minimize the chance for the virus to spread. The



WE ARE LUCKY. I HAVE ANOTHER BUSINESS, BUT WITH MY BAR JUST SITTING (IT IS CLOSED), I’M LOSING \$6,000 A MONTH.

TY BOUDOIN, OWNER QUARTER TAVERN IN NEW IBERIA



Crowd Pleaser

COVID-19 weary? SHUCK’S! in Abbeville has a bread pudding that will make a customer beam the type of rays that will make daisies bloom. The restaurant’s menu says it best, “Sinfully good homemade bread pudding! Topped with hot white chocolate rum sauce. Real rum and plenty of it.”



WE DID WHAT WE COULD TO KEEP EVERYONE ON BOARD. THE FIRST TWO WEEKS, STAFF WORKED CLEANING AND PAINTING THE BAR AND WE WERE THINKING WE'D BE CLOSED TWO OR THREE WEEKS.

MATTHEW TRAHAN, OWNER CITY BAR IN MAURICE



building Quarter Tavern is housed inside naturally allows a majority of customers to sit outside and enjoy TVs and entertainment space which are positioned in the open air. Boudoin, like a lot of bar owners, is upset with the governor.

Gov. Edwards provided the overall hospitality industry some relief in May by moving the state to phase one reopening following the stay-at-home order. Restaurants and bars with food permits were initially limited to 25 percent occupancy, upgraded sanitation criteria, and social distancing. Bars that did not have the food permit remained closed.

At the start of June, the governor announced the state would move to phase two opening which allowed businesses to have 50 percent occupancy. Restaurants and bars and breweries with food permits would benefit from this policy. Meanwhile, bars and breweries without food permits could open with social distancing requirements and 25 percent occupancy. By mid-summer, approximately 200 bars applied for and received food permits which allowed them to operate under the same guidelines as restaurants.

Boudoin reels at the notion that the kitchen permit is the ultimate answer to many bar owners' problems.

"I have no room inside to build a kitchen. We have a cooking trailer and we give away food," Boudoin explained. "If I had the room, I would have installed a kitchen when I started the business."

Whatever reprieve some bar owners felt (those who did not have food permits) ended on July 11 when Gov. Edwards ordered "bars in the state closed to on-premises consumption" due to increased COVID-19 cases. Bars could only operate with curbside take out or delivery services. The order stated that, "Since the start of the crisis, Louisiana has identified at least 36 outbreaks impacting 405 people, involving bars, which were actually closed under the Governor's original stay-at-home order."

State officials concluded that they "believe going to bars is a higher public health risk than visiting other types of businesses because people are socializing and cannot wear masks when they drink. In addition, young people under the age of 30 make up the largest percentage of new COVID cases in Louisiana."

Boudoin — who concluded patrons would spend less purchasing alcoholic beverages at stores, along with the fact that Quarter Tavern has no drive-through — joined with 10 other Acadiana bar owners to immediately petition

the federal court in Lafayette in the latter part of July for a temporary restraining order against the governor's bar restrictions. Similar actions were taken by bar owners in Baton Rouge and Houma.

In Maurice, fourth-generation owner Matthew Trahan has sympathy for all of the state's hospitality and dining establishments suffering through the pandemic. He did not join the 11 bars seeking the injunction but supports their effort.

"From day one, I knew this was not going to be good," he said. "We closed down on March 16 at midnight. We did what we could to keep everyone on board. The first two weeks, staff worked cleaning and painting the bar and we were thinking we'd be closed two or three weeks."

Not serving customers is abnormal for City Bar as well as other drinking establishments. The longest period of time the bar has been closed in 93 years of operation is one week. Trahan is proud to proclaim the establishment doesn't close, "not even for a hurricane."

Trahan argues that the majority of bar owners were following the state's guidelines but ended up suffering anyway.

"They have taken one type of business throughout the state, that is not the problem, and put the burden on us," Trahan said. "And this time, we don't have payroll protection and employees are drawing unemployment or looking for other jobs."

Arpeggios Lounge and Event Center's website has a note on the home page. It states that "Out of an abundance of caution for our artists and our patrons given the current uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, we are suspending Jazz night ... until further notice."

Owners Thurman and Carmen Johnson are taking the business impacts in stride with a sense of calm.

"Oh, it has been tough," Thurman Johnson said. "We haven't been able to book any events and people have been postponing things because of crowd restrictions. You just can't have as many people as you want attending engagements. But my wife and I have been at this since 2016 and when you start a business you understand there will be times like these and that is why we had some reserves built."

In May, Arpeggios was going to be an important site for a large Zydeco event. Due to the pandemic, the event was altered.

"I understand what we are doing and the reason we have restrictions. But overall, we will lose some businesses," Johnson said.

COVID-19 NEEDS. NOT WANTS.

If you adventure into any of the Acadiana region's specialty meats stores, independent grocers or spirits sellers, a bottle of City Bar Bloody Mary mix should be available. For 90 plus years, the folks at City Bar in Maurice have perfected the art of Bloody Mary preparation. A bottle of their mixed base is a COVID-19 necessity. Vodka or gin. It will all make you sin with Cajun-inspired spices.

A SAMPLING OF OPEN EATERIES THROUGHOUT ACADIANA

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| C'est Bon Restaurant
Mermentau
337-824-5015 | Neptunes Restaurant
Elton
337-584-3264 | Cafe Habana City
Lafayette
337-267-3060 |
| Cajun Way Family Restaurant-Boudin King
Crowley
337-788-2929 | Coby's Classic Cuisine
Opelousas
337-678-0454 | Bangkok Thai Restaurant
Lafayette
337-989-2009 |
| Fezzo's Seafood, Steakhouse and Oyster Bar
Crowley
337-783-5515 | Steamboat Warehouse Restaurant
Washington
337-826-7227 | Market Eatz
Lafayette
337-575-3289 |
| Mama Reta's Kitchen
Lake Charles
337-656-2798 | The Shack of Houma
Houma
985-868-9996 | Spoonbill Watering Hole and Restaurant
Lafayette
337-534-0585 |
| Mr. Bill's Seafood Express
Lake Charles
337-477-9746 | Milano
Houma
985-879-2426 | Cafe Josephine
Sunset
337-662-0008 |
| Tony's Pizza
Lake Charles
337-477-1611 | Fremis
Thibodaux
985-449-0333 | Uncle T's Oyster Bar
Scott
337-504-2285 |
| LeBleu's Landing
Sulphur
337-528-6900 | Rita Mae's Kitchen
Morgan City
985-384-3550 | Veronica's Cafe - Cajun and Creole Restaurant
Carencro
337-565-2301 |
| Heaven On Earth
Westlake
337-287-4860 | Atchafalaya Cafe
Morgan City
985-384-2707 | Cafe Sydnie Mae
Breaux Bridge
337-909-2377 |
| Anchors Up Grill
Cameron
337-775-5409 | Annie Mae's on the Bayou
Franklin
337-471-7016 | Glenda's Creole Kitchen
Breaux Bridge
337-332-0294 |
| Fausto's Family Restaurant
Kinder
337-738-5676 | Victor's Cafeteria
New Iberia
337-369-9924 | Myran's Maison De Manger
Arnaudville
337-754-5064 |
| Roy's Catfish Hut
Kinder
337-738-4243 | The Yellow Bowl
Jeanerette
337-276-5512 | D.I.'s Cajun Restaurant
Basile
337-432-5141 |
| Cajun Tales Seafood Restaurant
Welsh
337-734-4772 | The St. John Restaurant
St. Martinville
337-394-9994 | Cafe de Lasalle
Ville Platte
337-363-7891 |
| Regatta Seafood and Steakhouse
Lake Arthur
337-774-1504 | Dupuy's Seafood and Steak
Abbeville
337-893-2336 | Hot Tails Restaurant
New Roads
225-638-4676 |
| | Hebert's Steakhouse and Seafood
Kaplan
337-643-2933 | |



MY WIFE AND I
HAVE BEEN AT
THIS SINCE 2016
AND WHEN YOU
START A BUSINESS
YOU UNDERSTAND
THERE WILL BE
TIMES LIKE THESE
AND THAT IS WHY
WE HAD SOME
RESERVES BUILT.

**THURMAN JOHNSON,
CO-OWNER ARPEGGIOS
LOUNGE AND EVENT
CENTER IN OPELOUSAS**

**LOUISIANA BAR
OWNERS GOT A
REPRIEVE FROM
GOV. JOHN BEL
EDWARDS ON
SEPT. 11, 2020
... SORT OF.**

Edwards announced the state would move to phase three opening. According to the Governor's office, that means "For now, bars will remain closed to on-premises consumption in parishes with high incidence of COVID as evidenced by their test positivity rate, which is a continued recommendation of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, as cases among young people and in college towns continue to grow."



Arpeggios is not the Johnsons only source of income. Carmen Johnson is a pediatrician and owns a medical office her husband also works in. Whether or not the courts side with the bars and other hospitality businesses that face restrictions, the Johnsons intend to adjust one day at a time.

Some bar owners like Boudoin intend to fight "Every restaurant owner I know feels sorry for us. You can go to a casino and do what you want," he said. "Oh, you can bet I will appeal [if the federal court rules against the 11 bar owners]. And businesses that don't do what is right and follow the health guidelines while I'm fighting to keep my business, you can bet I will let officials know who are breaking the law."

To date, bar owners have been on the wrong side of court decisions.

A Nineteenth Judicial District Court judge in Baton Rouge ruled against four Jefferson Parish business owners in early August, deciding the governor's bar mandate is necessary to protect the public.

A few weeks later, a New Orleans federal judge heard a case filed by bar owners in Houma. The court ruled in favor of the governor's restrictions again, stating, "The court is compelled to conclude that Governor Edwards' ban of on-site consumption of food or drink at 'bars' bears a 'real or substantial relation' to the goal of slowing the spread of COVID-19 and is not 'beyond all question' a violation of the bar owners' constitutional rights."

As of this article's deadline, a federal judge in Lafayette had not issued a decision on the 11 Acadiana bar owners' request for an injunction which would allow the business sector to reopen immediately.

The service industry has always been precarious, and no one knows that better than the people who make and serve our drinks and dinner. They are a tough lot, accustomed to weathering every type of storm. The chefs, owners, staff and patrons continue to navigate the uncertainty of the crisis the way people of the region always have — with persistence, ingenuity and the indomitable spirit of Acadiana.