



INTRODUCTION TO THIS DOCUMENT

Andrew Genung, Creator of Family Meal newsletter based in Hong Kong, uses a recent experience of dining out in Hong Kong as a model of what “Eating Out in the Future” might look like in America

OUR TAKE-AWAYS:

This is what we learned from this document:

- **Dining out in Asian cities such as Hong Kong, which have largely succeeded in controlling the outbreak and allowed restaurants to stay open, could give a glimpse to the future of dining out in other parts of the world. In Hong Kong, dining areas are operated at 50 per cent capacity by law, and diners are limited to a maximum of four per table.**
- **While restaurants and bars *may* still be lively at 50 per cent capacity, there is a high possibility that the potential energy for the solo diner will be stripped away.**
- **Key lessons – strict social distancing has to be enforced and restaurants need to implement health and safety checks that include temperature checks and staff wearing face masks. BUT, this is destroying the essential ambience of hospitality and sociability!**

Here's What Eating Out Might Look Like When Restaurants Reopen

Masks, temperature checks, and awkward bar vibes — one writer's recent night out in Hong Kong could be a glimpse at America's future

[Andrew Genung](#) Apr 21, 2020, 2:24pm EDT

Expats gather outside bars and restaurants on Peel street in Soho

On a recent Friday night in Hong Kong, two police vans idled outside an upscale Italian restaurant on Wyndham Street. Only a few months earlier, their presence might have been an ominous sign that a unit of [anti-protest riot cops](#) was in the area, tear gas and pepper spray at the ready. But as is the case for much of daily life here since January, Hong Kong has moved from a state of protest to pandemic, and that night, instead of an armed “raptor” force wearing dark green fatigues and gas masks, the vans discharged a group of what looked like ordinary patrolmen in simple short-sleeve uniforms and surgical masks.

The officers had mustered in one of the city's busiest nightlife districts to enforce the local government's [ongoing social distancing measures](#) in response to COVID-19, many of which were first announced in late March. They stood outside on the sidewalk like nuns chaperoning a Catholic school dance, armed with rulers, ready to stalk the floor and push guests apart to “make room for the Holy Spirit.” Except in this case the school gymnasium was a bar full of consenting adults, the rulers were rolls of measuring tape, and the Holy Spirit, I assume, was the distance required for gravity to pull down tiny drops of spittle from the air between us.

As cities and states across the U.S. begin to float possible dates for reopening the closed sectors of their economies, many diners and hospitality industry leaders are asking what that next phase might look like for restaurants. Because Hong Kong — along with other Asian cities like Seoul and Taipei — [has largely succeeded in controlling outbreaks](#), and allowed its restaurants to stay open throughout the pandemic, some are asking if the present state of dining here could be a glimpse at the future for America.

And so, with the number of newly reported COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong staying firmly in single digits over the preceding few days, I traded house socks for chukka boots, slipped on a surgical mask, and did what many in the U.S. have been longing to do for weeks. I went out for dinner.

I chose Frank's in part because it makes for a useful case study of the current regulatory climate in Hong Kong. Bars have been ordered closed, but not restaurants; Frank's is a split-level operation, with more of a bar setup downstairs and a sit-down restaurant upstairs. The mandatory bar closure has meant that almost all of Lan Kwai Fong, Hong Kong's famous party district, has been shut down; Frank's sits on the edge of LKF, sandwiched between it and the equally busy but more restaurant-heavy SoHo neighborhood.

Although popular with Cantonese locals for workweek lunch, at night, Frank's is often filled with expat residents drinking Negronis and ordering the veal. Expats have come under special scrutiny recently, after a wave of travelers rushing home to the city from hot spots abroad brought new cases back with them only a few weeks ago.

Normally, it would cost me less than \$1 to take the subway or minibus from my house to Wyndham Street, but to minimize time spent in small, enclosed, crowded spaces, I splurged \$6.50 on a cab. At the entrance to Frank's, I was stopped by a host and was confronted with the first in a series of small obstacles to eating out: the temperature check.

Having an infrared thermometer pointed at your forehead in a non-medical setting might kill the mood in America, but in Hong Kong it blends in relatively naturally with the rest of the ways the city has become visibly anti-contagion since the SARS outbreak more than 16 years ago. Signs in elevators remind riders how often the buttons are sterilized. Hand sanitizer has been a lobby staple for years. And then there are the masks.

Well before COVID-19, it would've been hard to go a day in Hong Kong and [not see someone wearing a mask](#). They're common enough that if you met a friend on the street and someone asked you later if the friend had worn one, you might not remember. In restaurants, I'd seen staff wearing masks from time to time too, though almost never in more upscale situations. But at Frank's — as with every other restaurant I checked in on — all staff wore the same thin, blue surgical masks Hong Kongers had been wearing on the street for years.

While Hong Kong's pre-existing mask culture somewhat prepared me, in the U.S., it might have felt a little like a mass text had gone out on Halloween, where the in-joke was that instead of asking everyone to dress in a sexy costume, every costume would be a surgeon: Surgeon servers. Surgeon cooks. A surgeon DJ. Even having lived with regular mask culture for years now — and among their near-ubiquity for weeks — seeing every single person who handled my food and drink wear the tell-tale sign of medical caution was jarring.

Still, not long into the meal, as the unnerving feeling began to subside, it was quickly replaced by communication issues. I've heard a lot of people lament the non-verbal communication lost behind masks, the missed smiles or bitten lips, but more difficult for me were the few times I couldn't understand what my server was trying to ask me. He was enunciating clearly at a volume well above the ambient noise, but without seeing half his face, he may as well have held his hand behind his back and asked me, "How many fingers?" "Sure," I replied the first time this happened, and the result was a side of squash I didn't think I'd ordered. (It was great.)

After dinner, I picked my own mask up off my knee, where it had remained throughout the meal, and headed downstairs for a cocktail. I ordered at the bar, got my drink at the bar, and then immediately had to walk away from the bar and stand against the far wall. The bar itself had no stools, and featured printouts explaining that customers could not hang out at the bar. In a total reverse of the usual crush to buy drinks, the few guests in the quarter-full room were clustered in small groups against the far wall with me. Only they weren't with me at all.

When you sit at the bar you are part of a continuum, long or short, curved or straight, finite or infinitely looped, that counts everyone seated anywhere along it as also *at the bar*. Downstairs at Frank's, we were all standing up while observing social distance. Me trying to join any one group would have been the awkward equivalent of pulling up a seat to a table full of unsuspecting strangers upstairs. Not having the stomach for that, I downed my drink, put my money on the bar and left.

Police on Wyndham Street prepare to enforce social distancing rules on Friday night
Pens used to fill out health declaration forms at Yardbird HK are individually sterilized after each use

Outside, I walked back past the cops and did a quick loop through an eerily empty Lan Kwai Fong, before wandering back up towards Soho to see how restaurants were doing there. Turning up Peel Street, I was only half-surprised to see several large gaggles of

maskless expats drinking out in front of restaurants on the dead-end road. You know that particular genre of sports bloopers where an athlete begins celebrating right on the verge of winning, only to have victory snatched away by someone actually digging for those last few inches? I've gotten some good schadenfreude out of those scenes, but with only one new case of COVID reported in Hong Kong the day before my night out, these people felt like the last link on our whole city's relay team, and their confidence made me nervous.

I moved on, and tried to stop in a wine bar that sells enough charcuterie, cheese, and other no-cook food to maybe pass as a restaurant, but the man at the front desk of its building told me that the entire floor was closed. I stopped into the lobby of a high rise on Wellington Street, hoping to finally try the "martini 3-ways" at VEA Lounge, the cocktail bar one flight down from Vicky Cheng's French-Chinese tasting menu restaurant, VEA, but the button for the 29th floor didn't work at all.

Then I remembered that Yardbird Hong Kong had reopened. It closed for 14 days starting March 23, after word of infected diners at another restaurant group got out. But it was back in business now, albeit under a new regime of health and safety measures. There was a wait, as usual, but nowhere to do the waiting. The front room, where I've spent several past pre-dinner hours nursing a cocktail or two while my name moved up the host's list, had been converted from a mostly standing-room bar area into a second sit-down-only dining room. Anyone not yet seated would have to wait outside. I gave my phone number and went for a walk around the block.

When I did finally get in, the host took my temperature and asked me to sign a form declaring that in the last 14 days I had not been outside of Hong Kong, hung out with anyone outside of Hong Kong, and/or had COVID-19 or symptoms of COVID-19. I also gave my name, phone number, and email address, so that should anyone present that night later test positive, they could contact me. I'd had to give the same personal information at Frank's as well, so that now, despite paying cash at both venues, there was a point-by-point record of my night just floating out there in the ether, my American right-to-privacy preferences be damned.

Diners at Yardbird sit four to a table max, in a dining room at 50 percent capacity by law

The host told me she had never had problems from anyone about the health form, but there had been larger groups who got annoyed at having to separate into tables of four

or fewer. On my own, I was led to a two-top in the middle of the back dining room, ordered a cocktail, and read on my phone.

At 50 percent capacity, the place was still lively, but even if the kinetic feeling of the restaurant was still there, some of the potential energy for a solo diner had been stripped away. I'm usually fairly confident being out on my own, but something about sitting so far from another table — even an empty one in one of my favorite Hong Kong restaurants — was uncomfortable.

Steam rose in the open kitchen, swirling past a flurry of masked chefs shuffling around their stations. What felt like more servers than I can ever remember seeing on that floor swarmed about the dining room. And everywhere there were people eating. Everywhere, except of course within about six feet on all sides of me. If my distant neighbors and I had shared a brief conversation before I finished my drink, decided there was no point in trying to stay out anymore, and headed home, it most likely would've consisted of an exaggerated wave and a pantomimed shout, as if we each occupied either side of an enormous cavern, and could never get much closer than we were already. It would've been mildly funny. And mostly true.

Andrew Genung is a writer based in Hong Kong and the creator of the [Family Meal](#) newsletter about the restaurant industry.

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