



BLUE HERON  
RESTAURANT  
& CATERING

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Sunday, December 13, 2020

Dear Friends,

Out of concern for the health and safety of our team and our community, Barbara and I have made the decision to switch back to takeout only beginning the week of December 14<sup>th</sup>. With the recent climb in COVID-19 cases in our region and the cold weather effectively eliminating outdoor dining, the risk of anyone contracting the virus from our decision to remain open for indoor dining is too high.

Our team has worked admirably to create a safe environment for each other and for our guests. We strategically placed HEPA-certified air purifiers in all dining areas, coupled with open windows and doors to keep a steady flow of fresh air for indoor dining. Our team wears face masks at all times and we have enforced a face mask policy for our guests that is stricter than what our state government requires. Our sanitation regimen is rigorous and informed by the most up-to-date information from the CDC and WHO. Nevertheless, the risk of contracting COVID-19 in a public environment is way too high, and the emotional toll should anyone contract it here is far too steep for us to stay open for on-site dining.

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It comes as no surprise that Merriam-Webster's word of the year for 2020 is "pandemic". For restaurants, the word of the year has been "pivot". In May, after about eight weeks of total shutdown, we returned with a skeleton crew to offer family style takeout meals for Mother's Day in lieu of our typical brunch buffet. We then overhauled our system to provide contactless curbside takeout with online ordering and worked with local officials to allow us to add grocery pickup to our list of services. Once the state opened outdoor dining, we re-vamped our patio and front porch to allow for more than six feet between tables and implemented a host of practices to reduce the likelihood of COVID transmission while maintaining our standards of service, from pre-wrapped cutlery to covered cocktails to QR codes that allow guests to access our menus on their own devices. When indoor dining became an option, we once again re-worked our floor plan to allow for plenty of spacing, added air filters, installed a plexiglass divider on our bar, and enforced additional mask-wearing and time limit policies for our guests as we learned more about transmission factors. Once the temperatures began to drop we set up propane patio heaters adjacent to all our outdoor tables and switched our Sunday hours to brunch hours to steal a few additional hours of sunlight. We have pivoted so many times it makes our heads spin. But it has been worth it to keep our business going, our staff employed, and our loyal customers well-fed.

Our ability to share meals with you all during this dark year has been a bright spot. You have shown such tremendous support from joining us for dinner, to ordering takeout, to purchasing gift cards as a true show of faith. But the circumstances we are in are so extraordinary and unprecedented that it will take more than just your business to keep our industry afloat.

Let's be very clear: our state needs to close non-essential public spaces for the short run so that we can survive and be viable for the long run. For restaurants and small businesses to survive in the long run, we need relief from our state and local governments. In March, Governor Baker closed restaurants which triggered relief that we could use desperately now, including:

1. Delayed collection of meals/sales taxes, property taxes, and real estate taxes until later in the year without penalties of late fees and interest

2. Extension of payment deadlines on liquor invoices, which are established at the state level by the Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission
3. Extension of unemployment insurance for employees who are out of work through no fault of their own and no penalty to employers for COVID-19 related claims
4. Delayed collection of mortgage and loan payments and an eviction moratorium that protects tenants' rights

Without a doubt, our federal government needs to pass a new relief bill with small business grants, federal unemployment, and direct stimulus payments. But we know that Congress has been unconscionably slow to action, while our state and local governments have the ability to act now. We have all already lost so much. 110,000 restaurants have closed nationwide since the beginning of this pandemic, which is not to mention the countless other small businesses shuttered since March. There will be little light at the end of the tunnel if Main Street is decimated by the time the vaccine is distributed and life starts to return to "normal" (whatever that means).

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A restaurant starts with great food and caring, responsive service, but if you're lucky enough, it becomes so much more. Joy Harjo begins her poem, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," with: "The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live." In the middle of the poem, she writes, "The table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun." Our kitchen table has been your kitchen table. Your house in the rain, your umbrella in the sun. We have set the table and nourished you as you have shared your lives with us. It is a table where memories are shared and memories are made. A place of comfort and respite. A restaurant is about community, family, and friends. From the beginning, our dream was always to be an active member of our Connecticut River Valley community, both socially and economically. Our opening event in 1997 was a fundraiser for the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. Since then, we have committed resources to the Food Bank, Amherst Survival Center, NELCWIT, Bridge4Unity, the Women's Fund, and many more organizations doing important work in our community. We have worked with local farmers since day one. There is no us without all of you. As we pivot back to takeout, we will miss the presence of our guests. We will miss sounds of your clinking glasses and laughter. We will miss experiencing our shared lives just as we did during the shutdown at the beginning of this pandemic.

As much as we will miss our wonderful family of guests, we will equally miss each other, our "Blue Heron family," the team that makes it happen. On our busiest days there could be 25-30 people working together in a team. Now with social distancing at top of mind, a smaller crew keeps the gears running. In the heat of the moment and the heat of the kitchen, we have weathered the good and the bad, together. We depend on each other. The success of one is the success of the other. I know of few other businesses like this. The comradery, dedication, and loyalty of our team is powerful, and it is everything to the Blue Heron.

Harjo ends her short poem with, "Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite." This is not the end, and certainly not the last sweet bite. We plan to re-open for on-site dining when COVID-19 cases decline, or warmer weather allows for outdoor dining again, whichever comes first. If you can, please continue to order curbside takeout, and buy those gift cards to use when it is safe to come back for dinner! But also, please take the time to call and email your state and federal legislators and Governor Baker to push for common sense closures and relief for small businesses and everyday people.

We will continue to keep you updated on our hours and takeout options and eventually (hopefully sooner rather than later!) on our re-opening plans. Thank you for your continued love and support!

With deepest gratitude,

Deborah, Barbara, and the Blue Heron team