

AAPI restaurants suffer and pine for relief

By Mahlon Meyer
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

The gilt lettering on the window of the restaurant was not enough to save it. It said, “Dine In” and “Take Out” and “Catering” and “Delivery.” And it was written in gold-colored paint that even looked Chinese in style. But when the Northwest Asian Weekly called for an interview, the proprietor said no—she was going out of business. “How is this going to help me?”

Help is what Chinese and other Asian restaurants are looking for in the wake of the Omicron surge.

In Washington state, over the five years preceding the pandemic, Chinese and Japanese restaurants had already declined in number by 10%, according to Anthony Anton, CEO of the Washington Hospitality Association, although other Asian cuisine, such as Asian fusion, had grown.

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Photo by Mahlon Meyer

Tai Tung owner Harry Chan says take-out dining has helped his restaurant fend off the worst ravages of the Omicron surge.

HOPES FOR THE YEAR OF THE TIGER

JOANNE HARRELL
Seattle First Lady



My wish for 2022 is that we get past the pandemic and emerge with a dedication to healthy outcomes and disease prevention for all people. I'd love to see this new year be one where “all boats rise”—we see greater prosperity for all, underpinned by a keener sense of hope, a renewed belief in our democratic principles and a commitment to justice across all parts of our nation for every resident.

Y.P. CHAN
Principal, Chanden Inc.



To stay in shape and get my mind off the pandemic, I hiked (or snow-shoed) with friends most weekends. This year,

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New home for clinic with mission to improve birth equity

By Kiley Riffell



Executive Director of the Rainier Valley Midwives Tara Lawal

Tara Lawal is the executive director of RVM, which is a center aimed at improving birth equity. In an interview on the Mirror Stage Podcast, she reveals that the organization has doubled its business since the start of the pandemic, and that the demand, particularly in the BIPOC community, just keeps increasing.

“We feel that Covid is increasing fear of the unknown for birthing people, as labor and delivery protocols and procedures are changing rapidly at hospitals, even from week to week,” Lawal said. Having a home birth lets some families take back control over the situation.

LAYERS OF NEED

Lawal said the ongoing pandemic has also amplified the need for support services. There are many layers of need that the staff didn't initially anticipate.

“We have had a lot of special needs that have come up through the pandemic so that we need to have social services and mental health services.”

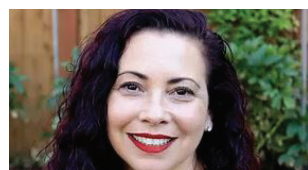
This year, the clinic received funding

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The pandemic hastened their decline massively. Many closed. And just when business was starting to pick up again late last year, a combination of Omicron, debt from earlier years in the pandemic, and an end of government subsidies has catapulted many more into disaster.

Sometimes, the extent of the damage has depended purely on outside factors, such as what neighborhood you're in, according to Mike Fong, regional administrator for Region X of the U.S. Small Business Association (SBA).

Decades before the pandemic, Fong's father's restaurant in Idaho was initially very successful. But it went out of business in part because the city built a new road in front of the premises that kept business away for a year due to the ongoing construction.

"Omicron, while far more disruptive, is like that as an uncontrollable factor," he said.

During Omicron, the patterns have been even more complex. Restaurants that have been able to draw on neighborhood support, such as people walking in for take-out service, have done much better. To some extent, this has depended on how many people are working remotely in the neighborhood and so choose to get their meals there.



Mike Fong

"There's been an interesting dynamic coming out of the pandemic—because people are staying closer to home, working at home, or not traveling, they are spending more time in their own neighborhoods and spending resources in their community—it highlights the importance of small neighborhood business districts," said Fong.

As a result, said Anton, "We have seen a fascinating trend—some neighborhood restaurants have actually done better." That's why not all restaurants qualified

for relief funds, he added.

This also means that the restaurants that are near travel centers or big office buildings—often vacated by the pandemic—have been in more serious trouble, said Anton.

The Chinese restaurant in Renton that was about to close down—the owner asked not to be identified—is along a lonely highway in a tiny strip mall with a tobacco shop and other seemingly derelict businesses. Most importantly, it is far from any homes.

Since delivery services take 30% off the top, restaurants that have to rely on them, do not always fare well. Those that are in neighborhoods in which patrons can walk in seemingly do better.

Take Tai Tung, in the Chinatown-International District (ID), the oldest Chinese restaurant in the city. Although dine-in service is down 40% just in the first four weeks of this year, take-out orders are up by 30%. And during a recent lunch hour, none of those "to go" orders were delivered by a third-party delivery service.

During an interview with owner Harry Chan, customers walked in and out, waiting to pick up food. Chan knew all of them by name.

"Hey, Michael," he said to one. Another greeted him by name.

It also helps that Tai Tung has been around since 1935. Chan can tell you the names of the dishes that new customers order compared to those that the regulars order. New customers order dishes like shrimp egg foo young or honey walnut shrimp. The old customers—those whose families have been coming, in some cases, for five generations—order from the signs on the walls, such as string beans with garlic.

The restaurant is also integrated into the community. Chan is quick to point out his special Bruce Lee table, when asked for a tour, where the

action star used to sit.

"He would always sit with his back to the wall where he could see the whole room, so no one could sneak up behind him."

But that part of the dining room is empty, despite the colored lights and the plethora of action photos of Lee around the table. Even with a robust and loyal base of customers, the restaurant, like all others in the ID, is struggling with inflation and Omicron. Chan has had to raise prices by 10%.

"I can see, I can feel, especially at the beginning of this year, it would be nice if the government would help," said Chan.

Even for restaurants that are doing relatively well, like Tai Tung, another problem can creep up and spell doom.

That is: earlier levels of debt from previous years in the pandemic are now coming due. On top of a \$5.4 billion drop in revenue for the industry as a whole in the year after the pandemic compared to the year before, the average full-service restaurant in this state built up \$160,000 in debt, according to Anton.

He gave an example of a Thai restaurant that was just starting to recover at the end of last year. "If you passed them on the street, you'd see the restaurant full of people. They were able to pay their rent for the past six months. But then their landlord demanded they pay their debt from the previous year, and the following Tuesday, you'd see them closed down."

Government relief programs have ended. The Restaurant Revitalization Fund (RRF) ran out of money last year when less than half of qualified restaurants had received some aid. To be qualified, a restauranter must have proof of debt incurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Anton, 3,335 restaurants have closed since the start of the pandemic.

"What we're afraid now is that there's going to be a further

wave of closures with all the debt coming due," he said.

Anton has been lobbying Congress to "backfill" the RRF, meaning that Congress would apportion more funds to fill the grant requests of all restauranteurs that had applied in the first place. All members of the Washington state congressional delegation are in support.

"There is momentum," he said, referring to information he's gotten from his national headquarters.



Sen. Maria Cantwell

Sen. Maria Cantwell last March spoke on the Senate floor, urging passage of the American Rescue Plan Act, which included the RRF. She highlighted the closure of thousands of restaurants nationally and in this state. On Jan. 25, she held a round table with Anton and restaurant owners to raise awareness and gather feedback.

"We want to take today's information and go back to Washington, D.C. and fight even harder to get a second round," said Cantwell. She cited surveys taken by the National Restaurant Association that showed conditions are worse for restaurants than they were three months ago.

Asked specifically about Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)-owned restaurants, Cantwell responded

in an email, "Our local AAPI-owned businesses are integral to communities across Washington, both as employers and part of the vibrant cultural fabric of our state. We must ensure that AAPI-owned restaurants receive the support they need to make it through the pandemic. That's why I am fighting for a second round of restaurant revitalization funding."

Any relief cannot come a moment too soon. During a recent lunch hour in the ID, a few patrons walked in and out of restaurants with bags.

But in Renton, and places like it, where restaurants run by AAPI owners are not only struggling, but are shutting down, it may already be too late.

Fong is planning to hold a number of round table discussions with AAPI community leaders, both in the ID and on the Eastside. Later in the month, he will hold one in Spokane, and next month in Portland, with more to follow. His goal—to raise awareness of the many types of services and funding the SBA has to offer, as well as receiving feedback about what the community needs.

"We want to meet people where they are," he said.

Fong would perhaps find some aspects of the scene in Renton familiar, as the restaurant there faces extinction. Inside, glistening in the darkness, red and gold talismans hang suspended in the air above the cashier's desk to bring good luck. But the luck has run out.

One problem—the purpose of the SBA is to administer federal funds. It cannot generate them.

"We're eager to support America's small businesses, and if more resources come our way to support restaurant relief, we would be ready to execute," said Fong. ■

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