

THE NEXT COURSE

Barking Crab could have gone belly up, save for an ingenious plan

The decades-old seafood restaurant turned into a hole in the wall. Literally.

By **Kara Baskin** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 30, 2021, 10:00 a.m.

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At the Barking Crab in Boston, Alexandra Morris at the makeshift takeout window she built by hand for the pandemic. Restaurant owners have moved ahead after a year of COVID with many new ideas to serve customers. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Third in a series of stories in which restaurateurs and chefs reflect on their businesses — and their lives — one year into the pandemic.

The Barking Crab straddles that social nexus between the Financial District and Fort Point, a location that many restaurateurs would kill for in the best of times. As such, it's always been a reliable haven for wandering tourists in need of seafood and tired office workers longing to let loose over beers: no frills, no pretenses, just fun. For a brief period of time, when it opened in 1994, it was known as Venus Seafood in the Rough.

And here, the livin' was always easy — until COVID-19 hit. During a pandemic, a restaurant known for jam-packed picnic tables and bare-handed feasting in the middle of the city seemed unlikely to thrive. And yet it endured.

"It's kind of a miracle," says Crab director of operations Alexandra Morris.

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In March 2020, the outlook initially seemed bleak.

"It was horrible last spring. Based on our location, we had a strong after-work crowd and a strong tourist crowd, both of which collapsed immediately," she says.



At the Barking Crab, general manager Matt White gets the outdoor dining area ready for guests. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

To make matters worse, the restaurant didn't have any kind of takeout capabilities. People came to the Barking Crab to sit outside and eat seafood. A lobster roll just doesn't taste the same in a cubicle.

Morris and general manager Matt White laid off their staff of 30, save for the controller. Then they began to improvise.

"And this is the story of how some lobster rolls saved the day, in a corny way," she says.

Instead of focusing on delivery, Morris and White returned to the building in late April with saws and hammers to cut a window into the wall for takeout. Nothing fancy, just a little portal for hot or cold lobster rolls, chips, cookies, water, or Harpoon beer. They'd make the food and see if anyone stopped by.

"We didn't know who our customer base would be, and there no flights coming into Logan," she says. They planned to sell about 50 rolls. White cooked, and she worked the window.

The response surprised her.



A bell used for takeout at the Barking Crab. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

"Bostonians — real Bostonians, people who live in the area, people who just wanted to get out of their house, came by for a complete meal," she says. "Our very first lobster roll was picked up by regulars, who still come every two weeks or so."

As business grew, Morris was able to bring staffers back to work. Since there wasn't much of a traditional bar business, she turned bartenders into cooks, making lobster rolls. With limited outdoor servers, sometimes staffers became bussers, cooks, and servers, working in pod-like shifts so they didn't cross over with colleagues.

"The people that I have are dedicated employees willing to think outside the box, the same way that Matt and I totally changed our roles. They are waiters, therapists, and bartenders," Morris says.

Come winter, things changed again. Normally, the Barking Crab brings diners inside, warmed by a wood-burning stove.

"But there's no way I'd be able to keep people safe in there. So we never opened the indoor dining room. We just crossed our fingers and kept our tent open for as long as we could, which we'd never done in the past," Morris says. She switched to beer kegs, so tap lines didn't freeze, and festooned the tent with space heaters. She removed their well-worn picnic tables — chopping them up, gone for good — and replaced them with two- and four-top tables.

The restaurant stayed open through the winter, serving people in their tent despite the chill.

"We buttoned down the flaps and taped them shut. We literally battened down the hatches and taped everything closed. It was drafty enough to think the air exchange was good, and it had that outside feel — and it was way easier to distance people," she says.

Now, with warmer weather back again, "I'm hoping the worst days are behind us," she says. "We're seeing offices come back slowly. Tourists are coming back from all over. I think they got a great deal coming to Boston, and we're happy to have them."

But while new customers are slowly trickling in, she appreciates the devoted ones who walked over when times were terrible.

"My reflection is: You cannot underestimate the power of loyal customers. Seeing familiar faces in the worst of times was an immeasurably amazing feeling," she says.

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