

ORDER UP!

Two Cottage Grove Businesses Develop Innovative Partnership Despite Challenging Conditions

By JON STINNETT



By mid-morning on a brisk, sunny Saturday, the takeout orders are starting to stack up at Buster's Main Street Café.

Alerted that the next order is ready to go, Steve Lawn loads up both his arms with bags of food. Without hesitation, he's out the café's front door. The restaurant offers curbside pickup, but Lawn doesn't stop at any cars parked nearby. He continues well past Buster's, in fact, waiting patiently to cross first Highway 99 and then Main Street.

Soon, Lawn reaches his destination – the spacious indoor seating area of Covered Bridge Brewing Group, a combined coffee shop/brewpub located several blocks away. There, nearly everyone seated looks up as he announces what he's brought. Two tables recognize their orders and are all smiles as Lawn delivers their food to them.

Behind his mask, Lawn is smiling too, but he doesn't linger to chat. Before long, he's back at Buster's, gathering up another order as he prepares to make the same walk again. The restaurant has only been open for a half-hour or so, but already this isn't his first trip, and it certainly won't be his last.

Such has been a frequent scene between Buster's and the Covered Bridge since last summer. Back then, a conversation between the two businesses' respective owners led to a fruitful partnership, one borne of necessity and cooperation in the face of a global pandemic and the measures taken to try and curb it.

Chrissy Chapman, who opened Covered Bridge Brewing Group last summer along with her partner, Brewer Nate Sampson, and Dave Barclay of Laurel Mountain Coffee Roasting, recalls that a visit from

Buster's owner Paul Tocco back then led to an important conversation.

"He started talking about his limited seating due to the size of his restaurant and the lockdown, and we mulled over the idea of having people come here," she said. "He said that Buster's could deliver to customers here free of charge, so we decided to try it, and it's been very successful."

In fact, both Tocco and Chapman characterized the arrangement as a "win-win" for all parties. Covered Bridge hosts food carts that begin serving around lunchtime, though that means they don't have food to offer (particularly breakfast fare) during the peak morning hours when they're serving coffee.

"What it really came down to was that, during those hours, they had lots of seating and no food to offer," Tocco explained, "while we had lots of food to offer and no seating."

For the first few months – before the November "freeze" that again closed restaurants for indoor dining in an effort to curb the Coronavirus pandemic – the arrangement performed fantastically, with Tocco estimating an average of 30-40 customers enjoying Buster's fare at the Covered Bridge on weekend mornings.

"I tell people when they order from us that they need to buy a beverage from them, and I want Chrissy to tell me if they don't," Tocco said. "We want the arrangement to help them, too."

Now, with restaurants again open for limited indoor seating and weather improving for outdoor dining, it's believed that deliveries will again pick up (in the short time since the limited reopening, in fact, this has already begun to happen.)

Tocco said he looks forward to a full reopening, when the Covered Bridge will be able to accommodate about four times its current capacity. And despite the challenges the last year has brought, he said he's still optimistic about the future of his business, which could certainly have been in jeopardy due to the limited indoor seating in Buster's historic downtown building.

"We've been reinventing what we do according to what's happened," he said. "Before, on the weekends, we never did takeout. The restaurant would be full and there would be 30 people sitting in the hallway. Now, we've had months where takeout was all we could do, and we've built up a pretty good business."

New tools to facilitate online ordering have improved this process, Tocco says.

For Chapman and her partners at the Covered Bridge, who opened their business under extremely challenging circumstances last June, the partnership with Buster's has entailed a bit of coaching for the local restaurant-going public.

"Some people find it an inconvenience until they understand how it works," she says. "Those who have used the system love it."

Chapman says she also sees the partnership as more proof that the group did the right thing in converting all possible space in the former auto body shop to restaurant use.

"As we were building this, I thought for a while that we went too big for Cottage Grove," she said. "But that's not the case. In fact, all this extra space really turned out to be a blessing."

