

## **COVID – 19: Concern and Challenges for fine dining Restaurant operators on re-opening/ unlocking in North Bangalore**

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### **1 Introduction**

India reported its first Covid 19 case on January 30, 2020. On 28th September, 2020, the country reported its 6 millionth case. This after the nation underwent a total lockdown and then gradual reopening of the economy as it was impossible to sustain the economic loss that was being suffered by the nation in lieu of the lockdown. As the nation re opened, the cases mounted and as per the latest reports, considering the huge population and the type of spread we have witnessed, India is still far from herd immunity as per Indian Council of Medical Research.

Of course hopes are pinned on the safe delivery of the commercial Covid Vaccine as a means to overcome the pandemic, however, if reports are to be believed it is still a few months away and further, vaccinating a population like ours is going to be indeed a humongous job that shall take time and cost.

As India started reopening its economic activities, one of the high risk area that was identified and hence permitted to open last was Fine Dining that too with extensive protocols to be followed. The Corona virus spreads ideally in closed spaces, and the typical fine dining environment, which entails removal of face masks for long periods, is considered to be extremely conducive to the spread of the virus. However, most restaurant associations assert that the risks can be allayed by following safety protocols. It is a surety that keeping restaurants closed was not only causing a huge economic loss, it was also creating a huge loss of occupation which had many ripple down effects.

Restaurants, especially fine dining have had to undergo plenty of changes to allay the fear of diners getting infected as well as to make the dining experience safe and wholesome. This entailed giving up many traditional practices and adopting some which during pre covid days would have been certainly not acceptable to restaurant owners and the customer alike. Bangalore, The Garden City of India, like most cities across India has suffered majorly due to the Covid 19 pandemic and to further detail, one of the worst hit businesses had been fine dining. Although Government of Karnataka is robustly trying to perk up business, the fine dining business was among the last avenues to be opened by the graded Unlock programme. Bangalore was also the most severely affected city in terms of Covid load in the country behind only Mumbai and New Delhi.

As the city fine dining restaurants slowly started on the path of recovery, the way ahead was extremely challenging. In fact, many outlets decided to shut shop as they felt fine dining under the new norms may not be feasible. This was more noticeable in the newly developed areas of Bangalore which relied on business travelers, IT sector and had less family diners as compared to business diners. One of the typical areas in Bangalore in this category was North Bangalore and the peripheral ring road area, which has the maximum Tech parks and airport centric travel. It was with this background that the author felt that the topic would be ideal for a study and may provide useful insights into the slow path of recovery that lies ahead for the owners of fine dining restaurants in North Bangalore.

North Bangalore, which boasts of the upcoming area which sprung up around the International Airport, typically identifies itself with the business clientele who frequented the city. The study also took responses from restaurants attached to hotels in large tech parks, which again relied heavily on business travelers and residential units built around the parks.

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## 2 Objectives

- Understand the concerns of fine dining in Covid 19 times
- To list the challenges faced by the fine dining industry due to Covid situation as it tried to slowly emerge out of the lockdown and establish them all over again
- To establish the change in service delivery adopted by fine dining restaurants to win the confidence of the diners
- To appreciate the success of measures taken by restaurants, in removing fear from the minds of diners
- To comprehend new trends in menu planning to attract diners post re opening in covid times

## 3 Data collection

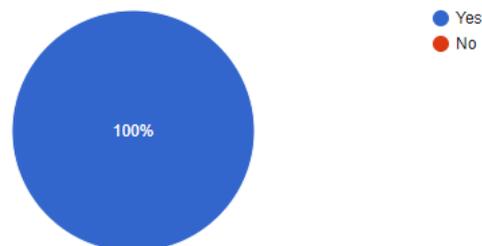
Primary data was collected by means of a structured questionnaire that was distributed to fine dining restaurant management, including owners and senior management staff attached to fine dining restaurants in and around North Bangalore. 50 questionnaires was floated in form of a Google form and 15 responses from well known restaurants were documented. Clarification of responses was made by telephonic interviews which helped the author to further firm up on the conclusions made. Secondary data was used to supplement and verify the findings of the primary data. Secondary data was collected from reliable sources on the internet and from articles in national newspapers.

## 4 Findings of the study

1. All respondents agreed that they were fully prepared to reopen the outlet with covid 19 protocols. They had practiced social distancing by increasing aisle space, reduced seats per table. This however had led to significant reduction of covers.

7. Have you practiced social distancing by increasing aisle space, reducing seats?

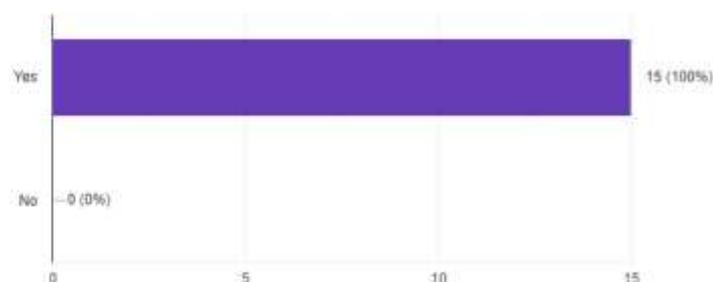
15 responses



2. All respondents were unanimous that raw materials entering the outlets had to undergo sanitization procedures. This resulted in higher costs and lesser inventory as shelf life of raw materials especially perishables is further reduced due to the process of sanitization.

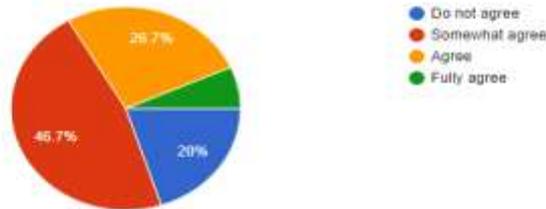
8. Do you sanitise the raw materials entering your establishment?

15 responses



3. The preferred style of service even in fine dining is no longer silver service. With lesser contact and higher demand for sanitization, extensive silver service was being replaced by pre-plated service, which adapts to lesser waiter and chef interface much better than silver service.

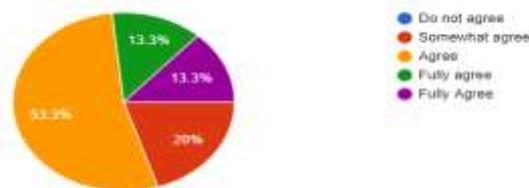
9. Post re opening, with new protocols in place customers would still prefer Silver service:  
15 responses



66.7 % of respondents were not in favour of silver service in the changed scenario of reopening with covid 19 norms.

4. Majority of fine dining restaurant management have introduced new measures to instill confidence among diners. These norms are here to stay. Some of the measures that have been adopted include contactless doors, self parking by guests, body temperature checks, use of personal protection kits by staff and guests which includes sanitization of hands at the entry door and use of QR coded menu for contactless ordering and settlement of bills by use of technology.

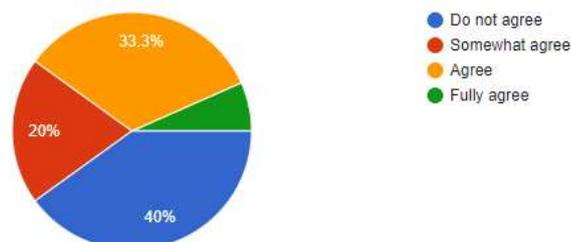
10. Facilities like contactless doors, self parking by guests, temperature check at main door, hand sanitization facility at entry door and QR codes for F&B menu have become essential features of Fine Dining restaurants post Covid 19:  
15 responses



80% of the respondents are in agreement that these norms have become an integral part of the fine dining experience being offered by the outlets. They expect these norms to remain a part of fine dining experience for some time in the future as these are confidence boosters for guests and staff alike.

5. Fine dining has always been rather exhaustive and detailed. Though restaurant management realize that smaller menu can save costs, the majority have retained exhaustive menu rather than curtailing the choice for customers.

11. Instead of exhaustive menu, smaller health centric menu are being sought by customers:  
15 responses

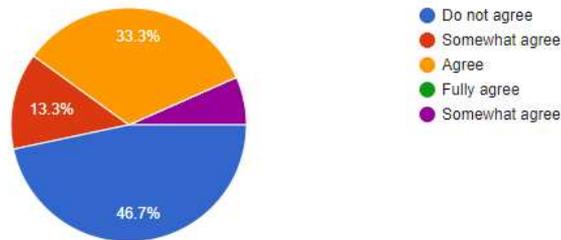


60% of the respondents felt that menus should remain extensive and reduction of scope of the menu would adversely affect customer confidence and goodwill of the establishment.

6. Use of Ayurvedic knowledge and a shift towards vegetarian food has been advocated throughout the pandemic. Though respondents say a shift towards Ayurveda, immunity foods has been noticed, yet the demand for Non vegetarian food remains. Hence shifting the focus towards vegetarian diet is still not an option for the fine dining restaurant owners.

12. With the Covid 19 pandemic demand for Ayurvedic foods , Vegetarian diet has been more from customers:

15 responses



60% of the respondents felt that guests in fine dining would still prefer outlets that offered non vegetarian selections. Hence a shift to purely vegetarian dining was not an option yet in the fine dining outlets in North Bangalore. Diners frequenting fine dining outlets in North Bangalore have been satisfied with the protocols being adopted by the restaurants. A significant majority are happy and confident with the precautions and restrictions placed to make the dining experience a safe one. 73.3% of customers are satisfied and confident of the measures put in place by fine dining outlets.

7. To cover the loss of revenue caused by loss of covers due to social distancing and need to increase aisle space, majority of fine dining restaurants have created a drive in facility so that guests could dine in their cars. Take away has been promoted and sales through aggregators for door delivery has been accepted by fine dining restaurants who were earlier rather reserved towards packing foods as well as door delivery as they felt that the taste of food suffered if it was not eaten fresh. Reheating food at home was also not considered good by chefs. However, with customers’ feeling safer within the four walls of their home and at best in their cars so as to avoid social contact this feature has been adopted and promoted by the fine dining restaurant management in North Bangalore. Outdoor catering has also been promoted by restaurant owners, so that customers can dine in the safety of their premises with chefs providing the same meal experience at the customer’s site of preference.

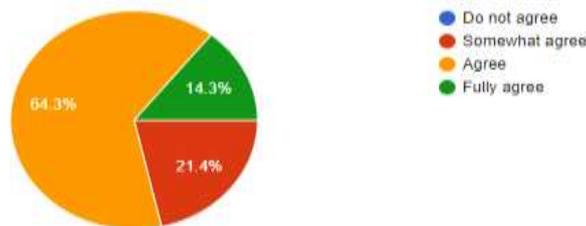
13. The measures taken by food service outlets have infused sufficient confidence in the customers to dine out again

15 responses



14. Fine Dining outlets have promoted drive in and take away facility to promote business

14 responses

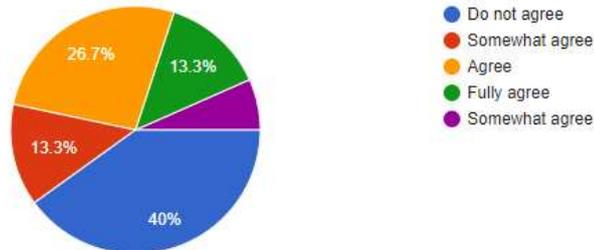


78.6% of the respondents said that drive- in and take away were being actively promoted to augment restaurant sales in the fine dining outlets.

9. Raw material procurement went through a lot of restrictions during and post lockdown. Packed foods and processed food were considered unhealthy as compared to fresh ingredients. However, fine dining outlets continue to rely on packaged and often imported ingredients. On enquiry though, the reliance on these was being reduced and locally sourced raw materials have become the mainstay, especially with most English vegetables, exotic herbs and spices being produced in India.

15. Locally sourced raw materials are replacing packed and imported raw materials post Covid 19

15 responses

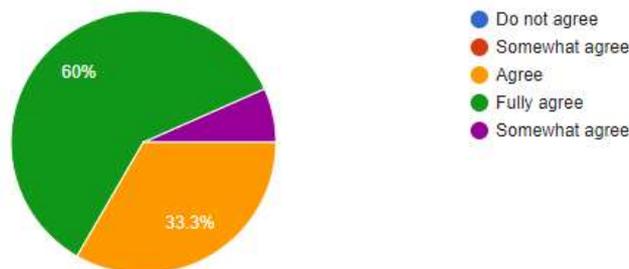


A marginal majority of 53.3% believe that they still need imported and packed raw materials. This however is a significantly lower number as compared to pre covid times, where a much larger number of restaurant owners used to prefer imported ingredients to local ones.

10. Corona virus is known to be highly virulent which spreads through contact points. Hence sanitization of kitchen and pantry which includes the food pickup and dish wash area was a key concern so that safety of the customers could be ensured. An overwhelming majority of the respondents agreed that the back areas were being sanitized after each shift. This is a tedious process as well as incurs costs. However the author found that the compliance to this need was almost unanimous.

16. Kitchen, pantry and back area is being sanitized after each shift in your outlet

15 responses

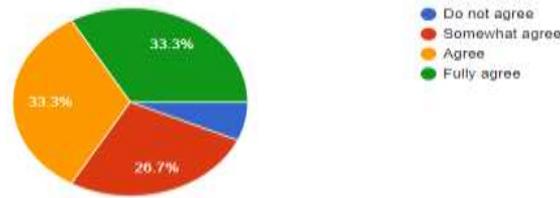


93.3% of the respondents agreed that the back areas, kitchen and the pantry were being sanitized after each shift.

11. One of the biggest fallout of the lockdown was the large scale return of migrant workers who were left helpless by the pandemic. The restaurant business of Bangalore had been always reliant on migrant workers as serving staff, semi skilled kitchen staff and in many other capacities. Hence the impact of return of migrant workers from cities it was felt was a significant area to be clarified. A majority of restaurant owners and management feel that that return of migrant workers from Bangalore to villages in West Bengal, North East, U.P and Bihar has meant that the restaurants have acute shortfall of skilled and semi skilled workers. This has led to higher labour costs which are adding to an already fragile economic viability of the restaurant business in Bangalore.

17. With migrant workers having left Bangalore post Covid 19 acute staff shortage is adversely affecting reopening of fine dining business

15 responses



67% of the respondents feel that the fine dining business in Bangalore is adversely feeling the impact of loss of migrant employees.

## 5 Limitation

Bangalore was among the last cities to open up fine dining after Unlock steps were announced by the Central Government as the state had seen a huge load of Corona cases after an initial success in dealing with the pandemic. Hence, till date many fine dining restaurants have only part opened the operations.

The study was therefore based on limited responses received. North Bangalore being close to the International Airport and business around air travel has been the most severely impacted area in Bangalore with air travel being still very much on a limited side and international travel restricted to only ferry of stranded nationals.

This study was conducted with purely academic interest and should benefit students, my colleagues in the hospitality education sector and restaurant owners to get an overview of fine dining operations in a city like Bangalore post Unlock procedures and restaurant operations there in.

## 6 Conclusion

The Covid 19 pandemic has severely impacted the food and beverage business, especially the fine dining section which typically called for luxurious closed area, personalized waiter service of which silver service was very common. The fact that dining out in such closed spaces without masks made it one of the most risky businesses in terms of risk of spreading the corona virus. Therefore even when business was allowed to re open after Unlock steps were initiated, restaurant fine dining was among the last to be allowed. Bangalore after an initial success in dealing with the pandemic was engulfed with a huge case load and till first week of November was reporting among the highest cases in the country. Therefore the state government held back the permission to open public places like malls and restaurants even after other parts of the country had permitted the activity.

This meant that restaurant owners had to face a huge financial challenge as costs like rentals, interests on loans and staff bills had to be footed. Consequently, the first means of cost cutting was salary cuts. Restaurant staffs were mostly migrant workers from West Bengal, U.P, Bihar and the North East. These workers in turn, unable to meet expenses, returned home to their native villages.

As the unlock process finally came about in Bangalore, North Bangalore, which had flourished prior to the pandemic on the basis of air travel movement from the international airport and the IT corridor came to be one of the most severely hit zones of Bangalore as rentals were high but business travel, international travel came to a grinding halt and IT business called for work from home, which in many of the well known firms has been extended up to June 2021.

The restaurant owners and management either shut shop as they found the business no longer lucrative those who re-opened had a range of changes in operations that included:

- Contactless doors
- Self parking by guests
- Temperature check on guests entering the restaurant
- Provision of hand sanitisation at entry
- Spreading the furniture on the restaurant floor to create social distancing
- Every table having menu cards with QR codes for F&B menu
- Sanitising all raw materials entering the restaurant
- Following social distancing, minimal contact norms in preparation, pickup and delivery
- Insistence on masks or face shields for entry into the outlets

As the business demand was yet to pick up and people remained indoors, restaurant management have worked out alternative means to enhance revenue loss especially the buffet lunch which was very popular with the IT crowd during the weekdays. These measures meant moving away from some traditional concepts of fine dining. The study points to some of these trends as:

- Promoting drive in facility
- Take away counters in fine dining outlets
- Fine dining restaurants joining with aggregators like Swiggy and Food Panda as well as entering door delivery segment which was not common earlier
- A shift towards procuring raw materials that are locally procured
- Accepting the value of immunity foods long enshrined in Indian food history
- Continuing to offer guest with extensive menu and not curtailing choice
- Non vegetarian food continues to attractive to guests dining out concepts without meats are still in its infancy, although the demand for vegetarian food has grown post the pandemic
- Silver service or personalized waiter service have given way to contactless plated service
- Personalised order taking and feedback procedures have been replaced by app based ordering from mobiles and online payments which reduce waiter guest interface to the minimal

The concerns encountered by the fine dining restaurant management in North Bangalore mainly include:

- Revenue loss of almost eight months
- Business levels expected to remain low for at least 4-6 more months
- Higher labour costs due to return of migrant workers due to lockdown
- Closure of international air travel
- Limited domestic air travel
- High levels of fixed costs like rentals, interest on loan
- Work from home culture promoted by government and offices keeping away diners

To conclude, the restaurant business especially fine dining which was a flourishing business pre covid is reeling under the restrictions and costs that have to be incurred for opening the outlets with Unlock protocol in place. With Unlock process on, and many outlets opening up with the suggested protocol, it has been a rather difficult way ahead. The fear of the virus has kept customers at home. With months of losses and high overheads, fine dining business is struggling to come to terms with the impacts of Covid 19. The ray of hope though lies in the fact that a vaccine against the virus is now within striking distance. Like the nation as a whole, restaurant business is also dependent on normal economic activity which includes rail and air travel, both domestic and international, movement of tourists both for business and leisure and an economic recovery.

Though pre covid volumes may be still some distance away, the vaccine is the much awaited confidence booster that should truly revive the tertiary sector that includes travel and tourism and luxury dining. Till such time as this is a reality, restaurant owners especially in metros like Bangalore, shall continue to try and innovate and accommodate what little business they can manage so as to make both ends meet. Profits if any shall be minimal, and the vision shall be futuristic rather than in the present. Hopefully this challenge like any other in the past shall be tided over and soon fine dining would flourish very much like it used to. After all, the success of mankind has hinged around the adaptability of the race. Covid should soon be another challenge from which we emerged stronger.

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