

The Telegraph



Is omicron the last straw for pubs and restaurants?

As proprietors across the country gear up for what could be a make-or-break festive season, many are now facing cancelled bookings. *William Sitwell reports*

As he took the train into London yesterday, restaurateur Russell Norman noticed the smirks and resigned chuckles directed at him. The owner of Brutto, a new Italian trattoria in Clerkenwell, was wearing a badge on the lapel of his corduroy jacket that read: "How's it going to end?" It's a quote from the movie *The Truman Show*, a fable about reality. The badge reflected the mood of Norman, a feeling of frustration and confusion, and of trepidation, of whether the country is once again sliding towards chaos; the unreality of pandemic-induced restrictions, or, God forbid, lockdowns.

"If there's one thing I've noticed from our customers it is absolute confusion," he said, as he opened the doors to his popular establishment. "I saw it on the train: some people wearing masks, others not, and I'm seeing it in the restaurant. People don't know if they should wear masks on arrival, as they move between the table and the bar, or to the loo. But there is one definite thing happening," he adds, "and that is that people are cancelling tables, no question."

"People are waiting for a solid, confident message," he said. "They are nervous and they want guidance."

At present, as the hospitality industry gears up for the most important few weeks of the year, clarity is not what they are getting. It was an almost off-hand remark of one of the Government's most senior advisers, that, in the words of hospitality's leading voice, Kate Nicholls, "had a chilling effect on consumer confidence".

Dr Jenny Harries, chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency and head of NHS test and trace, spoke of "not so-calm" when we don't particularly need it".

It was a cold, wet slip on the face to every restaurateur, chef, cook, waiter and kitchen porter in every restaurant, pub, cafe or hotel in Britain, not to mention every individual in this country who might like to go out, for a drink, a snack, dinner or party. Could anyone ever say that they particularly needed to socialise, that it is a compulsory activity, a die-in-a-ditch necessity for actual human existence? No, we don't need to go out to live – but it sure as hell makes life worth living.

Not that the great party-pooper in chief Dr Harries looks like a woman



MARCUS WAREING
MasterChef judge and patron of London's Marcus

"We've had a few cancellations for our private dining. Mainly from people who were coming from overseas. Boris wants the country to stay open, and I sort of agree, but it's down to us to follow the rules. Overall, I'm not worried, as I think in the fine dining sector there will be enough people going out."



RICHARD GREEN
Founder, 28-50

"Of course lots of people are cancelling – we're new on to our waiting lists. We're keeping everything crossed that the new variant turns out to be a light weight."



TOM PHILLIPS
Head chef at Restaurant Story

"We've made changes to our cancellation policy to safeguard ourselves. Because if a table cancels on the day or the day before, it's not just the cost of ingredients, it's the last revenue. I worry, if we go through another lockdown, how many restaurants will close."

who would know a good time if it collided with her in a cosy, warming, convivial little bar somewhere.

The Government hit back quickly. "We don't want people to cancel such events [Christmas parties]," was Boris's message at a Downing Street briefing on Tuesday. "What we are doing is trying to take a balanced and proportionate approach to the particular risk that seems to be posed by omicron," he added.

Those Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) experts now without that great lockdown-loving despot Matt Hancock as health secretary, it seems, were talking out of turn. Were we witnessing a growing impatience in government with unselected advisers getting too much air-time and credibility for their views? Leader of the Commons Jacob Rees-Mogg certainly seemed to think this as he castigated what he called "this idea that independent bodies of non-elected people are ipso-facto more high-minded, more honest than elected people".

But the damage has been done. As Nicholls, chief executive of UK Hospitality, has reflected: "You are seeing once again a return of uncertainty." The result, she said, was: "We are starting to see a small number of cancellations coming through. It's a trickle at the moment." Those words were uttered at breakfast time on Wednesday morning. By lunchtime over by the Thames, in Hammersmith, it was feeling like a flood.

Sam Harrison, owner of Sam's Riverside, a light, bright establishment freshened by the cool air of the river running past, was trying to be upbeat.

"It's the firms that are the problem," he said. "Office parties are the icing on the cake in any normal December; this year they're absolutely vital. But this morning we've lost several large parties, and that's pretty galling. You only get these parties once a year and when they cancel, you can't replace them. They won't rebook in January."

Harrison breathes a sigh of despair as he reflects how he has somehow managed to navigate the staff shortages crisis in the industry. He has just finished recruiting a full team, "all geared up for a busy December. If we use this now, it will be a real blow."

South of the river, in Clapham, the acclaimed chef and restaurateur Adam Byatt of Trinity is similarly nervous. Lunch service is beginning and, he tells me, "the first goose of the year has just gone into the pan on the stove". Byatt says he has 650 booked to eat his goose – for which he removes the breasts, makes a confit with the legs and wings, and serves with a mountain of trimmings and homemade cranberry sauce.

"Over the last 24 hours, we have seen a number of larger groups cancelling on us," he says. "I'm not panicking yet. But I am angry." Ad in customer worries about not just a new variant, but also falling foul of a new pindemic, and you can see how the situation could snowball. For now at least he doesn't blame the Government, who he believes have taken a measured approach. Instead, he points to the general atmosphere of hysteria, especially in some areas of the media. "It's atrocious and needs to calm down," he says. "Bookings are what I think



RICHARD CORRIGAN
Chef/patron of Corrigan's Mayfair

"This was the Christmas that was supposed to save us. Clearly, that's not going to happen. We've had substantial enough corporate cancellations. It's shown on the bookings as well. The Government are going to have to look at VAT and rates on hospitality. It's not business as usual. By next April, there will be an absolute crisis in hospitality."



STACEY SHERWOOD-FRENCH
Co-owner of Joro, Sheffield

"In recent weeks there has been a huge increase in last-minute cancellations due to people testing positive for Covid. We missed out on one Christmas, to lose another would be devastating."



MARTIN WILLIAMS
CEO of Gaucho • M Restaurants

"The panic and uncertainty has led to a significant amount of cancellations. Thankfully, there are enough level-headed diners, keen to enjoy a great steak in a safe environment, so we still anticipate a very strong festive period."

about when I first wake up and last thing at night when I go to bed. We are a really fragile industry, and the build-up to Christmas is long and hard: from organising staff to pre-ordering ingredients. Any damage to it would be catastrophic."

But is that catastrophe already unfolding? Last month, restaurant group Gusto Italian, with 11 outlets in the north of England and one in Edinburgh, reported 1,000 no-shows in one week, prior to this week's conflicting message from officials. And, in the adjoining sectors of music and sporting events, research shows that one in seven ticket holders who have pre-paid aren't turning up. It's the hospitality businesses who then suffer as their drinks and snacks go cold and unsold.

But while Britain's urban consumers are nervous about dining, more rural restaurants and pubs appear to be more robust.

Freddie Tulloch, proprietor with his wife, Sue, of the Queens Arms in East Garston, near Hungerford in Berkshire, is feeling confident. "I had two deposits for dinner yesterday," he said, "but then the next call was for a table of 16. We are a country-led pub, the people round here work in racing and farming. Work never stops for them in the stables or on the farms, and nothing will stop them going out for Christmas either." Tulloch adds that there's a benefit to flights being cancelled to countries such as South Africa: "We've suddenly picked up on staycations for those who can't go abroad."

Similarly, at the Bear in Wiveliscombe, Somerset, co-owner Millie Coward says: "People are not as nervous as we are being made to think they are. We've got a huge, heated marquee outside but people want the atmosphere of the pub and to be inside."

So, while mixed messages abound, the city dwellers cover and the rural types gather indoors and plug their pints. "It was ever thus," says Norman. "Normal rules don't seem to apply to the countryside." He'll keep brandishing his badge, wondering where it will ever end. There were 42 cancellations yesterday at Brutto. Thank God he takes casual walk-ins; many others may not be so fortunate.

Continued on page 26: Team Boris • Team Jenny, plus Nightmare in Theatreland