

# Victoria Restaurants Need Your Help

By Jean Newton - July 2020

Increased cleaning. The necessity for social distancing that has reduced the number of seats in most restaurants by 50%. The need to pay rent and taxes even when revenue is steeply reduced. Commitment to the wellbeing of their staff, their communities, and their suppliers. These are some of the challenges owners of local restaurants have faced over the past four months and will continue to face in the foreseeable future.

As part of a CRFAIR food literacy webinar series, we invited the owners of three restaurants to be our guests at the July 2nd webinar titled Restaurants In The Time of Covid. Castro Boateng, owner of House of Boateng; Cliff Leir, owner of Fol Epi, Agrius and Paul's Diner; and Kai Riecken, owner of Bakeology, shared their philosophies of food and community, the problems they confront to stay in business during the pandemic, and their ideas for how the public can help restaurants survive this unprecedented disruption to their businesses.

Castro Boateng was born in Ghana and immigrated to Canada with his family at age 9. He worked as a chef at the Rimrock Hotel Resort in Banff and as executive chef at the Aerie Resort before he and his wife Charlotte moved to West Shore, where they opened a fine dining catering business nine years ago. Over his career, Castro has won many awards, including Eat Magazine's 2020 Reader's Choice Award for Chef of the Year at his restaurant, House of Boateng, which he opened in Langford in 2018. Castro says his philosophy of food begins with gathering people, starting with the staff he has gathered around him and extending to provide a gathering place for the community where people can come together and enjoy great food at his restaurant. His cuisine is driven by culture: the culture he's from in West Africa, and the culture where he lives now, on the west coast of Canada. He challenges himself to use ingredients that span his cultural experiences: mushrooms with spices, fish with vanilla. In his recipes he uses foods he forages, such as fiddleheads, and he preserves foods in season so he can use them throughout the year. He explains that he comes from a background where nothing is wasted, and he believes in using every part of a food to eliminate waste. Purchasing food for his restaurant is a group effort that includes staff, friends and business associates in the

community. "I buy the best food I can find from friends and family. It's all about taste," he says.

Cliff Leir is well known for his award winning bakery, Fol Epi, with locations at Dockside Green and downtown on Yates, and for his award winning restaurant, Agrius, located next to Fol Epi on Yates. Fol Epi won three awards in Eat Magazine's 2020 Readers Poll: Best Place to Buy Bread, Best Place to Buy Pastries, and Best Guilty Pleasure. Cliff's career began 20 years ago when he started selling home-baked bread at farmers markets. He loves preparing good food for others. He began working with fermentation and manipulating flavours years before fermentation became trendy. Cliff purchases the vegetables, fruits and meats he uses in his restaurants from local organic farmers. Quality of ingredients is one of his highest priorities. He mills his own flour, which he purchases directly from the Loisselle Family Farm in Vonda, Saskatchewan. The Loisselle Farm has been certified organic since 1985 and has helped bring the heirloom wheat, red fife, back into commercial production. Recently Cliff made the decision to eliminate tipping at Agrius and to increase staff wages to \$20 an hour. He says that staff are key to the success of his businesses and that they should not depend on the uncertainty of tips to pay their rent and meet living expenses. Prices at the restaurant have also increased, partly to cover staff wages and also to meet increased operating costs due to the pandemic. Cliff says most of his customers support these changes.

Kai Riecken is owner and baker at Bakeology, a popular new cafe she opened at the corner of Admirals and Gorge Road in 2018. As a young adult, Kai worked in cafes and food service, followed by a career in academia in community population health. Her dream was to open a cafe that would provide a meeting place where people could eat fresh baked goods, drink great coffee, and stay to hang out in a beautiful setting. Bakeology, located in the historic Brookman Building overlooking the Gorge, has free WIFI, board games and a Little Free Library that invites people to "take a book, leave a book." It also has a zero waste philosophy, and everything in the cafe is compostable. Prior to the opening of Bakeology, there wasn't a neighbourhood cafe in the locale, and a wide demographic of the population has been eager to support it. When the pandemic hit and the cafe closed for a couple of weeks, Kai was approached by a group of people who had raised money they wanted to give her to help assure that the cafe wouldn't close permanently. She used the money to buy ingredients so she and her staff could keep baking, and she donated the goods she baked to people in need. The cafe has now reopened Thursday through Sunday, mostly for take-out (though there are a few tables, spaced

far apart).

Toward the end of the webinar, CRFAIR asked Castro, Cliff and Kai how people in our community can help restaurants survive the pandemic. The consensus among our guests is that they are all struggling, no one expects to make a profit this year, everyone is stressed and in survival mode. They ask that people come out to the restaurants, tell friends about the experience, and encourage others to try the restaurants' new offerings. And be patient with staff and with other guests. Follow the arrows and lines to support social distancing. Don't touch what you're not supposed to touch. Restaurants need to meet safety criteria to protect guests and their workers. It's stressful for staff, who are doing their best and have their own families and responsibilities to look after. And expect to pay a little more for the food. The cost of doing business is higher, while social distancing requirements have reduced capacity 50%. Restaurants are offering new things: take-home meals to reheat, pizza nights, bulk baked goods for people to take home and freeze. You can support restaurants by showing up and letting them know their customer base is still there.

*Written by Jean Newton, CRFAIR volunteer and member of the Food Literacy Working Group.*