

Winter Cities – A Frozen Opportunity

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Winter is coming, and in some cities of the Great White North, it is already here! For many Canadians, the cold weather signals a time to put away the outdoor furniture, get the snow shovels out of storage, and stay indoors as much as possible. This year, the continuing waves of COVID-19 will make staying-in even more favourable. For restaurateurs however, this is just more bad news in a year that seems to keep bringing mounting challenges. When initial lockdown measures were loosened in May and June of 2020, patio and outdoor dining became the lifeline for many establishments that were teetering on financial failure.

Interview Insights: A pub in London, Ontario described how regulatory changes allowed their patio to be expanded into their parking lot and utilize space that usually sat empty. The increased patio size allowed for employees to be hired back and service to continue at sustainable levels. “It was huge for us, customers finally felt safe to come eat and have a drink outside.”

Indeed, many cities raced to cut the red tape it took to open or expand a patio, knowing that they were a safe and easy measure to keep the industry alive (1). In late spring and early autumn many patrons were willing to dress for the weather so they could enjoy their favourite pint and meal outside; however, asking people to dine outside when it is twenty below may bring mostly cold stares, even from the most seasoned wintery Canadians. Many cities have extended patio seasons to cover the winter months (2), and many businesses have responded by buying up patio heaters and propane fireplaces in the attempt to get a few more weeks out of their patios. These, however, are short-term solutions.

Interview Insight: One individual in the restaurant industry stated that she is grateful that the City of Waterloo has allowed them to extend their outdoor patio until the end of the year. Along with the purchase of heaters, she is hoping this will attract people to the restaurant in the cooler months.

To survive as an industry, it will take more than heaters, tarps, and blankets. Both businesses and communities need to be creative. Luckily, Canadians are not novices when it comes to adapting to winter. Organizing activities around the colder months is a fact of life for many Canadians. Ironically, many people flock to ‘winter cities’ such as Ottawa, Edmonton, Montreal, and Quebec City to take part in outdoor winter festivals and markets. Runny noses and red cheeks are small prices to pay for a warm Beaver Tail after a cold skate on the Rideau Canal, or the sticky sweet goodness of *tire d’érable* during winter carnival in Québec City. These Canadian traditions raise the question, why can’t we capitalize on Winter instead of trying to fight it?

Out in the frozen west, cities like Edmonton, Winnipeg and Calgary have led the charge in creative ways to winterize outdoor dining. Edmonton specifically, has been working on ‘embracing the chill’ since 2017. Many establishments have installed heaters, outdoor grills, wood fires, and changed menus to better suit the weather (3). The city has provided detailed guides on how to design four season patios, focusing on solar access, awnings, providing blankets, heating sources, and using insulated furniture (4). Additionally, some businesses around the country are installing bubble structures or ‘dining igloos’ that segregate private dining groups and protect patrons from the elements, but some have raised the

concern that the difference between these and indoor dining is negligible in terms of limiting the spread of COVID and in some cases, have even been shut down by health officials (5).

Interview Insight: A restaurant in Collingwood, Ontario described when they were allowed to open their patio in early summer of 2020, they had initial success, “we were beating our monthly sales from the year before with just our patio when we opened.” However, they were worried about continuing this into the colder months. “we have patio heaters, we have had them for a long time, and they were definitely helpful in November, but the concern is when temperatures really drop. “

However, if cases are locally stabilized and health protocols are followed, COVID-safe winter festivals or open markets may be a perfect way for communities to gather safely over the winter months. By utilizing empty parking lots, city parks, or fair grounds, cities can organize safe outdoor food and drink festivals, skate-up markets, and travelling food truck meetups that get people outside and allow businesses to continue to operate. Cities that are fortunate to already have winter recreation facilities like outdoor rinks, ski hills, and winter trails can further capitalize by integrating food and drink options where it is safe to do so.

The potential success for all these ideas hinges on our ability to keep cases down, and follow the rules of local health authorities. The recent move back into a lockdown scenario for some large cities, makes the idea of investing in costly components to winterize patios unfeasible for many locations (6). One restaurant in Toronto purchased 10 mini greenhouses for \$1000/each back in October, but now with in-person dining banned again, this \$10,000 investment does not seem to be paying off (7). However, if cases stabilize and outdoor dining is deemed safe to continue, some businesses will be able to slow down the financial hemorrhaging during a time they usually counted on in the past with holiday parties and family outings. Further, the investment into winterized patios is not a COVID-only investment. Even when things return to ‘normal,’ whatever that turns out to be, local governments and community organizations should continue to push for winterizing their cities. Improving outdoor spaces and integrating them with the food retail sector will reap rewards in all four seasons of the year.

- 1) Bicknell, B. (2020, June 12). Restaurant patios back in business in London. *CTV News*. Retrieved from <https://london.ctvnews.ca>
- 2) City of Toronto News Release (2020, October 27). City Council approves extended winter patio program for curbside cafes and expanded private patios. *City of Toronto*. Retrieved from <https://www.toronto.ca/news>
- 3) City of Edmonton (2020). Winter Patios. *Winter City Edmonton*. Retrieved from <https://www.wintercityedmonton.ca/be-social/winter-patios-2/>

- 4) City of Edmonton (2017). Four Seasons Patio Design Tips. *Winter City* Edmonton. Retrieved from https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/documents/PDF/all-season-patio-design-tips.pdf
- 5) Warzecha, M. (2020, November 4). Bubble Trouble: Are dining domes safe? *Ottawa Citizen*. Retrieved from <https://ottawacitizen.com/>
- 6) News Staff (2020, November 20). Toronto and Peel moving back into lockdown on Monday: Ford. *City News Toronto*. Retrieved from <https://toronto.citynews.ca>
- 7) Canadian Press (2020, October 21). Restaurants doubt winter patios will save industry. *Orangeville*. Retrieved from <https://www.orangeville.com>