

## Athens Restaurant Owners Successfully Adapt to Pandemic Challenges

By: Lindsay Flinn

In [March](#) 2020, The World Health Organization identified the COVID-19 virus as a pandemic, causing a major panic and forcing people into quarantine with an unknown future ahead of them. The sudden shutdown forced business owners to create plans of action, with some choosing to temporarily close and some opting for adjustments to their normal routine. Among those businesses were Athens restaurants Maepole and The National.

Peter Dale, owner of [Maepole](#), The National, Seabear, and Condor Chocolates was forced into a difficult situation. With businesses of so many varieties, he had to come up with plans for how to conduct business so that customers could enjoy their food safely while also creating the same ambience as before. Dale worked alongside Erin Wilson, the general manager of The National, to come up with solutions.

Dale has always loved food. He grew up in Athens with a family that loved to cook and entertain as much as they could. After graduating from UGA with a major in public relations, Peter spent a few years working in politics in D.C. before he realized he was most passionate about food and hospitality. He returned to Athens where he held an apprenticeship at Five & Ten and then went on to become a chef and co-owner of The National, Seabear, Condor Chocolates and Maepole.

After it opened in 2018, Maepole became popular with both students and locals because of its healthy options and quick service. When stores began closing due to COVID-19 in March,

Maepole was able to remain open by relying on online ordering. They started by placing to-go orders on a folding table then upgraded to a sturdier shelf once business picked up. This method was largely successful, but it came with a few learning curves as well.

Dale said that one of his main concerns was getting quality food to his customers while also providing the same level of service. Maepole adjusted by hiring additional staff and adding a staff member in the shelving area. This incorporated a customer service aspect that was not there with the simple “grab-and-go” style.

There has also been some thought about opening normally in the spring, but this option also has its drawbacks.

“People traditionally would go down our line and we would help them build their plate,” said Dale, “but it was actually kind of loud and we had to read lips and point a lot.” This is something to consider since customers will likely still be wearing masks, making it difficult to serve.

In 2011, Wilson joined Dale at The National as an intern and worked her way up to general manager. When the pandemic began, Dale worked with Wilson to make adjustments to The National’s serving technique.

[The National](#) is an established restaurant and has been in Athens since 2007. Since The National had always been known for its fine dining, Wilson and the rest of the staff felt it was risky to move to the to-go option. However, she said that her biggest concern was keeping her staff safe

and employed. The National opened up business for take-out and eventually shifted to some patio service in the summer. “We were really happy to find that we are able to give a hospitality experience that we feel proud of and also feels safe for guests and staff,” said Wilson about the addition of the patio service.

Wilson and Dale both expressed their gratitude for working in Athens businesses during such a difficult time. While businesses struggled to adjust in the beginning, some were able to maintain sales by adapting their business to the safety needs of their customers. From April to June, the number of business applications actually increased 2% nationwide. In Georgia, the difference was even larger with a 31% [increase](#) in applications. Molly’s Coffee Company and Café on Lumpkin are just a few of the [Athens restaurants](#) that were able to open in May and July.

Business owners said that they were able to capitalize off of people’s need for something new and exciting to look forward to during the pandemic. Dale and Wilson also found several ways to make the best out of their situation.

For Dale, he found that social media and photography are essential and has invested more time in making sure Maepole’s products are shared online. He also shared plans to add Maepole locations in Atlanta. “I think that in the end we’re going to be a stronger, better business because of this process,” he said.

At The National, Wilson plans to create an indoor-outdoor experience with sliding windows that open up to 9 feet. “It would create not only an airflow and safety benefit but would also create

this feeling of excitement and something that no one else really has in a dining experience in Athens,” Wilson said.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused more creativity and flexibility in business owners than many of them had ever imagined. Although the situation is temporary, the lessons that they learned will be carried into the future.

###