



Theakston's Thoughts: Reopening

Now that the road map has been published and if all goes to plan, we now know when we can go to the pubs. There has been a flurry of headlines about pubs opening and to some extent some of the pub groups have even announced how many of their pubs will be opening. Clearly not all can as it is only outside drinking but those that can, can rightly expect a brisk trade. The public sense of anticipation is palpable, and it has been widely reported with pubs being inundated with bookings. All great news and I for one can't wait for that first creamy, smooth, cool and refreshing pint!

However, there are a couple of aspects that I think are being overlooked a little in the euphoria of being able to sit in a beautiful garden creating new or renewing old friendships and enjoying the company of long last seen family. Firstly, in my view it's going to take a lot more than one summer to put the pubs in general back in the black again!

The restrictions appear as ever to be complicated, open to different interpretations and will vary depending on where you are. What really concerns me is that these restrictions, possibly inadvertently, have now put a huge amount of pressure onto pubs and more particularly the teams that run them. Just because the pub might have a car park, or a garden does not mean that it can make money. Although it's easy to get a lot of tables and chairs, the rule of six applies, unless you are from 2 families, as well as not forgetting that the 2-metre rule is over-riding. That means a lot of space will be required. Who's going to police this? Yes, it's the pub and its team!

All it takes is one phone call or a quick photo on a mobile by a passer-by who is nervous about covid or an anti-pub member of the public and the pub could be in a whole heap of trouble. A good friend of mine who runs a small takeaway café had a visitation from not only the police but also from the environmental health authority, threatening to close him down permanently, causing him no end of stress. This was simply due to someone reporting him for standing too close to a customer, who happened to be his sister!

One of the most surprising aspects of the 'help out to eat out' campaign last summer was how aggressive and rude a small minority of customers were. Why, because they had to wait too long, despite the pub being full to the covid capacity. How many members of the team do you have on? Too many and you lose money, too few and you potentially lose customers. Not an easy balance to judge!

Trying to control groups waiting for tables, let alone those at the tables to comply with the regulations could become difficult especially if entertainment such as sports are being shown, or live bands are performing. How many tables will be available? As there will be an expectation to deliver drinks and possibly food (if available) quickly, how many team members do you employ? Is it worthwhile as it could quickly become unprofitable? Once you open the kitchen the costs go through the roof, but do you offer the full menu or what? My answer is a small simple and easy menu that is well advertised and importantly manage customers' expectations at every point of contact. However, there is no way of getting passed the fact that whichever way you look at it the pub licensee and its team will be under huge pressure. I can well understand pubs not opening up until customers are allowed inside (currently 17th May) so at least the kitchen will stand a chance of being profitable.

I know that some might say that I'm being a bit negative, possibly yes, but having worked in pubs most of my life I know how difficult it can be whilst remembering to smile all the time!

Despite all I've said, we are finally embarking on the comeback for the great British pubs and the positives outweigh the negatives as you can't deny. As I have said before, the pubs are the heart of the UK and it's what makes us all truly British. You may well come across those customers who can be unreasonable, but they are a tiny minority. Those dedicated locals, the excited students, the office workers, the farmers, the builders and the marvellous essential workers are there ready to help the comeback and to spend their money the best way they can. I would like to raise a glass (any excuse) and wish all in the trade the very best of luck and may the rain stay away, and **all** the customers prove me wrong!