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Orinda is open for business, cautiously

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo provided

Gradually, businesses in Orinda are reopening, but not in a rush. Owners are happy to welcome customers back, but only in ways that are safe for customers and for owners and their employees. Government services are also slowly reopening. Parks and Rec ran its first camps for small groups, and a few community youth sports groups have been given authorization to use city and school district fields. The library, which has been offering online services, is now open for book pickups and drop-offs.

Theatre Square isn't exactly bustling, but it isn't completely deserted either. On a recent afternoon, people were enjoying eating outdoors or having coffee. Many of the restaurants in the Theatre District offer some sort of outdoor dining. The Fourth Bore has a large outdoor patio with heaters, and there is seating by other restaurants, including Shelby's and Saffron.

Some shops are open, such as Sanvitalia Home and Garden. Others have reopened with limited hours, such as Orinda Travel, which is open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sweet Dreams Toy Store is open, requiring face coverings for all customers. Others, such as Anytime Fitness and Bamboo Spa remain closed. Anytime Fitness will be one of the last businesses that will be able to open, according to general manager Jami Edgell, but it has been offering the entire community, not just to

members, numerous free virtual classes each day and are planning to organize some outdoor classes.

For other businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a surprising increase in business. Square Baby founder Katie Thomson said their online, direct-to-consumer business has skyrocketed as parents look for healthy, fresh, convenient options that save them time in the kitchen and save them a trip to the grocery store. Square Baby meals are delivered frozen with dry ice in an eco-friendly shipping box with compostable insulation. "Recently, we have started meeting parents at our Theatre Square store to pick up the meals if that's more convenient for them. However, we imagine we'll be switching back to no-contact doorstep delivery with the new spike in cases."

Derek Zemrak, owner of the Orinda Theatre, Cine Cuvee, and Republic of Cake, has been organizing some entertainment under the theatre marquee on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Cine Cuvee has moved all the interior tables and chairs to underneath the marquee and arranged them to enable social distancing. They encourage the wearing of masks and welcome food from other restaurants as long as customers purchase drinks from Cine Cuvee. On Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. there is an open mic for singers from the Bay Area.

Zemrak says that Republic of Cake is doing really well, expanding the wholesale side and selling to Diablo Foods, as well as doing more deliveries and expanding offerings. The theatre, he added, is ready to go, but the studios are not distributing any films until July 24.

Sutter Health Orinda Urgent Care has been open since June 8 and Orinda Optometry Group reopened on May 4. During the time that the office was closed, according to optometrist Kristine Eng, their team spent the time reviewing new guidelines, implementing procedures, and acquiring protective equipment. "We installed Plexiglass guards throughout the office, don PPE including face shields, and have a sanitizing process for all surfaces and eyewear to keep our patients and employees safe." The parking lot has become the waiting area, and temperature checks are required before entering the building. The schedule has been rearranged in order to ensure social distancing.

Also on the Village Side, Orinda Books is slowly trying to make its way back to some semblance of normalcy, continuing with virtual author events. Although the store cannot yet host book club meetings, it is open for customers to come in and browse the shelves.

Mash Gas, which has remained open as an essential service, initially experienced a 70% drop in business. Owner Mo Mashhoon dropped prices to help the community, and business recovered to about 85% of pre-pandemic levels.

Café Teatro, located on Orinda Way below the library, recently renewed their lease, but owner Joe Kim says that business has been terrible. "Regulars come in for coffee and food," he said, but with nothing going on, no events, and when the library was completely closed, it was bad. However, Kim feels lucky to have a good patio. Although he felt confident renewing the lease, he thinks that business won't be back 100%. Siam Orchid, across the street, continues to do takeout business only. Owner Pepsi Phunmongkol says that with 21 tables inside, he could place them six feet apart to provide for social distancing, but for the time being the takeout business has picked up.

Baan Thai owner Jim Phoonpirom said that he was kind of scared because most people don't wear masks. He is fine for now with pickup only, and said that only two or three customers had asked about reopening. Genuine Goodness owner Donna Pickhall said she was closing for the month of July to review her menu and how to operate in a safe and efficient way. "We don't want anybody inside," she said. "Eventually we will be taking orders at the door, but we need a place for customers to line up." Geppetto's Caffè owner Frank Leou said that his patio seating has been busy, but many customers have been calling to ask when the café will be open for inside seating.

City Manager Steve Salomon has said that he has offered to work with local restaurants to provide for more outdoor seating, but he hasn't met with an enthusiastic response. Several restaurants contacted for this story said that they are concerned about the health and wellbeing of the owners and staff and are happy to continue with takeout for the time being.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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