

# Planning for the unthinkable

How caterers and event planners survived a pandemic year

BY MONICA PARPAL STOCKBRIDGE





**W**hen Colorado Gov. Jared Polis issued the “stay at home” order last in March 2020, global event planner and MorEvents’ founder Betsy Mordecai was on her way to catch an international flight. She immediately turned around and began fielding a flood of cancellations. “All of our clients started calling, everything was canceled, and we were very busy from March until June, canceling, rebooking, trying to figure out what was next,” Mordecai recalls.

### **SURVIVING THE SHUTDOWN**

Mordecai is one of many Colorado event planners and caterers who faced unspeakable challenges at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many had to furlough their employees as they watched their revenue evaporate. The entire state’s food and beverage industry suffered. The Colorado Restaurant Association released a report in October 2020 stating that the industry lost nearly \$1 billion in revenue in April 2020 alone, shedding about 87,000 jobs in the process.

Gretchen Bartek, founder and CEO of Adelska, launched her company just two years ago as a full-service event and party planner

for networking events, client appreciation events, team building, festivals and corporate retreats. “It was a business that I had been grinding out on for almost five years and had just started to really hit. And we were starting to onboard new team members, look at other cities to move out to. And obviously [Covid-19] was very devastating for us,” she says.

Footers Catering CEO Anthony Lambatos had a similar experience. “We were gearing up for a record year,” he says. “We had big plans. And then the rug got pulled out from under us.” As a full-service, off-premise caterer, Footers relies on live, in-person events. When Colorado restricted gatherings to 10 people or fewer, it cast a thick fog over the future of catering and events. The toughest thing, Lambatos says, was “just not knowing” what was going to happen.

Epicurean Catering’s Chairman and founder Larry DiPasquale calls the pandemic an “unthinkable” event. As the exclusive or preferred caterer at venues like Empower Field at Mile High and the Denver Center for Performing Arts, Epicurean experienced an 83% decline in revenue from 2019 to 2020. DiPasquale was able to keep his core manage-

ment and sales teams, but the furloughs were difficult.

### **DECIDING TO PIVOT**

DiPasquale asked himself, “How do we take care of our own, as they are now out of work unexpectedly?” He decided to launch a program to offer furloughed team members frozen soups they could pick up and take home, calling it the “Soup for You” program. Over time, Epicurean Catering extended “Soup for You” to others in the hospitality workforce and served additional communities through Mental Health Facilities of Denver and Volunteers of America. Epicurean also initiated a program to feed frontline hospital workers, firefighters and police, serving about 16,000 meals from March to May 2020. What’s more, Epicurean published a cookbook, offering a portion of proceeds to hospitality workers through an organization called Catering Alliance.

Similarly, the Footers team decided to create experiences for people whose plans were suddenly canceled. “Our team has an incredible ability to problem solve and think creatively,” Lambatos says. For Mother’s Day, Footers assembled 300 packages that included a kids’ craft, family activities, brunch, an afternoon

picnic and a floral arrangement — sourcing product from locally owned Polidori Sausage.

At-home experiences were a hit for Adelska as well, which pivoted to date boxes highlighting locally owned businesses. One such experience involved learning to play chess virtually with a grandmaster from Portugal, with hand-delivered custom chess boards, wine flights and charcuterie boards. “I was just trying to get a way for people to have fun at home,” Bartek says.

MorEvents leaned hard into the virtual event space. Mordecai stocked up with equipment, fiber, and computers, and eventually hired additional staff capable of running a high-powered production studio. “We’ve become subject matter experts in the virtual space,” she says.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

More than halfway through 2021, DiPasquale is catering events again. “By no means are we out of the woods, but we’re

seeing people starting to gather,” he says, especially with weddings and private events; corporate events are slower to come back.

Footers Catering is experiencing a similar rebound. “Weddings are really driving our recovery,” Lambatos says. In fact, Footers Catering took a calculated risk in 2020 — moving forward with a planned expansion to an on-premise catering and events venue called Social Capitol. “It’s pretty cool for us to have come out of the other side of the pandemic with this opportunity to be in a whole new spot,” he says. “We’ll see what happens with the Delta variant but, you know, the second half of this year is on track to be just as good if not better than 2019 was for us.”

Despite the challenges of the past year and a half, Bartek kept going, because “I’m insanely stubborn and refused to give up,” she says. Adelska has started doing select in-person events once again, including the annual Pumpkin Harvest Festival at Four Mile Historic Park this October. Bartek will also continue doing

the packaged at-home experiences, especially for dispersed corporate teams looking for ways to connect.

Mordecai believes the corporate world will be seeing virtual options for a long time. Events that had 1,500 attendees in person before the pandemic might still get 1,500 in-person attendees, but they might also get 7,000 online. “The silver lining is that I think it’s changed meeting planning or event planning for the future.” From June through December, MorEvents has 122 virtual meetings on the books.

Despite what these industry professionals have been through, they all mentioned being incredibly proud of their teams. “I feel so lucky to have the kind of staff that we do,” Mordecai says. DiPasquale echoes the sentiment. “The silver lining that I’ve pulled out of this is I just love to see how people step up and continue to move forward.”

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