



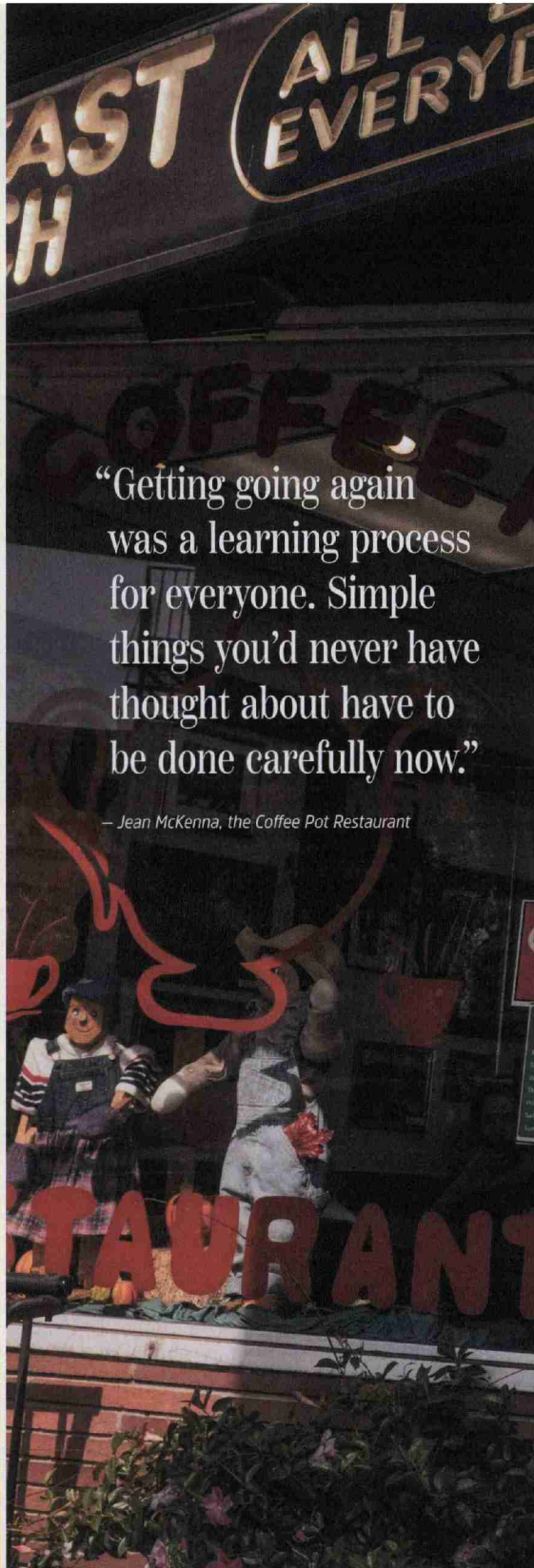
WHAT'S ON THE MENU FOR LOCAL EATERIES?

Restauranting in the time of COVID-19 presents a series of challenges never seen before. Here's how some Granite State establishments are dealing with the situation.

Jean McKenna remembers that fateful day in March. A town officer came into the **Coffee Pot Restaurant**, which she and her husband run on Main Street in Littleton, and ordered her to stop serving food inside at once. From that minute on, everything had to be carried out. Customers would wait outside in the cold. If she didn't comply immediately, he would call the state police. "I knew the man personally," McKenna says, "and was kind of upset that he took such a mean tone." McKenna wears a pin on her shirt that reads, "Make America Kind Again."

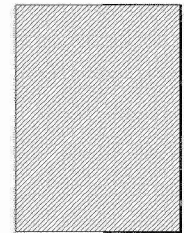
BY ANDERS MORLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JARED CHARNEY

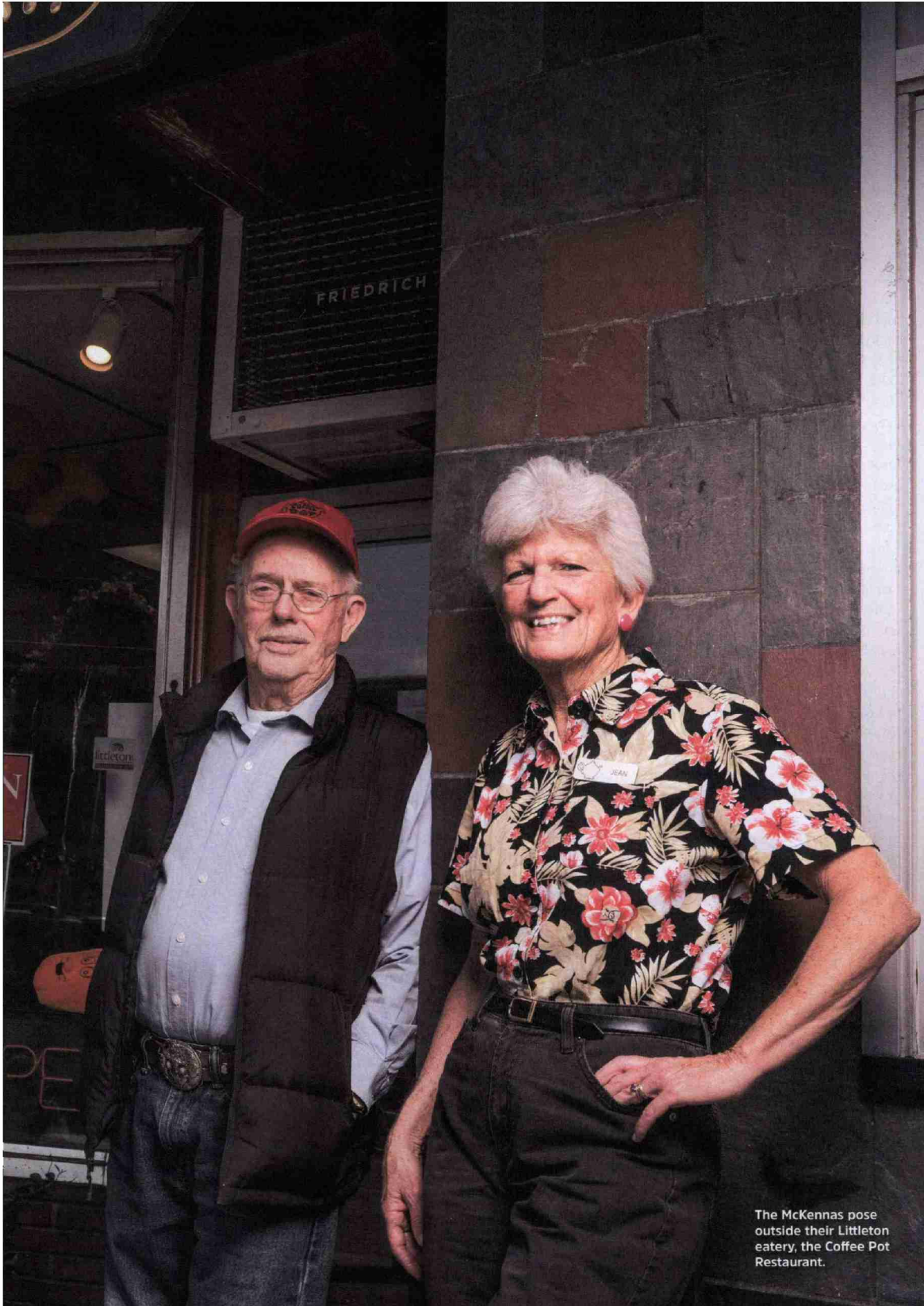
40 nhmagazine.com | November 2020



"Getting going again was a learning process for everyone. Simple things you'd never have thought about have to be done carefully now."

— Jean McKenna, the Coffee Pot Restaurant





The McKennas pose outside their Littleton eatery, the Coffee Pot Restaurant.

The restaurant shifted to takeout, but after a few days it proved unprofitable. "I said, 'You know what, gang? We're closing,'" McKenna recalls. The restaurant closed for three months. The McKennas made the most of it by tidying up inside — attending to things they'd been wanting to do for years, such as installing new lights and repainting.

Their staff went on unemployment, but by then the McKennas had already applied for a PPP loan of \$25,000. Because of a rule mandating that 75% of the loan be used within eight weeks to fund payroll, McKenna knew it was useless, now that they were closed. She returned the money. They then qualified for an Economic Injury Disaster Loan and a grant from the New Hampshire Main Street Relief Fund. "It was like going through a Harry Potter maze," she says. "Poor Harry, trying to make his way through when all the trees kept growing in around him."

Rent, gas, electric bills, insurance and taxes all still had to be paid. Landlord Jack Eames owns the spaces out of which several downtown businesses are run. "He is remarkable," says McKenna. He sent notifications to all his tenants explaining that he was monitoring the situation and intended to pass along to his tenants every benefit that was offered to him as a landlord.

"And my kids were with me," McKenna says, referring to her staff. When they reopened in mid-June, the whole staff came back. "Getting going again was a learning process for everyone," she recalls. "Simple things you'd never have thought about have to be done carefully now. We used to just pass a ketchup bottle from one table to another if someone needed it. Now someone has to grab it, walk it over to the work area, clean it, and walk it to the other table. Everything hangs on sanitation and disinfecting." Shower curtains separate the booths, which cannot be moved 6 feet apart. "Customers are learning that they have to wait for tables to be entirely sanitized and bussed before they can approach."

The Coffee Pot's employees love being back, McKenna says. The kitchen staff is a little overwhelmed, since takeout service has continued — but she's not complaining. It helps make up for losses elsewhere. The café now closes at 2 p.m. instead of 4. Wearing masks for so long was hard on the workers. When they made the change, McKenna called up customers who eat later in the afternoon to apologize and tell them they'd have to start coming in earlier.

"We work with whatever happens," she

says. "A group came in this morning and I told them, 'You know, you get what you get. And that's me.'"

Diners and cafés like the Coffee Pot play the role once played by the taverns that dotted the lonely highways of early New Hampshire. "The tavern barroom often served as a community bulletin board," write James and Donna-Belle Garvin in "On the Road North of Boston," their history of New Hampshire turnpikes and taverns. A community bulletin board flanks the entrance to the Coffee Pot today.

It's not just whim that makes McKenna talk about her staff and customers as her "family." In small-town or neighborhood coffee shops, customers are often regulars; there is an almost sibling dynamic between staff and clientele; and meals become part of customers' daily routines. On a recent Friday morning, six or eight unconnected guests sat around the Coffee Pot's horse-shoe-shaped counter and gabbed like cousins at a Thanksgiving table. This family dynamic, too, links coffee shops to the taverns of yore. "With few exceptions," write the Garvins, "tavern guests ate their meals with the innkeeper's family, just as if they were friends rather than strangers."

Another family business sits up the street from the Coffee Pot. Steve Bromley and his daughter Jillian Sartorelli own the **Littleton Freehouse Taproom & Eatery**. Different businesses face different challenges in the time of COVID-19, and the Littleton Freehouse's challenge is that it opened its doors in December 2018, a little over a year before the pandemic hit, forcing it to close. Bromley and Sartorelli applied for various federal

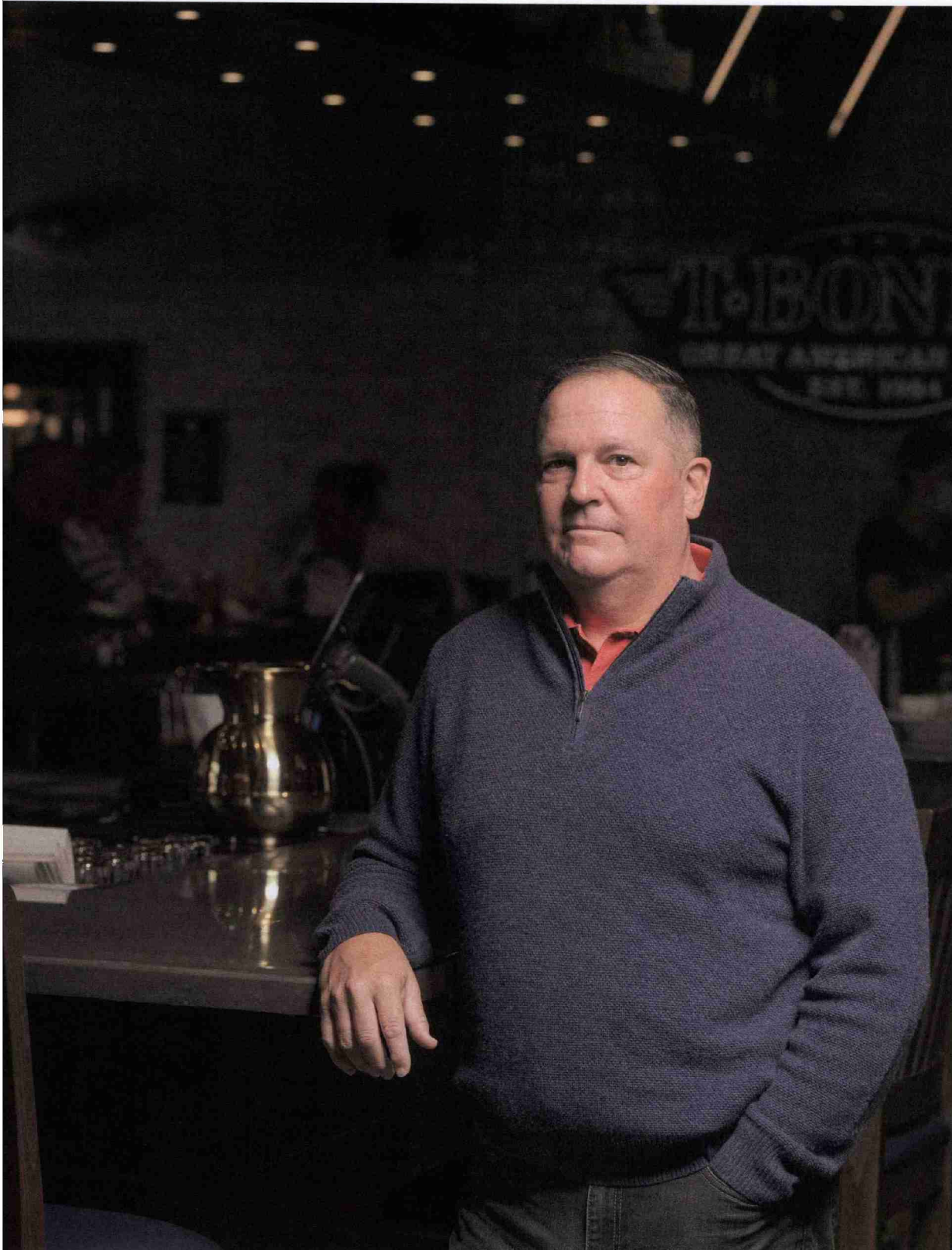


Tom Boucher, owner and CEO of Great New Hampshire Restaurants (also next page), at the September grand opening of the Concord T-Bones location. This is the sixth T-Bones in the state.

"People have always used restaurants as places to socialize, but it's who we socialize with that is changing."

— Tom Boucher, *Great New Hampshire Restaurants*







“The idea is to have a restaurant-quality meal at home in 30 minutes for a good price. It’s one way we’re filling a need.”

— Sean Brown, COO of Common Man Family of Restaurants



loans, secured a payroll loan, and were able to keep their full staff employed to run the takeout business. Everyone had to learn the new health protocols.

The Freehouse opened its frontside patio in May with the help of outdoor heaters. Last summer, they added additional patio seating at the back. Now they are glad they did, even though managing this spread-out dining area involves lots of hustling and close attention to sanitary guidelines.

When they were greenlighted to open inside, they removed half the seats to comply with physical-distancing norms. They converted their function room to normal seating. Despite the decreased capacity, they did pretty well, because the patio business kept going.

The public had to be trained too. There was some vocal pushback to masks, but Bromley says a majority were understanding of the situation.

"We're lucky to be in the North Country," he says. "People come up here and feel very safe. It's an opportunity to go for a trip and feel normal. I've talked to restaurant owners in southern areas who didn't have the luxury of opening up. But here there were lots of hikers and day-trippers who would just come up, take a walk along Main Street, eat and drive home." The flipside is that the outdoor dining season in the North Country is shorter than in southern New Hampshire.

"We have a great local following too," Bromley says. Even in a relatively small community, he insists, this amounts to something. With many students learning remotely, he suspects that more families will be living under the same roof this winter and that they will be among his regular customers. Bromley calls himself optimistic, and predicts that the restaurant will do about 75% of the business it did last year. It's an outcome he says he can only be happy with. "It's hard to hope for a return to normal before the discovery of a vaccine."

Meanwhile, south of the notches, the economic stakes are high for the kinds of multiple-outlet restaurant groups on whose success hundreds of people depend for their livelihoods. Conventional wisdom says they are the ones mostly likely to come through COVID-19 alive.

Still, Tom Boucher, owner and CEO of **Great New Hampshire Restaurants** — which includes T-Bones, Cactus Jack's, and The Copper Door — is worried. "Since the start of COVID-19, business has been kind of a mix," he says. "July was very good,

August not quite as good, and September has fallen off." Outdoor dining now represents 25-30% of the group's volume, but Boucher is unsure whether his customers are eating outside because of health concerns or because the weather has been nice. At T-Bones in Hudson, he has brought in a heatable tent as a prewinter experiment. "But it's obviously done at great expense," he says.

"In business your worst nightmare is uncertainty," Boucher explains. "I'm not going to sugarcoat it. It's grim. It's going to be a very lean winter."

Boucher and his team have been brainstorming promotions to draw as many customers as they can safely accommodate. They paid Saint Anselm College to do an official poll that asked potential customers: "Would you dine out more often if you were offered a discount during slower periods?" Two-thirds of respondents said they would. Now Boucher and company are designing a promotion aimed at bringing guests in during the afternoon lull. Another promotion now underway at T-Bones is the Fair Menu. "It's inspired by New England's fall fairs," Boucher says, "all of which have of course been canceled."

The National Restaurant Association recently reported that one in six US restaurants have closed since March. Many will never reopen. Restaurants that have remained open are often operating with reduced staff and higher-than-normal operating costs. "The public grossly underestimates how hard it is for restaurants to keep operating," Boucher says. "In normal times, a restaurant makes something like 4 to 6 cents on the dollar. It's a slim profit margin." The number of closed restaurants is likely only to rise over the winter.

"If there's one thing I'd like the general public to be aware of," he says, "it's the ripple effect caused by restaurant closures and volume reductions. Meals and rental tax, business profits tax, business enterprise tax, property tax — we produce so much in taxes for the state of New Hampshire. And then there is the business generated to suppliers, from farms producing food to general food lines and basic restaurant supplies." He says more relief funding is needed to avert disaster.

But even Boucher sees a bright spot. "People have always used restaurants as places to socialize, but it's who we socialize with that is changing," he tells me, adding that as long as you follow all the protocols, restaurants are safe places to be. "The one weak point is if you're sharing a table with

someone outside your family group.” He’s noticed, though, that when people go out these days, it’s often with their families. And he thinks that’s good.

Compared to Tom Boucher, Sean Brown is upbeat. Brown is COO of the **Common Man Family of Restaurants**, another big player. He says things for the Common Man are better than anticipated. They’ve had a good summer and a loyal clientele. Brown expects an overall falloff with the arrival of cold weather, but there are no plans to extend the outdoor-eating season artificially.

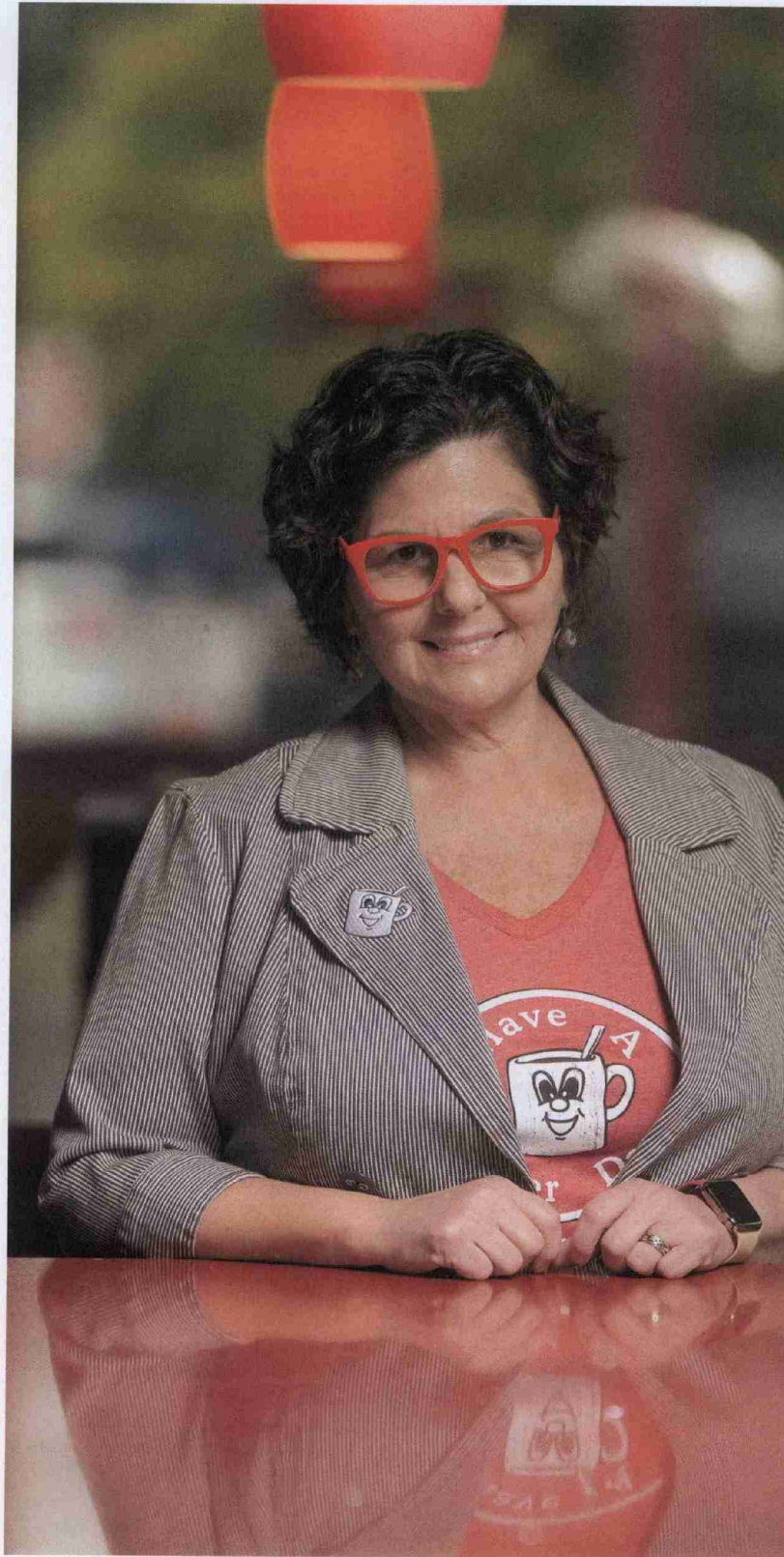
The Common Man has adapted in the same ways as other restaurants. On any given week, takeout represents about 20% of sales. According to Brown, however, much of the group’s success depends on their presence across the lower two-thirds of the state. “Different pockets are busy at different times,” he says. “The Lakes Region is busy in the summertime, while after Labor Day business in the southern tier starts to pick back up again. This year in the Lakes Region and Lincoln, we’ve have seen a lot of our southern-tier regulars with second homes take up residence and become regulars farther north.”

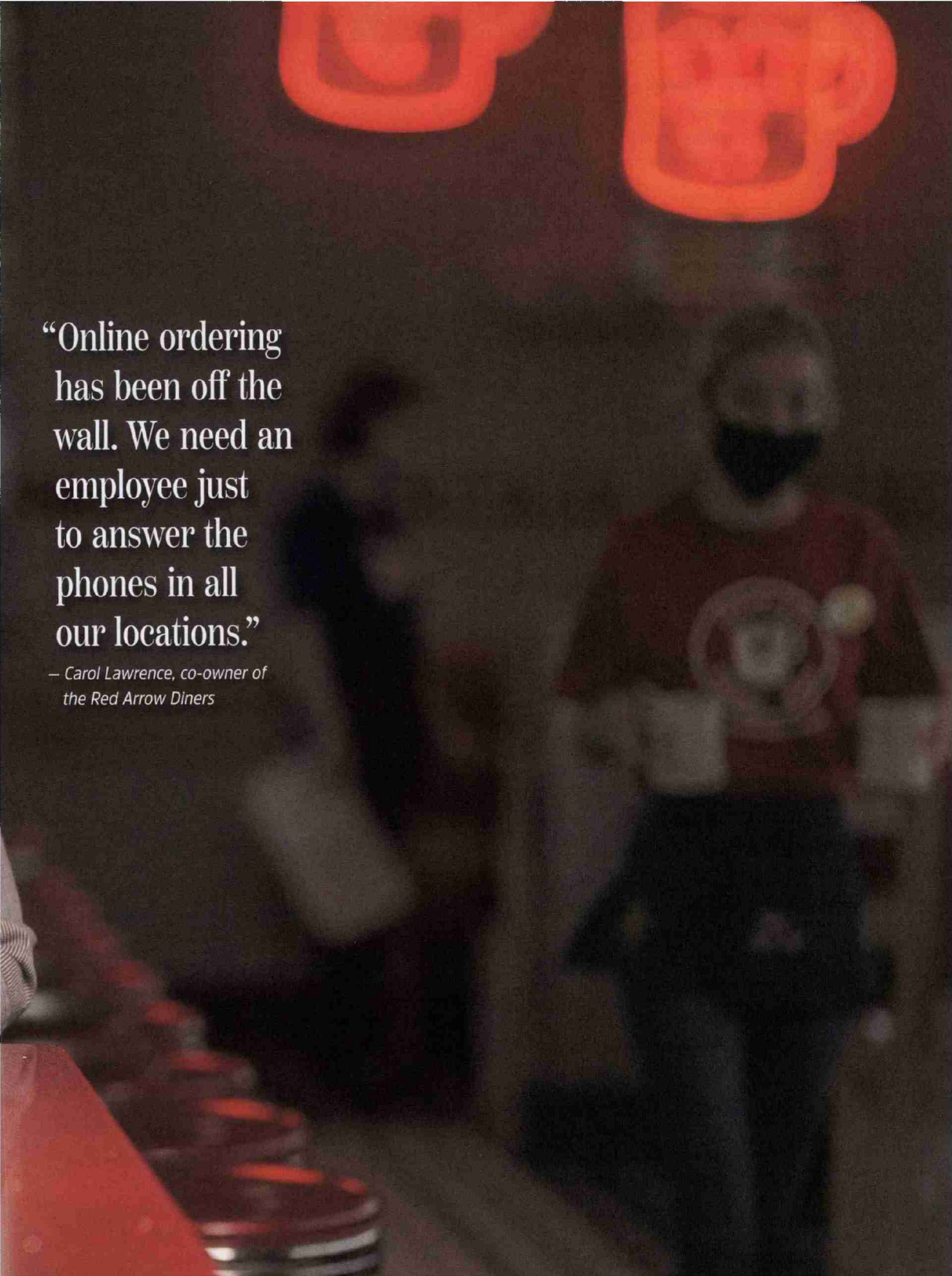
Like Boucher’s group, the Common Man has also been exploring product innovation. One direct response to the pandemic is take-and-bake meals, geared towards families with kids studying from home or other people under more stress than normal. “The idea is to have a restaurant-quality meal at home in 30 minutes for a good price,” Brown says. “It’s one way we’re filling a need.”

I am surprised to learn that no staff has been let go in the Common Man restaurants. “We are actively hiring for all positions in our restaurants,” Brown says, and seems almost surprised at my surprise.

Carol Lawrence is one of three owners of another New Hampshire minichain, the **Red Arrow Diner**, which was bold enough to open a new location during the pandemic. “It was extremely challenging,” she tells me. The Nashua diner opened a few months later than the planned spring date in a way that was informed by lessons learned in the other three locations. “We just found out what was required and did whatever we needed to do to conform,” says Lawrence.

All Red Arrow restaurants are usually open 24 hours, but at the moment only Manchester is functioning around the clock all week long. The reason is a staff shortage.





“Online ordering
has been off the
wall. We need an
employee just
to answer the
phones in all
our locations.”

— Carol Lawrence, co-owner of
the Red Arrow Diners

"Many employees prefer to collect unemployment," Lawrence says. "This is just beginning to change. I say 'kudos' to our loyal Red Arrow family who stuck with us and kept on working."

Fortunately, the business has discovered new revenue streams likely to persist beyond COVID-19. "Online ordering has been off the wall. We need an employee just to answer the phones in all our locations," Lawrence says. Outside seating will also likely become a permanent seasonal fixture.

Thanks to this diversification, things have been going pretty well. Lawrence estimates total sales in Manchester are up by 8-9% over last year, while Londonderry sales are slightly down, and Concord is about the same.

If she could go back to March and talk to herself as she was then, Lawrence says she would tell herself "to have more faith day to day. I'd say, 'Be more confident in yourselves. Be more positive.' I'd say, 'You know, we got used to masks. It's actually OK.'"

She admits that she's nervous about winter, but ends with a sober statement of fact: "Lots of restaurants have closed. Things happen in the world."

When the prognosticators say it's the large restaurants that are most likely to come through this crisis, of course they're right. But it's easy to state the obvious: It's survival of the fittest out there.

Fortunately, fittest doesn't just mean biggest. It may mean biggest, fastest, most convenient — or it may mean most flexible, most devoted to high-quality food or to providing customers with a unique dining experience. A fit restaurant may simply be one that makes its customers feel at home. One key to a restaurant's fitness is its understanding of its role in the complex hospitality ecosystem. There's room for generalists, and there's also room for all kinds of specialists.

Before COVID-19 made every restaurant into a takeout, if you wanted to eat at home but didn't want to cook, you called for Chinese or pizza. Even so, Sean Chi, kitchen manager at **Kim Lai Chinese Restaurant** in Portsmouth, says that March, April and May were hard for everyone. "Three people quit at the same time in March," he says. He had to pick up the slack and sometimes found himself alone in the kitchen at 2 a.m.

"The food cost was very high then too," he says. "It nearly doubled because there were problems with the supply. Some customers said, 'You should raise your prices, at least

10%.' But we said no. We've been here 20 years, and we have a very good relationship with our customers."

Since March, Kim Lai has operated exclusively on a takeout and delivery model. When I ask whether the total volume of business has fallen off, Chi says, "We think about the risks more than the business. We have no dining in because it makes our customers feel more safe. All our employees have their temperature taken every morning. Some takeout customers say, 'I feel safer getting takeout here because there are no diners inside.'" Many of his regular dine-in customers have become regular takeout customers.

"We've got to learn to get by with a little less money, but we've been fortunate. ... This is the new normal. We all have to adapt."

— Hank Letarte, *White Gates Farm Pizza*

Kim Lai Restaurant is focused on the present. As long as there is a risk to their customers, they will run things the way they run them now. They will worry about the future when the future looks clearer.

There's no doubt a similar niche for pizza joints, but that's not the role of **White Gates Farm Pizza** in Tamworth, which isn't exactly a restaurant either. In normal times, Hank and Heather Letarte host twice-weekly summer pizza nights on their farm, where guests sit at picnic tables, listen to live music, and enjoy a view over the Ossipee Range and the hills of the Lakes Region. In winter, for the last two years, the event has been held once a month inside a heated greenhouse.

When COVID-19 hit, the Letartes were between seasons. They hired a company to set up a website that would manage the flow of guests coming through for dinner. They decided they would allow 35-40% fewer people than they normally expected. "We started with a number we thought would work and then upped it a bit," says Hank Letarte. Pizzas had to be limited to a few preselected types. Guests were assigned half-hour increments during which their pizzas

could be picked up. Waste was no longer recycled. All this was done to eliminate lines and close contact.

"We wanted it to be comfortably safe and manageable," says Letarte. "We had zero people complaints. Everyone said, 'Thank you so much for creating a safe and beautiful space for us to enjoy a meal.'" The Letartes' priority is keeping their staff and customers safe. "We don't want to end up in the news," Letarte says.

There will be no winter pizza nights this year. "We've got to learn to get by with a little less money, but we've been fortunate. The winter pizza nights are a side business for us. A lot of people are really suffering though." He says he has no right to complain. "This is the new normal. We all have to adapt."

After talking for hours with restaurateurs throughout the state, what surprised me most was that nearly all of them remarked on a newfound sense of closeness and familiarity among guests and staff in their establishments. Perhaps it's only the wishful thinking, but I can't help but wonder whether COVID-19, after all the harm and havoc it has wrought, might somehow point toward a future in which the old spirit of the tavern is partly revived — a spirit like the one that, after a shutdown of three months, I saw almost completely brought back to life at the Coffee Pot in Littleton.

For the **Fox Tavern at the Hancock Inn**, COVID-19 ushered in changes that were waiting in the wings. Marcia and Jarvis Coffin had been contemplating a shift to an owner-chef model for some time. Circumstances tipped the scales, and now Jarvis runs the kitchen. Their son, furloughed from his hospitality job, came home to help. He now handles the garde manger and dessert stations. "We've leaned heavily on family — both immediate and our extended family of employees," says Marcia Coffin. "Our front-of-house manager has dived right in and is now waiting tables and tending bar as well."

Since theirs is a small, family-run business, many customers know the Coffins personally, and there is an element of trust, of confidence in their doing things right that you might not find in a bigger place. She exhibits an "optimism" suited to our times: "If you recalibrate your expectations so that 50% is the new 100%, then it's been okay."

It's impossible to say what the future holds — but the Fox Tavern has existed since 1789. **NH**