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Territory's Food and Beverage Industry Reopens with Social Distancing and Capacity Limitations; Law Enforcement Visits Establishments

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Robert Moore **May 27, 2020**

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The Tap and Still in St. Thomas

Pre-pandemic sounds of music, laughter and cash registers ringing are back again.

In Red Hook and elsewhere across the territory, the usual weeknight rattle and hum was toned down. But the key indicators of island commerce were clear. Virgin Islanders returned to favorite local spots — Duffy's Love Shack, Island Time Pub, Tap and Still in St. Thomas and Sharkey's Bait Stand and Cloud 9 on St. Croix, to name a few — Tuesday evening for the first time since the island economy went into lockdown to slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus two months ago.

At the outdoor bars and restaurants of American Yacht Harbor, Virgin Islanders eased into the next phase of life during COVID-19 with soft-opening of the territory's food and beverage industry. Some people were hyper-cautious, wearing masks and socializing at a safe six feet or more away from strangers.

"It's a fear," said 37-year-old Megan McCloud, a server at a St. Thomas restaurant. "Not a crippling fear, but there are asymptomatic people walking around," she said while socializing with friends at distant corner of an outdoor bar.

With his facial covering lowered to speak comfortably, Yosh Tafari, 40, said he was eager to leave home for a while. "But I'm still paranoid. People are too close. I will stick with the people I know," he said. "I'll wait a couple weeks" before going to an indoor bar or restaurant.

Robert James said he too is giving it some time before dining in at a restaurant. "Look, it could get a little worrisome. This virus, it didn't clear up yet."

Three people sat at the bar at Duffy's Love Shack Tuesday evening while half a dozen people congregated in the parking lot, sipping libations. "I am happy to see people back," said lead night-time bartender Steven Ritter. "We were closed six or seven weeks," he said.

Duffy's general manager Andrew Shire said Virgin Islands Police stopped at the establishment Tuesday morning to review table spacing. "We removed one (indoor) table," he said. "We're going to do what we need to keep people safe. There is no reason to risk the health or safety of any."

As the evening wore on, a trip through Havensight on St. Thomas came up on a caravan of 12 law enforcement vehicles — part of the COVID Task Force — as they rolled into shopping mall. Nearly two dozen V.I. law enforcement officers from the police department, the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs and other agencies stopped at bars and restaurants as part of an information and education tour, officers said.

Establishment owners were provided information about limited-opening rules, patrons were urged to maintain proper six-foot social distancing from strangers.

Governor Albert Bryan said last week that Tuesday's "soft opening" was an opportunity for restaurants and bars "to understand what their service is going to look like, have an opportunity to call employees and properly space their tables, chairs, and to make sure they have the proper equipment to sanitize and keep the people visiting those restaurants and bars safe."

The temporary restrictions placed on establishments will include:

- Employees are required to wear facial coverings at all times. Governor Bryan told the Consortium while patrons are not required to wear the masks at the restaurants and bars, "it is strongly recommended."
- Establishments must provide "sanitization stations" for customers and employees.
- Restaurants and bars can only operate at half of Fire Marshal-approved seating capacity, or host a maximum of 50 customers. "That is 50 percent of what the Fire Marshal said you can put in there or 50 customers — whichever one is less," Mr. Bryan said.
- Tables must be placed at least six feet apart.
- Establishments cannot cater to parties larger than six people. Larger groups can be split up among multiple tables that are properly spaced apart.

- Bar stools must be “spaced out as much as possible. ... We know that’s going to be difficult, but we are encouraging you to do that.”

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