

With capacity restrictions lifting, one less worry for restaurateurs

"We're just happy that the time has finally come."

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Business as usual is still a long ways off, but for eateries on Elgin Street, deeply challenged by the pandemic and departure of downtown workers to home offices, the provincial announcement about the lifting of capacity limits on restaurants and bars Monday was one step in the right direction.

At Browns Socialhouse, full capacity will mean about 30 additional seats, enough business for another staff member in both the front and back of house

"We're just happy that the time has finally come," general manager Max Su said Friday. It wasn't yet 5 p.m., and the restaurant, across from city hall and the Ottawa courthouse, was already filling up.

The province's afternoon announcement was one they'd been "really antsy about," Su said, since such limits were lifted for sporting arenas earlier in the month.

At Giulia, an elevated pizzeria at the corner of Elgin and Waverley Streets, chef Chris Cooke said they'd been lucky to enjoy the buzz that could come with being a

new restaurant. But the patio they survived on after opening in June has been slowing down with the colder weather and they've had to turn people away because they're only allowed to seat so many inside.

Cooke is also hopeful that increased capacity will help ease the labour crisis facing the industry.

"It's kind of wishy-washy, working in a restaurant right now," he said. Staff "might come in for an hour and then get cut because we're not busy, because we can't be busy."

For The Ministry of Coffee, a narrow Elgin Street cafe with a handful of spots to sit and sip beverages, full capacity will only mean about six to eight more people, according to barista Liam Eales. Still, he said, it'll be nice.

"The big thing for us and the big challenge is the lack of foot traffic downtown right now. We need a lot more people working in their offices again to regularly come to these spots."

Sarah Chown, managing partner with the Metropolitan Brasserie and board member with the Ontario Restaurant, Hotel and Motel Association, would have liked to see restaurateurs given the option to open fully sooner than Monday. "Why wait? Why not reopen now?" she questioned. "And, if people weren't ready to go, then leave that to us (business owners) to decide. Some people may not

have been able to pull in staff at the last minute, but maybe some businesses do have staff that are waiting for those extra shifts.”

But, ultimately, Chown said Ontario’s policy shift comes at an opportune time with the weather starting to turn and patio season effectively coming to an end. People in the service industry were also worried about the possibility of federal relief programs winding up, she said. “We’re going into November, the weather is changing drastically and patio season is essentially over, as far as full dinner service, and we’re still operating at a limited capacity indoors.

“That was a very scary thought, but, thankfully, the feds have extended those programs, and, for those of us who are still seeing losses, even though we are back to full capacity, there will be some relief there.”

Beyond the cohort of permission to operate at full capacity and do away with physical distancing requirements as of Monday — which also includes gyms, casinos and indoor meeting and event spaces — a number of other settings will be given the option to enjoy the same freedom if they opt in to the provincial proof of vaccination system. That includes salons, like The

Connoisseur Art and Hair Studio on Cooper Street just off Elgin. Owner Gamal Rahman wasn't rushing to embrace the opportunity, however. Business at his salon used to support six staff; now, with so many public servants still absent from the area, he works alone. The bright side is that he has time to work during the day on the paintings that adorn the salon. He says he'll inquire about the vaccination status of new customers, anyway, but knows enough about the life of his regulars that their vaccine situations are old news: When they secured their doses, it was an update they shared on the salon chair. "(You) open at full capacity, but, if you don't have clients, what are you going to get?" Rahman said. "This is the problem."