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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9sp2z8dm>

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Publication Date

2021-09-21

CAL-IN-SACRAMENTO FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM, FALL 2021

DIVERSITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CALIFORNIA

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In the spring of 2021, IGS launched a two-year Diversity and Entrepreneurship Fellowship Program. Cal-in-Sac Fellows conducted original research focused on the challenges and opportunities facing women- and POC-owned small businesses and diverse entrepreneurs in California. This series includes Op-Eds, blogs, policy briefs and other research products that capture key findings of the students' research. Learn more at <https://igs.berkeley.edu/matsui-center/fellowships/cal-in-sacramento>.

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The Mountain of Waste: How Small Businesses Have Managed Food Packaging Practices During the COVID-19 Era

by Layla Dargahi

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed the smog in Los Angeles clear, and car emissions reduced significantly, dramatically illustrating the impact of humans on the planet. Everyday practices that were once overlooked, such as the extra plastic utensil set in a to-go order bag, now have greater significance as attention is directed at our collective struggle for environmental sustainability. However, it has been difficult for businesses, especially BIPOC-owned, to put sustainability at the forefront of their business practices due to limited resources; as [data](#) from July 2020 reports, “Black-owned businesses received 1.9 percent of PPE loans. While white-owned businesses received 83 percent.”

In speaking with representatives from BIPOC local restaurants in the downtown and Lake Merritt area of Oakland, I was able to better understand the perspective of these restaurants in how they have adapted to new practices as COVID-19 upended their routines, to analyze whether the new world of dining proves to be more environmentally friendly or not. How have packaging practices changed as a result of COVID-19 in these restaurants in downtown Oakland? Have they been forced to become more environmentally wasteful as a result of COVID-19? If the amount of to-go and other single use packaging has increased, have these restaurants been able to financially keep up with the costs?

After discussing with four BIPOC owned restaurants how packaging use, costs, and practices have changed in the last year and a half, I developed a clearer understanding of the changes they have undergone. Three out of the four restaurants interviewed stated that they currently utilize a mix of compostable and plastic packaging. One of these restaurants had switched over to a hybrid packaging practice during COVID-19. They stated how before the pandemic they utilized plastic packaging and bags for their to-go orders, but transitioned to a hybrid mix of plastic and compostable during the pandemic to reduce environmental waste as all orders were to-go for the first year of the pandemic. However, the motives for the other restaurants interviewed to implement compostable packaging vary from compostable packaging being the only option in the store to buy, to utilizing compostable packaging because of local

Oakland packaging mandates. According to Oakland and Alameda County Sustainability Mandates, “Oakland food vendors may only use BPI Certified compostable food service ware.” While the restaurant owners I interviewed did not fully utilize BPI Certified compostable packaging, with even one restaurant completely using plastic packaging, it is interesting how their motives and opinions surrounding packaging options differed.

But one thing remained the same with all restaurants: the amount of packaging utilized in their restaurants increased tremendously as a result of the pandemic. One popular soul food joint exclaimed how COVID-19 has caused catering events to completely transform. Restaurants went from serving food in large hot trays buffet style to serving individual plates pre-packaged prior to the event, to avoid excessive contact. The other BIPOC restaurant owners wholeheartedly stated how unbelievable the amount of to-go packaging increased. It’s unsurprising that restaurants are spending more money on packaging as to-go has been the only reliable dining option due to COVID-19 dining mandates in Oakland that are continuously changing. A couple of restaurant owners openly discussed how the increase of packaging costs have been a challenge, especially since to-go orders continue to be the primary dining experience despite the economy officially opening up on June 15th in California. They expressed how the costs of the increased packaging has been passed on to the customer, as they cannot be absorbed by the restaurant with an already smaller customer base compared to before March 2020. One owner stated that about 80% of their sales goes towards purchasing packaging.

Furthermore, the BIPOC businesses discussed above have experienced the same challenges, in addition to their own unique ones, as all other small businesses during COVID-19. When looking at the [Census Pulse Survey](#), more small businesses in California have continued to experience a decrease in revenue than an increase from April 2020 to May 2021. To see if there is a difference between the packaging practices and operations of BIPOC restaurants compared to white owned businesses, I interviewed the owner of a farm to table restaurant in downtown Oakland.

Upon speaking with this business owner, I noticed a surprising amount of similar experiences with the more affordable BIPOC owned restaurants mentioned prior. Like the

others, they seemed to experience an intense increase in to-go packaging, and packaging costs, especially as their restaurant fully transitioned to to-go orders only after realizing the ambience of their outdoor dining did not meet their usual standards. As packaging costs increased, the only way the farm to table restaurant was able to adapt, like many other restaurants in my study, was to pass the cost on to the customer. However, unlike most of the BIPOC restaurants interviewed, the incentive to utilize eco-friendly packaging happened nine years ago as the owners wanted to ensure they were being sustainable while still being able to give every customer utensils. Meaning, while utilizing eco-friendly packaging cost more, the business owners decided it was worth it to keep the restaurant flow smooth and avoid having to ask each customer whether they wanted utensils. Furthermore, the farm to table restaurant was the only business interviewed that discussed the government's distribution of the PPE loans. The manager expressed frustration regarding how minority loans were rightfully distributed first, but other businesses, such as his, experienced long lasting neglect in funding following.

In analyzing BIPOC Oakland restaurants' packaging practices as a result of COVID-19, a variety of insights have been made regarding the differences within these restaurants, and even the surprising similarities shared with the white owned restaurant. Restaurants have struggled with the increased demand in packaging in the last year and a half, especially those restaurants who transitioned, optionally or because of mandates, to eco-friendly packaging. Furthermore, each restaurant shifted and dealt with their rise in food packaging in a unique manner, as they needed to best adjust to new COVID-19 protocols. But one thing remains unchanged, restaurant packaging waste remains on the rise, and in order to protect the environment it cannot continue at this rate.