

Open for Takeout

Clubs are providing meals to go during the Covid lockdown to keep in (non)contact with their members

BY HANK GOLA

With clubhouses and their restaurants shut due to coronavirus restrictions, creativity hasn't been limited to the kitchen. MGA clubs continued to serve their members through takeout options and social media.

"We're just trying to keep the membership engaged and offer them amenities for a club that is, for the most part, closed," said Brian Curtin, general manager/chief operating officer at Southward Ho Country Club. "We started off slow so we could make sure we could manage it, and every week we're adding to it, just trying to give them something to keep them engaged but also a value for their membership."

"To me, more than just the food we're serving, it's a way to stay connected with the membership," Dan Pasternak, PGA general

manager at Essex Fells Country Club added. "It has almost [meant more to] us from a peace of mind standpoint—connecting with the members, the relationship part of it—than the business itself."

Essex Fells began offering takeout service in mid-March and the response to its Easter and Mother's Day packages was "overwhelming," Pasternak said.

"We've obviously tried to step up our communication with the members, not just from a 'what's going on' standpoint but from a storytelling standpoint as well.



On Easter Sunday, we did a little 15-second virtual tour of the kitchen where you saw all the staff members in there with their masks and gloves on, prepping for the day. It's great to keep that handful of employees working. I can't get over how positive and grateful they are to be in there, and they're putting out a tremendous product."

At Garden City Country Club GM/COO Manny Gugliuzza could be found working fulltime in the kitchen on Wednesday through Sunday evenings, preparing food along with the chef, sous chef, assistant manager, and grill manager, filling orders for curbside delivery.

The menu changed every week, including a "Stuck at Home" special for kids: a pizza package including raw ingredients so kids could create their own pies.

"Around Garden City, anybody who orders takeout anywhere else in town ends up waiting in their cars for so long," Gugliuzza said. "But we've got a great system here. We're pumping out six or seven tables every 15 minutes, so members are literally driving right up. We put the food in their trunk and they drive off."

The club filled 300 orders for its Mother's Day package that included shrimp cocktail, tomato caprese with springtime salad, and penne a la vodka followed by Garden City Surf and Turf—a prime filet mignon with a truffle cabernet sauce and broiled salmon with a champagne butter sauce.

Garden City maintained its traditional Memorial Day lobster buffet by offering takeout meals with a pound-and-a-half



MANNY GUGLIUZZA



Left and opposite: Kitchen staff at Garden City CC had special wishes for club members on Mother's Day, expressed in signage and beautifully prepared salads. Below: Two FlippingBook publications from Rockrimmon.

inspired by a member, and Ryan goes into detail on the history of and story behind the drink. Ryan also used Zoom for virtual happy hours and bourbon and tequila tastings.

"Maurice is a master storyteller and people love it," Ara Daglian, Rockrimmon's GM/COO said. "He tastes it, talks about it, and leads the discussion on each. At the time of the bourbon tasting, clubs in Connecticut were not allowed to sell liquor to go so we sent out a list. Once the law changed, we boxed up the different tequilas for member pickup."

Billy Panagiotopoulos, assistant general manager at Sleepy Hollow Country Club, even considered using drones to deliver food and drink on the course before deciding it would be too much of a distraction. But he found a way to bring members to the club by turning the parking lot into a drive-in movie theatre featuring "The Greatest Showman." The 2017 film, a musical biography of P.T. Barnum starring Hugh Jackman, was partly filmed inside the club's mansion.

"We mapped out the parking lot with specific spots," he explained. "Members called or texted their [food] order, and we

delivered to the car with a mask. Everything was completely covered up and packaged in to-go boxes or baskets: burgers, fries, pretzels, popcorn, things like that."

Panagiotopoulos looked at the restrictions as a challenge. "There's always opportunity, even in a difficult time, to reinvent, recreate," he said. "You get those creative juices flowing and you try to implement things. Some things may do very well, some things may not do so well but it doesn't mean you're going to stop trying."

Sleepy Hollow also took care of its furloughed employees.

"We're doing weekly family meals for our furloughed employees and caddies every week, serving up to six people," he said. "Myself, our chef, and general manager Paul Brock are out there. We have a little tent set up, they pull up, pop the trunk, we put the food in there, give them a thumbs up and they keep going.... We thought it was important to keep supporting our staff. It's not a Sleepy Hollow problem or a club problem. It's a global problem. Everybody is going through it today, and we're all just trying to figure out what's the best way to help one another." ■



lobster, mussels and clams, salads, corn on the cob, baked potatoes, and homemade apple cake for dessert. Gugliuzza also offered a 30 percent discount on select wines.

"We received a bunch of emails: 'Hey, we miss you guys, we can't wait to be back at the club. Thank you for all you're doing.' It was encouraging," Gugliuzza said.

At Southward Ho, which filled an astounding 445 Mothers Day orders, Curtin instituted a "So Ho Market."

"We're selling raw items like steaks, ribeyes, chicken, marinated kabobs, a variety of items, and then staple grocery items like milk, butter, and bread," Curtin said. "When they're picking up their food, they can also pick up other items and it keeps our members from going to multiple stores."

The club also started a virtual happy hour featuring one of its favorite local musicians. "His name is Bobby Digital," Curtin said. "He does a two-hour set for our members on our private Instagram and Facebook pages. We paired that with cocktails prepared by our head bartender. We're averaging between 300 and 400 total views. People log on, they watch for a little while, they log off and they might come back on later."

Rockrimmon Country Club started very early in the virtual engagement area, using Zoom for Thursday Night Golf talks with assistant pro Paul Kenney, and a Monday night book club. It has used FlippingBook to provide recipes from executive chef Peter Dunlop ("Chef Peter's Pantry") and beverage manager Maurice Ryan ("Cocktail Chronicles"). Each of the cocktails is

Grape Expectations for a Cocktail in a Can

Fred Evanko thought, Who doesn't enjoy a transfusion at the golf course? He was sipping just such a vodka and grape juice cocktail when he had his light bulb moment.

"It occurred to me: What about canning this product?" Evanko explained. "Ready-to-drink cocktails were starting to become more popular. I threw it out to my golf buddies when we went out to dinner one night: 'What do you think about this idea?' They loved it."

Evanko, who grew up in Stamford and now lives in Fairfield, had been on the sales side of the golf industry for 20 years but knew nothing about the beverage business. Through trial and error, with the help of several business associates, LinksDrinks and its Classic Transfusion was born.

"I'm using a six-times distilled, corn-based vodka, all-natural ginger ale flavors and concord grape juice—no preservatives," Evanko said. "It's gluten free, with about half the carbs of the actual drink you would get poured at the club. Ours is less sweet. It's not sugary-tasting."



The coronavirus lockdown stalled the company's momentum after it was introduced last summer with statewide distribution in Connecticut and inroads to major distributors in New Jersey and New York. He recently delivered cases to Winged Foot and Hudson National, and sees clubs and courses as a natural market.

"If you have a halfway house or a beverage cart, if you do a lot of tournament business and have a cooler out on the course, what better product than this aside from beer?" Evanko asked.

He plans to donate a portion of the profits to help families dealing with pediatric cancer. Fred and his wife Denise lost their 10-year-old daughter Grace to the disease in 2013. Their son Riley, who is in college, has produced some social media videos for LinksDrinks, making it a true family business.

Evanko's grandfather, Fred Annon, was the head professional at Innis Arden, Knollwood, and Ridgeway, among other places. He won the Westchester Open in 1958. He probably would have enjoyed having a can with his grandson.