

# How are Tokyo’s Independent Restaurateurs Surviving the Pandemic?

James Farrer

**Abstract:** Globally, independent restaurants have been dealt a double blow by COVID-19. Restaurant staff face the risk of infection, and restaurants have been among the businesses hardest hit by urban lockdowns. With fewer resources than corporate chains, small independent restaurants are particularly vulnerable to an extended economic downturn. This paper looks at how independent restaurant owners in Tokyo have coped with the pandemic both individually and as members of larger communities. Both government and community support have been key to sustaining these small businesses and their employees during this crisis.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, vulnerable populations, restaurateurs, hospitality workers, community resilience

“Actually, this is fun,” the wife of a Tokyo sushi bar owner said in early May, describing her new job of hawking takeout from a ground-floor restaurant doorway. Her husband and business partner agreed “It’s not that we wanted to do it.... but if I don’t get excited about it, I will start feeling down,” he said. “I am standing out front shouting ‘Welcome,’ to people passing by. ‘Just come inside and take a look!’ When the kids come in, there is a free snack in my *net* box (where the big pieces of raw fish are kept during service). The boxes [for takeout] are lined up on the sushi counter. We are no longer

a sushi bar but a takeout service.”

The transition to selling takeout was shocking, the sushi master said, and it certainly wasn’t what he was expecting when the couple opened their own elegant, mid-priced sushi bar after decades of working in upscale sushi bars in the city, realizing a life-long dream. With an investment (including bank loans) of over 10 million yen for renovations and a monthly rent of nearly 300,000 yen, they were counting on pulling in high-spending locals and visitors from other parts of the city to dine at an eight-seat wooden counter that would serve delicate fish purchased daily in the Toyosu market. Just two months after opening, the coronavirus pandemic, and the Tokyo government’s April 7 “state of emergency” declaration, urging people to stay home, upended all their plans. Moreover, since the couple opened their restaurant after Dec. 31, 2019, they were ineligible for most aid the government was promising to small businesses (much of which uses the previous year’s revenue as a base). “There’s nothing we can do but keep running our business,” the husband said. The timing of the epidemic couldn’t have been worse for them.

Instead of selling high-end fatty tuna, sea bream, and sea urchin carefully ensconced on molded balls of rice, the couple were packaging American-style “spider rolls” (soft-shelled crab rolls), traditional Tokyo *futomaki*, and *inari* sushi in plastic boxes (The “spider rolls” were the chef’s idea of a novelty item suitable for takeout, and have proven popular.). These boxes go for 1000 yen a piece, which is reasonable for *sushiya*-quality products. During

May, they were able to sell upwards of 70 boxes per day, plus some extra higher-end items such as a fancy 4000 yen box of *chirashi* sushi that must be pre-ordered. Altogether, they were able to achieve roughly the same sales volume they were planning for with the sushi bar evening service and thus kept their heads above water. It was hard work but rewarding in ways they would not have expected. “We are also getting repeaters now,” the wife said, “and this has been a chance to promote ourselves. Many people thought that if you didn’t have a reservation you couldn’t get in, or first-time customers (*ichigensan*) would be refused.” For the new business owners, it was a chance to establish good relations with the community where they just opened up, and to show potential customers that they are a friendly family business. Their popular inari sushi also used fried tofu skins from a small artisan working right down the street, creating extra business for his tofu shop as well. They also cooperated in their takeout sales with neighboring restaurants, establishing ties they hope to sustain moving forward. Takeout sales ended in late June but sustained the restaurant for two months. The couple planned to re-open for regular business in July, though how they will manage social distancing at an 8-seater sushi bar was still unclear, even to them.



**Figure 1: A local sushi bar produced special American-style “spider rolls” (soft shell crab rolls) for its takeout service. They have been a big hit. (photo by James Farrer May 12, 2020)**

### Will “Mom-and-Pop” Restaurants Survive COVID?

This relatively positive story of a brand new family-run business coping with upended plans during the COVID epidemic is not unique, as I will discuss below, though it also shouldn’t be taken as representative of the situation in Tokyo as whole. It does raise important questions. How are independent restaurants surviving this crisis? What government or community resources are they able to rely upon, and what more do they need? What kinds of eateries are better positioned to weather this crisis? Who is failing?

As in other countries, restaurant owners and workers are a vulnerable and precarious group. An online survey by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (conducted in early May 2020) found that 66% of people working in the food and beverage industry were worried about their employment or income situation, over twice the proportion among all respondents (31%).<sup>1</sup> Worldwide, restaurateurs are some of the most vulnerable to the economic shutdowns put in place to combat the pandemic while food-service workers who do remain in business must engage in the risky work of serving large numbers of customers face-to-face during a pandemic. In the USA, a survey in early May of restaurant owners by the James Beard Foundation found that while many restaurants were open for takeout and delivery orders (59%), 40% of them remained closed to the public. One percent of respondents already reported permanently closing. The report estimates that roughly five million US restaurant workers were already unemployed.<sup>2</sup>

In Japan, a greater proportion of workers remains employed, since restaurants were not forced to completely close under the emergency regulations, but business volume in general was down, with some of my informants reporting decreases of over fifty percent. Many laid off part-time workers, while a few closed for good.

Clearly some restaurants will survive, and others will open, but what sorts? Early in the crisis many industry insiders, such as New York's celebrity chef David Chang, predicted that chain stores with greater capital resources will survive the COVID shutdowns, while "mom-and-pop" businesses like the one described in the opening section of this paper will be less able to sustain months of greatly reduced business.<sup>3</sup> One *New York Times* article predicted 75% of independent restaurants in the USA would not survive the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> A McKinsey study predicts that independent restaurants and fine dining restaurants will be hit particularly hard, taking years to recover.<sup>5</sup> Already, in most developing countries a decades-long trend towards consolidation or corporatization of the food service sector was well-established. Larger companies generally have more access to credit, real estate, brand recognition and other resources that help them weather business downturns and even take advantage of them. Even when governments provide aid, very small businesses are less able to take advantage of it because of paperwork and other bureaucratic obstacles.<sup>6</sup> As described below, this is a problem also seen in programs to help small culinary businesses in Japan.

In Japan, the decline in independent restaurants is not new, reflecting consolidation in the industry by corporate restaurants and the aging of restaurant owners who created small restaurant businesses in the postwar high growth decades.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Tokyo remains a city of many small independent restaurants and bars. Overall, according to the 2016 government census of business activity, Tokyo

had a total of 55,574 eateries (*inshokuten*) (out of 453,541 nationwide) employing a total of 515,199 persons (out of 3,190,461 nationally).<sup>8</sup> About half of all these eateries still were operated independently (others as part of multi-shop chains).<sup>9</sup>

We do not yet have adequate statistical data on restaurant closings and the resulting unemployment in the industry. Moreover, it will take months to see how this will shake down. This paper is based entirely on qualitative interviews with independent restaurant owners in Tokyo in early May 2020, some recorded, others short conversations. Follow-up interviews were conducted in June 2020. Most data were gathered in two residential neighborhoods, one located in the Western reaches of the 23 urban districts of Tokyo (17 minutes from Shinjuku), and one in the far Western suburbs of the city (an hour by train from Shinjuku). Helped by a research assistant in the suburban district, I have recorded basic data about the coping strategies of 30 eateries in two neighborhoods. Some conversations occurred in the doorways of restaurants during takeout hours, while five longer interviews were conducted online and transcribed. Many of these discussions were follow-ups to earlier full-length interviews conducted in better times. A few informants were also able to discuss the impact on restaurants in more central urban districts, as well as the effect on suppliers, providing a broader context. I was also able to discuss these broader issues with a community journalist and the local head of a business association (*shōtengai*). The questions asked were quite basic as well. How are you experiencing and coping with the pandemic? How is business compared to before? What about your employees? How do you see the future? And have you had help from the government and community?<sup>10</sup>

This remains a very preliminary and limited study, but it has important implications for understanding *how* independent restaurant

businesses were surviving in this economic and medical crisis. While most industry observers predict a difficult time for such small businesses, at least some point to the resilience of small-time operators when compared to more complex fine dining restaurants who hire many highly skilled employees and rely upon an affluent and very mobile clientele. High-end restaurants rely heavily on alcohol sales, elaborate presentation, and attentive services, which cannot easily be replaced by takeout or delivery services. Independents – especially those ensconced in a residential community—might even have some advantages when compared with chain restaurants, since neighborhood restaurants could rely upon loyal regulars as a support network. Below we look at some of the survival models emerging among independent restaurants, bars and other eateries in Tokyo and their implications for various types of restaurants, their owners and employees.

### **Endangered Businesses**

Already some neighborhood restaurants have closed for good. One seafood restaurant in the urban residential neighborhood, first posted a temporary closing notice in April, then a week later a note appeared that the restaurant would be closing down. According to informants it is likely that business at this restaurant was not very good before the pandemic, and the emergency situation became a “final straw” in deciding to close. Other restaurateurs also mentioned that the pandemic would prompt many restaurants to close that were already struggling or otherwise contemplating shutting down. In this case, the two-story restaurant had several full-time and part-time employees, meaning several people were now out of a job. In general, larger scale restaurants we visited seemed to be having a more difficult transition. Even some mid-sized restaurants whose

business was excellent before the shutdown struggled with running costs. It was difficult for larger restaurants with several full-time staff and a larger rental space to make up for lost business with temporary measures such as takeout. Chain restaurants might be able to rely upon corporate support and bank loans, but larger private restaurants seemed vulnerable to a short-term cash-flow crunch. The plan at one popular seafood restaurant (not far from the one that closed permanently) was to reopen as soon as possible. This restaurant had also kept its doors open until late April, continuing business several days after others were already shutting up. The restaurant has been able to cover only a fraction of previous turnover by doing takeout sales. Indeed, when we interviewed this owner a year before the shutdown, he reported that all his profits came from alcohol sales. The inability to sell alcohol alone would be crippling for his business model (very few restaurants were able to sell alcohol as a takeout item). In general, owners of such mid-sized restaurants were doubtful they could cover rent and wages for more than two months.

Another restaurant that closed in April and whose owner was struggling was a small dining bar that can only seat six customers. It also usually survives on alcohol sales, though there is a full food menu. Even before COVID, the owner-operator was barely able to make a living on this business, given its small size, and she supplemented her income with housecleaning and other tasks during the day. Her loyal regular customers were mostly middle-aged and older men, but some stopped coming as the numbers of infected persons in Tokyo began rising in April. By mid-April her business was a fraction of the pre-COVID normal, and she closed the bar. Some of her part-time jobs also were cancelled. While she reported staying in good spirits and enjoyed reconnecting with neighbors near her home during the pandemic, her personal financial circumstances were dire. She was planning on

applying for aid the government was offering. In general, small drinking places seemed to be big losers in the pandemic, especially those that relied on close contacts with the staff and late-night service (e.g. snack bars). Many customers were staying away due to the publicity about infection clusters in nightlife locations. Some workers were also worried. There are roughly two hundred such establishments in the urban neighborhood I study. Throughout Tokyo, nightlife locales such as this small bar are some of the hardest hit businesses.<sup>11</sup> In this case, she was able to open up again in early June. Her regulars greeted her with flowers on her first night. But on a reservation-only basis, and with three or four of the six seats occupied (in order to create some minimal distancing), sustaining the business would be tricky, she said.

Another set of food industry personnel who were suffering losses from the economic effects of the lockdown were wholesalers. According to informants serving fresh seafood in their restaurants, sales volume at Tokyo's main urban fish market in Toyosu was way down. Vendors who used to hire five or six part-time staff had let people go, because of slow business. The collapse of business in this sector was driven by the decline in orders from sushi bars, particularly the high-end places in the city center. Orders from individual consumers would not make up for the loss of this huge market, especially for expensive products typically consumed in restaurants and rarely at home. Similarly, liquor wholesalers were seeing a drop in business. In this case lost sales could be partly offset by increased purchases by individual consumers drinking at home. However, even in the largely residential neighborhood where we conducted most of our interviews, the owner of the largest family-owned liquor shop told us that the increased sales to individual consumers were not offsetting the decreased sales to restaurants. The situation was much worse in stores in the central city, she said. This slowing of orders for

premium craft sake will trickle all the way to the sake brewers, who may also be forced to cut back production of goods originally intended for restaurant consumers.

It is unclear how much this decline in business will affect fulltime employees in these supply chains, but some of the first people to be affected were the part-time and temporary employees at restaurants, particularly service staff. One South Asian student who was employed at Indian restaurant in Tokyo said that even though the restaurant that employed her was doing a very strong takeout business, her own hours were cut. Service staff were no longer needed. She was planning on taking on an additional job at a supermarket, despite the risks involved facing so many customers. The calculation she was making about greater risk and needed income was the same being made by many migrant service workers around the world.

Finally, among the independent restaurants most severely hit by the COVID pandemic were fine dining restaurants in central Tokyo, most of which are also independently owned. Over the past decade, these have become increasingly dependent on the tourist trade, which has boomed in recent years. For example two of the most highly-rated restaurants in Tokyo are Ryugin and Narisawa, both of which have appeared on the World's 50 Best restaurant list and have received three and two Michelin stars respectively, and rely on overseas guests for over half of their patronage.<sup>12</sup> Both were closed during the entire month of May 2020, though [Narisawa was offering takeaway](#) (perhaps the most expensive takeout in Tokyo, with meals at 15,000 - 35,000 yen a person). Both restaurants reopened in June; however the question for restaurants like these is, "when will the tourists and other high-spending customers return?" Without the well-heeled travelers from places like Shanghai or Singapore willing to pay upwards of US\$500 per person, fine dining restaurants will struggle

to fill their seats with Tokyo locals in the coming months. (In late June, Narisawa's webpage advertised open seats in June and July, a rarity for this world-famous restaurant). Though luxury brands, these restaurants are only mid-sized private businesses offering some of the most prestigious and stable jobs in the industry. All over the world, we will likely see this sector in steep decline, along with the decline in tourism and business travel.<sup>13</sup> If the tourists do not return, and without longer term government aid, many of the best-paid and most prestigious jobs in Japan's restaurant sector could disappear.<sup>14</sup>

### The Survivors (and a Few Winners)

As we saw with the sushi bar in the opening paragraph, some independent restaurants – especially those that successfully switched to takeout and/or delivery – were able to maintain or even increased sales volume. “Compared to before, our sales have not decreased, actually they have probably increased,” said one owner of a small café/restaurant in a Western Tokyo suburb. In this Tokyo “bed town” few residents live within walking distance of restaurants, making takeout a less viable model. This husband-wife team decided instead to focus on delivery, with the husband delivering personally using their car, and the wife managing the kitchen. Business is so good that they have taken on a new employee in addition to the one they already had. Moving to delivery, however, required completely redesigning the menu. Previously the café had specialized in creative Brittany-style galettes (buckwheat crepes), but these would not taste good if delivered. The new menu consists of hot lunch boxes based on conventional Japanese deli favorites including teriyaki chicken, pork, curry, and roast beef. While the previous dine-in customers were mostly local women, three quarters of the new delivery customers were an

entirely new group of elderly people who did not want to leave their homes during the epidemic. They found the delivery service through advertising and word of mouth. Even with this new business model, however, the overall effect of the crisis meant a reduction in net income. The owner said she was applying for government aid covering costs of transitioning to takeout and delivery sales as well as a long-term interest free loan for small businesses (see discussion below). They were not personally worried about COVID, she said, because there were few cases reported in their area.

In the denser urban residential community where I conducted most interviews, transitioning to takeout was easier, since most residents regularly walk to the area around the station where the restaurants are concentrated. One husband-wife restaurateur team was so moved with the support they had received from the community through takeout service that they were reconsidering plans to close the restaurant at the end of the year. The restaurant, now in its thirty-sixth year, serves French and Japanese-Western (*yoshoku*) dishes. Over the past year the husband, who is the chef, had been complaining privately of the declining presence of regulars at the restaurant in the evening and had begun telling his wife that he was wanting to close at the end of this year. When the coronavirus began spreading in Japan, their steady lunch business had not faltered. On April 4, 2020 they nonetheless made a relatively early decision to close. Their concern was personal safety. “We were worried about the spread of the disease,” the husband said. “We didn't do anything at all until April 20. We didn't think that things would go on that long. We had no plans for takeout. But without doing takeout, we wouldn't be able to make a living, so we started up.”

The wife, who usually manages table service, wine and publicity, had already been promoting the restaurant on Facebook, Instagram, and

other social media, so when they started advertising their takeout menu they were able to activate this online network. Orders poured in, and they soon had a full workload every day. The total sales volumes approached those of the restaurant before the shutdown, the husband told us. However, he said, his personal workload became much higher than before. They had to make all their money by selling food, he said, thus he has to make dozens of lunch boxes a day. Working only on a pre-ordered basis allowed him to eliminate food waste and keep the price of the takeout lunches at 1000 yen. He would not be able to produce much more than he does now, he said, even with the help of the part-time staff, who has switched her duties from waiting tables to helping prepare lunch boxes. Still, without alcohol sales on premise to maintain profit margins, this was not a financially sustainable model in the long term, he said. Takeout alcohol sales, though temporarily allowed under a government aid program, were weak. "People will think, why not go to a liquor store?" He was applying for four types of government assistance (more on these below). He is most gratified to see the support of the community, including many families with small children who had not patronized the restaurant before.

As described above, most small drinking places suffered badly in the shutdown, but some also made a transition to selling takeout meals during the day. One was a small South Asian pub - usually more of a late-night bar than a restaurant - run by a Bangladeshi migrant and his Japanese wife on a crowded drinking street in this urban residential neighborhood. They also switched to selling Indian-style meals during the day, and by his account, he was able to reach sales figures approximately the same as those he had achieved before. But the workload was much greater, he said. "I am a night person," he said laughing. "Now I have to be a day person. And it is much more work. It is much easier making money at night selling

alcohol." Even while his regular business was suspended in May, he allowed some regulars to drop by for a drink. One of the regulars at the Bangladeshi bar was an 85-year-old former bar owner who came every afternoon for her regular gin and tonic. For her, these routines were more important than concerns about the virus. In June the bar returned to its regular business model, though they could only stay open until 10 p.m.

Many independent food and beverage businesses that were already based largely on takeout already saw a clear upswing in business, including some in our urban residential neighborhood. These include a coffee shop run by a 75-year-old man who prides himself on roasting his own beans daily. To reduce contacts with customers, he has halted the table service of brewed coffee in the shop, but sales of roasted beans for takeaway have more than compensated for this loss of sit-down business. Even in late June he continued with this pattern. Similarly, a one-man bakery, a neighborhood favorite since the 1950s, was also doing a brisk business. The shop's 86-year-old owner was still arriving every morning to bake bread, which he sells himself in shortened hours in the early afternoon. Despite his age, had not taken a day off for weeks when we visited in late May. He looked tired, but was in good spirits, saying he had been "very busy." His daughter helps out on most days now, which is a change for him. Generally speaking, men in their 70s and 80s are a risk group for COVID and both men wear masks when they are facing customers, as do nearly all customers entering their stores. Most other takeout places installed elaborate plastic sheeting and barriers, and most employees wear masks.

One way in which neighborhood eateries survived the corona pandemic was to simply stay open for regular business, albeit with earlier and shortened hours. Such a pattern was allowed by the emergency decree in Tokyo.

For example, quite a few small izakaya in our urban neighborhood continued operating throughout this period. Most followed Tokyo government recommendations for restaurants, opening earlier in the afternoon and closing at the required time of 8 pm (10 am after June 1). Although we have not done an exact census, roughly one-half of the small izakaya (pubs) in the area around the station followed this pattern, while the other half have switched to takeout only, and a few closed up for a period of two to three weeks. In nearly all drinking places, business was down considerably from pre-COVID days. Many of these small-scale izakaya could accommodate only five to fifteen customers and were not spaces for large-scale interactions. Many customers at such places were regulars, even in normal times. One owner speculated that the small scale may create a lowered sense of risk among customers. Some of the restaurants that closed their regular eat-in business still allowed regular customers to come to the bar and share a few drinks in the late afternoon. This also was true at the galette shop in the suburbs, for example. For the owner of this galette shop, letting regulars stop by for a drink was less a business decision, than a form of moral support for regulars for whom her café was a kind of “third space” or home-away-from-home.<sup>15</sup> A few bars, however, violated guidelines and stayed open until late at night, provoking some (still generally low-key) criticism from other business owners.



**Figure 2: Many local restaurants stayed open during the COVID pandemic, though most closed by 8 pm. (photo by James Farrer April 18, 2020, around 7 pm)**

### Support from the Government and Community

The economic and health threats to people working in the food and beverage sector was evident from the start of the crisis, and various agencies of the government have rolled out a bewildering number of schemes to aid these businesses. Most informants were planning on applying for at least some of these. The Tokyo City government offered several types of grants: (1) a grant of up to 500,000 yen for those businesses who shorten working hours or stop business, (2) a subsidy of 80% of the cost of transitioning to takeaway and delivery service (including food containers and transportation costs), (3) a grant of 400,000 yen per day to shopping streets (shōtengai) on the condition that all members stop business completely (this was not done in our neighborhoods), (4) a subsidy to shopping streets of 90% of costs for creating an environment that mitigates viral spread, (5) grants to subsidize water and gas bills for businesses experiencing financial difficulties. In



addition there were a series of initiatives from the national government: (6) a grant of up to one million yen for businesses that have seen a loss of over 50% of business from the year before,<sup>23</sup> (7) a grant of 100,000 for each Japanese resident (not limited to business owners), (8) interest free loans of up to 10 million yen for businesses that have experienced a loss of over 10% of business. (9) a special license for selling alcohol on a takeout basis for businesses that had not been allowed to do so previously. This list is not exhaustive and new schemes emerge regularly as well as changes to regulations for existing ones.

Other than the grants to shopping streets (4 and 5), most business owners we spoke with were applying for these schemes. For small businesses hit especially hard by the crisis, the interest-free loans of up to 10 million yen were the most significant measure. Payments would not be required for two years, giving them a chance to recover from the current crisis.

Many complained, however, that the paperwork was onerous and complicated. As one community journalist told us in an online interview in late April, “Looking from the outside, I wonder how people will all be able to apply for this aid. The Tokyo city government is all about applications and paperwork, and you have to get all this paperwork together in time before the deadline.” The different types of aid were confusing, he said, and when owners called to ask for information, the phone lines were busy. Lines formed at the offices for information about loans. Small business owners with limited resources were finding compliance with the paperwork difficult. Migrants with no Japanese family members or staff to support them would also find filling out such forms difficult (though many established migrant business owners were long used to coping with such issues). One clear problem was the limited nature of the aid and its focus. There seemed to be nothing to help businesses retain employees, and if the crisis continues, many restaurant

workers would be out of jobs and many restaurants might close for good. “The future is difficult to see,” this community journalist said. “We may see many places closed in a couple of months.”

The most important support that businesses reported, however, did not come from the government, but from the community. Some of this was simply the support of regular customers, but business owners were most impressed by the increase in patronage from new faces. Some of this was the result of organized efforts. For example, in our urban residential neighborhood, residents organized platforms on social media to support traditional restaurants transitioning to takeaway service. In just a few days, over fifty restaurants were featured on the webpage which was replicated on Facebook, Twitter and the independent webpage managed by multiple neighborhood residents. Many restaurants were using social media for the first time. Many restaurant owners were very anxious at first, the neighborhood journalist said. “Even in this circumstance, seeing themselves make money, and seeing people line up, they became more confident.”

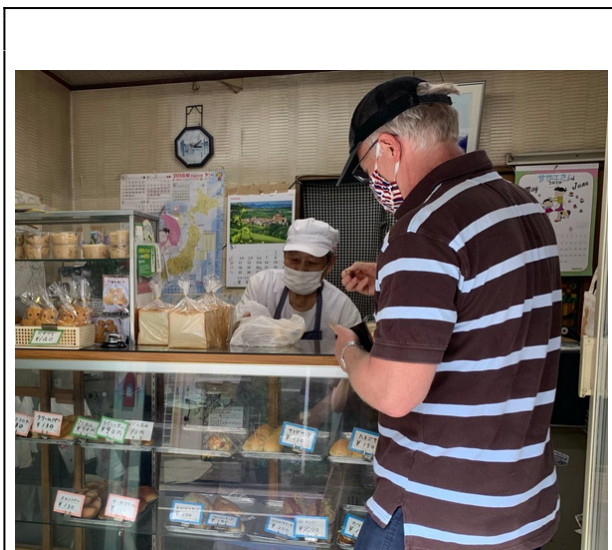
In the more far-flung suburban community, the situation was more complicated for businesses trying to reach customers who could not walk to restaurants. Delivery was the best option, but many restaurants lacked resources. One milk delivery service (these still exist in Japan) stepped in with a plan to deliver foods from restaurants as long as customers also ordered milk. This service had been quite successful. More recently, the owner of the local galette shop said, the chamber of commerce was considering organizing a delivery service for all restaurants in the community. This type of cooperation among businesses and with local government was helpful to making a transition during the crisis.

One form of support most informants generally

were not enthusiastic about were the commercial food delivery companies such as Uber Eats. Most resented the high delivery charges (30% of the cost of a meal). Many felt this would raise the price beyond what consumers would be willing to pay. According to press reports, however, sales on Uber Eats experienced a rapid increase in Japan, with sales volume in the first week of April double that in the same week in January.<sup>16</sup> One neighborhood restaurateur, a migrant from the USA, began using Uber Eats increasingly, he said. Even though his restaurant can earn very little from each sale, he said, the alternative would be food waste. So, it was a net gain.

Independent restaurants may have some hidden advantages in this crisis. Chain restaurants have been closing branches in Tokyo because of COVID,<sup>17</sup> but it is difficult to imagine community residents rallying around local chain restaurants. The outpouring of support has been largely focused on the personal ties built up between independent restaurant and bar owners, regular customers and a broader community that sees value in their presence. Recovery will not be easy, and business may never return to patterns established before COVID, but it does seem, at least for now, that independent Tokyo restaurants will survive. Those who relied upon neighborhood residents seemed to be in a better position than those who relied upon commuters and office workers. Izakayas and other drinking places relying upon patronage by after-hours workers and students seemed especially likely to suffer, since many company employees and university students continued remote working (or study) through the summer.<sup>18</sup>

Most informants did not foresee business returning to normal very quickly. Some owners talked about the difficulties of meeting new guidelines for restaurant customers to keep a distance of one meter, given such tight spaces.<sup>19</sup> Restaurants that depended on tourism were pessimistic about a quick return of foreign customers. Some owners assume that COVID would return once restrictions were relaxed, requiring another round of closure and takeout service. COVID is a personal threat, especially to aging owners. Even during the shut-down in May, some owners were concerned about the lines in front of some restaurants and crowding on the narrow streets. Reopening promises to be slow and difficult. Nonetheless, this qualitative research also highlights community-based resilience as a factor in supporting these businesses and their employees. Although business owners remained deeply worried about their financial viability, the psychological and economic



**Figure 3: The 86-year-old owner is still baking and selling bread daily at the bakery he has been operating since 1969. He now wears a mask, as does the author of this article. (photo by James Farrer May 16, 2020)**

### Risks, Uncertainty and Community-Based Resilience

benefits of support from the community members were clearly evident in conversations. Government aid will be necessary for many restaurants to weather a long-term macroeconomic downturn, but support from a broader network of consumers, businesses and local activists was the key component in the resilience I observe thus far.

This article is a part of **The Special Issue: Vulnerable Populations Under COVID-19 in Japan**. See the Table of Contents [here](#).

Please also read our previous special **Pandemic Asia** on the impacts of COVID-19 in the larger Asia-Pacific region, edited by Jeff Kingston, delivered in [Part 1](#) and [2](#).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> NHK. May 12, 2020. “タクシーや理美容など 収入や雇用に不安広がる 新型コロナ影響”

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Miller. May 8, 2020. “[Restaurants Need More Information to Reopen](#)”, *James Beard Foundation*

<sup>3</sup> David Marchese. March 27, 2020. “[David Chang isn't sure the restaurant industry will survive Covid-19](#)”, *New York Times Magazine*.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Severson and David Yaffy-Bellany. March 20 2020. “[Independent Restaurants Brace for the Unknown](#)”, *New York Times*.

<sup>5</sup> Haas, Stacey, Eric Kuehl, John R. Moran and Kumar Venkataraman. 2020 (May). “[How Restaurants can thrive in the next normal](#)”, McKinsey and Co. (May 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Zhang. May 6, 2020. “[The Path to Survival Is Even More Complicated for Immigrant-Owned Mom-and-Pop Restaurants](#)”, *Eater*.

<sup>7</sup> See James Farrer. 2018. “The Decline of the Neighborhood Chinese Restaurant in Urban Japan” *Jahrbuch für Kulinaristik – The German Journal of Food Studies and Hospitality*, Vol. 2, pp. 197-222.

<sup>8</sup> Statistics Bureau of Japan. 2019. “[Economic Census](#)”

<sup>9</sup> Tokyo Bureau Environment. 2020. [東京都における外食産業の概況](#)

<sup>10</sup> The online interviews were conducted in Japanese on Facebook Messenger. A Japanese research assistant conducted two of the interviews alone, while three were conducted together with the author. The face-to-face interviews all were conducted by the author. All were conducted between May 1 and May 14, 2020. I have chosen to anonymize the names of the restaurants as well as the two neighborhoods, since some of the financial issues discussed might have implications for aid applications.

<sup>11</sup> Takano Tomohiro. May 15, 2020. “[コロナだけじゃない、「二重苦」と戦う日本の飲食業界](#)” *Newsweek*.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with chefs Narisawa Yoshihiro and Yamamoto Seiji (Ryugin) by the author in late 2018 and early 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Haas et al. 2020. “How Restaurants can thrive.”

<sup>14</sup> Jada Nagamo. May 2, 2020. “[Japan's small companies apply for cash grants amid pandemic](#)” *Nikkei Weekly*.

<sup>15</sup> See James Farrer. 2020 (forthcoming) “The Space-Time Compression of Tokyo Street Drinking” *Food, Culture and Society* (accepted May 2, 2020) {copy available upon request}.

<sup>16</sup> Alex Martin. May 9, 2020. “[Hard sell: Japan's retail sector may need to reinvent itself in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)”, *Japan Times*

<sup>17</sup> Hisano, Hiroshi. May 15, 2020. “[Royal Holdings to close about 70 restaurants across Japan due to coronavirus losses](#)”, *Mainichi*

<sup>18</sup> Leika Kihara and Daniel Leussink. June 25, 2020. “[Japan's izakayas, once a staple of after-work socialising, crippled by pandemic](#)”, *Reuters*

<sup>19</sup> Nihon Keizai Shinbun. May 14, 2020. “[飲食店では「最低1メートルの間隔」、外食の業界団体が指針](#)”, *Nikkei*