

# the COVID diaries

There's no question about it: the pandemic has taken its toll on small businesses. Across the nation and the world, local businesses have grappled with the struggles of staying open during this time of decreased consumerism and complete uncertainty. In this issue we wanted to highlight the resilience of small Quad Cities area businesses, from coffee shops to art galleries, that have overcome hurdles during the pandemic in order to stay in business for the community. We think it's important to share what the pandemic has been like through the eyes of small business owners, because **perspective is everything.**



PERSPECTIVE  
*is everything*

# Food Affair Bistro

## Cooking up solutions

By Vinay Joshi

With the advent of COVID-19, it is hard to argue that the restaurant industry hasn't been one of the most heavily impacted. Despite these difficult circumstances, Food Affair Bistro, a new Bettendorf restaurant, hopes to not only survive, but thrive.

Food Affair Bistro is the creation of Namrata Malik, a local physician. Malik, along with her close friend Karishma Pancholi, originally planned to open an Indian restaurant about five years ago. However, the restaurant never materialized because the prospective building they would've used was taken off the market. However, in March of 2019, Malik had a brand new idea for a restaurant.

Over the past decade, Malik developed a close friendship with Aman Razdan, a chef at Hemispheres Bistro (and now the executive chef/part owner at Food Affair). Hemispheres Bistro serves a more formal clientele, but Malik's idea was to create a family-friendly restaurant to show off a broader range of his culinary skills: "The thought process was a very casual, 'let's hang out' type of a place," she said.

However, opening a business, especially a restaurant, during a global pandemic is no small feat. Since the initial planning in March 2019, the planned opening day was July 6th 2020. However, new challenges pushed the opening back to December of that year. Among the biggest of those challenges was the sudden quitting of the restaurant's designer, who, fearing lengthy delays, left the project as soon as the pandemic became serious. This led to the owners having to source materials needed for the restaurant themselves.

This, of course, created more problems. For instance, delivery of the restaurant's furniture was delayed by six weeks. Even-

tually, the furniture company declared that they were unable to fulfill the order due to COVID-19 related delays. Luckily, the owners were able to find a local alternative for furniture with more economical prices.

Malik cited several other challenges. For instance, the restaurant's builder had to self-quarantine for 3 weeks, halting development for the entirety of that period. These challenges included the awkwardness of communicating critical business decisions via email and Zoom, not being able to physically view restaurant materials before purchasing them, and frequent delays with shipping times. "We had to have a Plan B for everything," Malik reflected. Malik described going through a full day of work as a doctor, then conducting Zoom meetings from 8:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. to discuss restaurant plans.

Cognizant of the circumstances present when operating a restaurant in the midst of a pandemic, the owners made sure to

"COVID-proof" their restaurant for customer safety. This included picking materials and fabrics that would be the most sanitary and easiest to clean. Malik stated that "more or less everything is touchless."

This includes touch-free bathroom doors and faucets. The owners made sure to build a spacious kitchen to accommodate social distancing, have an open layout, and use a state-of-the-art air filtration system.

Although the quitting of the interior designer forced the owners to become much more involved in the development of the restaurant, Malik has a positive outlook on the demanding and uncertain path that Food Affair Bistro took to be able to open.

"It made me grow. It made me learn about things I didn't know about: dealing with construction, advertisement, builders...It was a positive thing for me."





392 is a popular coffee shop that is growing in Iowa. Jay Sanders and Jenna Sanders opened 392 Caffé in Clinton, Iowa in 2011. They moved here from Los Angeles and channeled their skills into the now known coffee place, 392. They opened their 2nd shop in downtown Davenport and they have a third one coming soon.

COVID was an extremely sudden interference for businesses everywhere. For 392, their coffee shops had to go from having fun indoors to drive-thrus very quickly. Jay and Jenna had to keep their customers' health in mind while making these fast decisions. They also had to think about their employees and how to maintain their business during these times.

The pandemic has had a major impact on the owners of 392 personally. Jenna said, "Being a small business owner, these shops are not just a job, these are our livelihoods. It's not something we get to clock out from or go home and forget about. When COVID hit, we went into survival mode."

The owners had the responsibility of maintaining their employees and family at the same time. It was mentally and emotionally exhausting for them all around. Another struggle that 392's owners faced was getting supplies for the coffee. They get milk from a local dairy, honey from a local apiary, coffee from a small roaster and baked goods from a small bakery. These other small businesses were struggling as well, so Jay and Jenna tried their best to support them. To keep the business running the safest way possible, Jay and Jenna had to make a

lot of changes. Luckily, they already had a texting system set up and curbside pick up available before COVID hit. Since these processes were already in place, it was a little easier for customers to adjust. The night that businesses were open for curbside only, Jay worked hard all night to build an online ordering system.

The owners wanted to be a stable front for the consumers in the area, so they decided to have no hours changed and no staff cut. Sanders said, "And because of this we were a sense of normalcy in a time of chaos for so many people. The community knew we were there for them and they continued to show up for us. This fall we launched our 392

app and it is now easier than ever to procure your favorite 392 items."

Many people enjoy 392's coffee shops not only for their coffee/food but also for the environment. 392 is a very safe and welcoming community that makes customers feel appreciated. Jay and Jenna worked extremely hard together to continue this welcoming environment even during the tough times.



## Giving it their best (espresso) shot

# 392 Coffee

By Raksha Kumar

# Kosama

## Carrying the weight of COVID

By Alyce Brown

Before the pandemic, Kosama was a busy gym in Davenport, beloved by its community of dedicated members.

Like almost all small businesses, however, Kosama took a hit when COVID shut-downs began across the state and nation. It has been a tough journey for them, and one that owner Lindsay Ulloa said has been “an emotional, physical and mental struggle.”

Kosama opened in July of 2011 and garnered a community around what its website calls a “one-of-a kind fitness program,” which Ulloa explained constitutes group fitness and functional movement with heart rate training.

As COVID kept more and more people home in the spring, gyms and fitness centers began to lose members, with Kosama being no exception. “Many members have completely terminated their membership because they don’t feel safe or comfortable coming into the facility due to the risks of COVID,” said Ulloa.

She was determined to find new ways to keep Kosama up and running during the global shutdowns, setting to work at what proved to be a time-consuming undertaking. “It has caused many, many more hours of work for me,” she said, but she found ways to continue operation.

Starting in the spring, Ulloa began live-streaming all of Kosama’s workout classes and providing access to recordings of them through a new On-Demand system. Cleaning and disinfecting was also increased for members who still attended in-person classes, including the purchase of a fog sanitizer machine to reach all of the equipment and flooring.

Making such substantial changes to the way the gym is run was not easy, however. “From the months of March to June I practically lived at my gym, working 12 to 14 hour days instructing virtual classes all day long,” said Ulloa. The equipment required for live streaming and On-Demand services also increased the fees the business has to pay, with Ulloa adding that all the new technology has “financially taken a toll on us.”

But despite the struggles and obstacles that Kosama and Ulloa have faced through the pandemic, she is happy to keep it running for her members. “I saw a need and decided I needed to step up and be able to service my members however possible,” she said. “I wanted to give them options so they could still stay healthy. Not just for their physical health but even more so for their mental.”

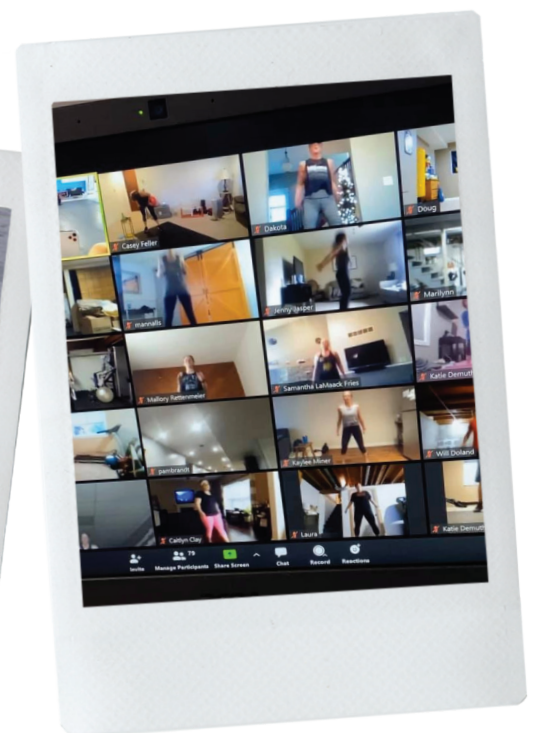
Ulloa’s dedication to her members comes at a good time, as the pandemic continues to take a toll on citizens’ mental health. From extra hours to extra services, she stepped up for her members when it counted and

demonstrated an impressive resilience during this difficult period for small business owners.

But the generosity didn’t end there. Ulloa’s desire to share the importance of fitness for one’s mental health combined with her love of the community prompted her to offer free community cardio classes via Zoom during the weeks when the Quad Cities was quarantined.

This summer, Kosama will celebrate its tenth year of business in the Quad Cities. While not without its struggles, Ulloa said COVID most definitely has proved to be the greatest of those by a landslide.

The gym continues operating and adapting to these changing times, and it seems clear that Ulloa’s positive outlook is surely the gym’s secret weapon to handling all this pandemic has thrown its way. “It’s worth it,” she said.





## End Result

## Racing into a new era

By Muskan Basnet

There's nothing quite like watching a runner cross the finish line, with the bright, digital clock keeping time on the sideline and hundreds of spectators cheering. One company that works to bring these running events to life is End Result Company—a local timing, scoring and data collection business.

Working with the local running community, End Result collects running times, categorizes them and registers participants with an online platform, GetMeRegistered.com. However, with the rise of the coronavirus, employee Adam Tisue and his team have faced a new challenge—one that could impact the sport of running for years to come.

Usually, economic crisis results in an increase in running, as Tisue noted: “People need something to turn to.” However, the nature of the pandemic has done the opposite. Though Tisue’s registration website still held promise, End Result saw almost immediate turmoil when the US faced its first breakout. Tisue noted the sud-

den extremities that his company faced: “In 2020, I scored a 10,000 plus person race in Tampa, Florida, on March 1. By March 7, we didn’t have any events scheduled for seven or eight or nine months.”

The downturn in business caused a number of employees to be laid off—even Tisue himself endured a temporary furlough in April. In order to stay afloat, End Result had to come up with new, unique events that were virtual, accessible and attractive to their customers.

Even more disappointing was the virus’s effect on the running community as a whole. The Quad Cities and other areas where End Result operates are packed full of small, tight-knit running communities that attend races and practice together. The most alluring part of these groups is being able to participate in large events with other local groups.

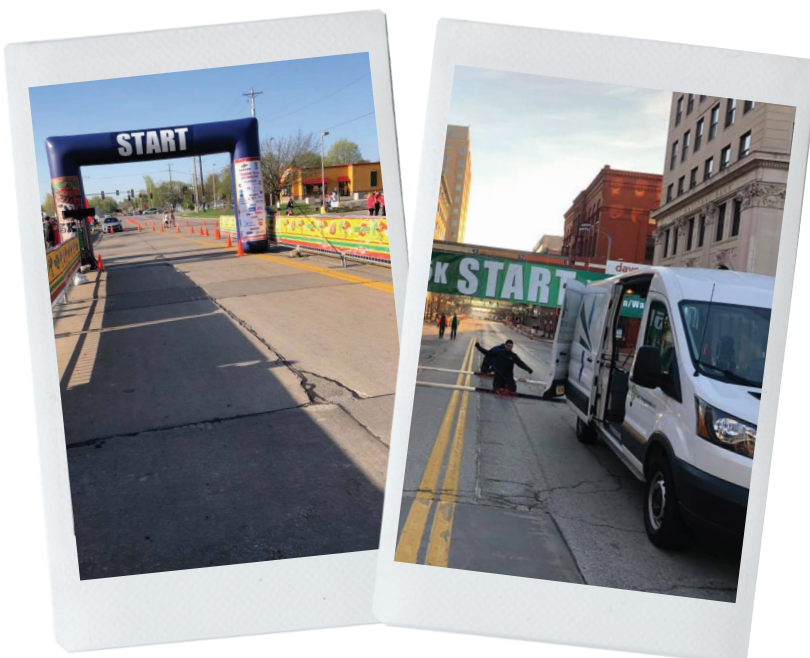
Even with the pandemic, runners will always have their small practice groups to turn to, but Tisue stressed what is arguably the most catastrophic part of this whole situation: the domino effect. These races helped to fund charitable organizations throughout the Quad Cities -- and they are feeling the trickle effect,

too. One of End Result’s largest events is CASI’s St. Patty’s Day race, one of last year’s canceled events that benefits the non-profit agency dedicated to serving the area’s aging seniors. Another local favorite is Ganzo’s Cinco de Mayo race, which raises thousands of dollars annually for the QC Autism foundation--it was also canceled. “Races have always been a great community feature because [they] bring people together — the cause is usually positive, whether it be for a charity, or a cause like supporting the military, or just a way for people to get together, race each other and just have a good time. Without races, people can’t come together,” said Tisue.

As the future approaches, Tisue acknowledges that the event industry is improving. End Result is logging a number of future events that have both in-person and virtual options for registrants — a duality that Tisue believes will last for years until people feel comfortable being in close proximity to others. This idea, too, holds positives: precautions that event-holders have instilled due to the virus are good for the safety of participants even post-pandemic, as running has always been a highly intensive sport with no way to ensure distance between athletes.

Though the challenges Tisue, End Result and the running community have faced are grueling, the positives have outweighed the negatives and this group of athletes has always been strong and persistent.

The event industry is possibly the most impacted amid the pandemic, but it also possesses an innate ability that always seems to keep it alive: bringing communities together.



Despite past successes, small business owners have been calling for the support of people to keep their businesses running now more than ever. This unprecedented pandemic caused people in the small business industry to shut down their shops and restaurants and completely stop working in March.

Even after they were able to reopen, more and more restrictions were presented to ensure that everyone was safe. People were afraid of COVID-19, and businesses, including Taste of Ethiopia, lost a lot of customers.

Since then, however, Taste of Ethiopia has gotten accustomed to all the necessary precautions needed to keep their staff and customers safe. Their staff has their temperature checked daily, hand sanitizer is provided inside the restaurant and throughout the outdoor dining area, everything from seating to tableware is sanitized after each customer, masks are required until seated, and there is mandated 6-foot social distancing.

Located on Harrison St in Davenport, Taste of Ethiopia offers a view of the Mississippi riverfront while serving authentic Ethiopian dishes with meat and vegan options. Getting the business up and running was already quite a challenge, but the pandemic has made it more difficult for the family restaurant to keep serving their numerous customers. Genet Morates, one of the founders and owner of the restaurant commented on the business's journey so far. "Taste of Ethiopia was created in May 2016 after numerous work potlucks, family get-togethers, and a



constant demand for our amazing food! We started with a few partners, and after one year we took over and ran it as a family business."

Morates struggled quite a bit at the beginning of the pandemic when she and her husband were the only people able to cook and manage the entire restaurant. As the year went on, their business changed into more of a carry out restaurant, even though they still offer the dining in option.

The restaurant is a huge success because of many dedicated customers, but also because of the natural curiosity people in the Quad Cities have about Ethiopian food and culture. The restaurant is only open five days a week, Wednesday through Sunday, but they still manage to offer many special dishes for their customers.

Some of the starters include Sambusas, which are hand-wrapped shells of thin pastry filled with either lentils or steak. The other items on their menu are entrees, combination dinners, desserts and sides. They also sell the very popular Ethiopian coffee and tea.

The Taste of Ethiopia family also takes holidays very seriously, as they offer Labor Day, Father's Day, etc. specials. Just this past December, they had a holiday special, offering their customers Ethiopian style lamb ribs with wild rice and their choice of two traditional sides.

There are still so many ways to support small businesses besides dining in restaurants, and Morates and her staff have tried their best to accommodate their customers' needs.

## Serving up a lot of optimism

By Aayusha Adhikari

# Taste of Ethiopia



"In the history of Italy and the arts, there have been plagues. We would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge and understand that these things are going to happen... we can bring comfort of the arts – from the arts – to our community." Pat Beréskin, proud owner of Beréskin Gallery and Art Academy, has dedicated her whole life to the arts and used them to accept every bend in the trail brought her way – especially in this past year.

Born and raised in Bettendorf with strong Italian roots, Beréskin has long understood the power of art. When asked when she knew what she wanted to do with her life, she fondly answered, "I was four or five and I was looking out, and I could see really far. I could see far down our street and all the way down to the creek – that was Duck Creek – and a male deer with a huge crown came out of the water and stood there and looked at me... at that minute I knew I was going to be an artist."

Not only did Beréskin become an artist, but she became what many believe to be a wonderful teacher too. Formerly, she taught classes to children in elementary through high school in her own home, but now she owns her own art gallery and studio here in her home town where she can help nurture young artists. She goes in to work at 7 in the morning and remains most nights until 8 p.m.

When COVID hit the ground running in the United States, Beréskin knew she had to work with this chapter instead of

letting it win. She couldn't let it keep her students from creating, and she was up for the challenge; as she likes to say, "teaching is not for the faint of heart." "Because of my family in Italy, I was very aware of what was going on in Europe [in early February]. Both of my family members are doctors, and they warned me because in the U.S. we were not prepared."

She used that knowledge to her advantage and prepared herself and her students for this time. She began utilizing temperature checks, having all students remove their shoes and sanitizing every open surface.

Additionally, before classes could resume in person again, she created a major online presence for her students not only in the Quad Cities but artists across the country and the world.

Beréskin was able to spread her love of art in completely unprecedented ways that likely wouldn't have been possible without this bump in the road.

It is clear that in embracing this time instead of loathing it, Beréskin truly knows how to appreciate life's beauty. "This is my mission – this is my life... my job is to leave this world more beautiful and to raise the next generation of artists!" When asked what lies in store for her and her wonderful local business, she paused, smiled, and responded, "Hope is where I'm going."



## Painting a positive picture

By Caroline Sierk

# Beréskin Art Gallery

# Cheesy Cow

## Trying to “brie” strong

By Allisa Pandit

The COVID-19 pandemic entered the US early 2020, leaving small businesses owners across the country with a unique venture: trying to keep their business afloat amidst a pandemic. People across the world were not ready for such a grave task. Beth Aronson, owner of Cheesy Cow and Coffee Hound, quickly adapted to COVID regulations and learned new skills throughout the course of the pandemic.

Cheesy Cow opened its doors December of 2018 as a brand new concept. “My husband and I used to take our son to Wisconsin Dells when he was younger and we soon fell in love with a local mac and cheese restaurant,” Aronson said. I inquired about possibly opening a second location in the Quad Cities, but they told us they weren’t a franchise.”

Gregg Aronson, Beth’s husband, began working on the commercial strips near the TBK Bank Sports Complex. After deciding to open a second Coffee Hound location in the plaza, Beth found the perfect opportunity to build her dream mac and cheese restaurant from scratch.

When word of the pandemic first spread, small business owners were met with new regulations from the governor and health department: “At the beginning of the pandemic, the first 2-3 weeks were slow due to shortened staff and new regulations. We quickly shut down our lobby and stuck to take-out options through DoorDash and Grubhub,” she shared.

During this time, Aronson wanted to focus on marketing and began to brain-

storm creative ways to keep Cheesy Cow in the profit margin. By using social media, Aronson spread promotional deals such as a ‘buy one meal, get one roll of toilet paper free’ deal. Through take-out options and additional advertising, Aronson brought Cheesy Cow back on its feet. “Nowadays, I would say, about 99% of the customers are okay with our mask requirement. We get the occasional customers that argue, but overall we are getting used to a new normal,” she commented. Aronson shared that although she has created an additional hourly sanitizing schedule and safe dining options, COVID gear is still a prominent issue.

Due to a shortage of gloves, prices for COVID gear have gone up in the past few months. Aronson similarly commented on the effects the dairy farmers have had on Cheesy Cow. The dairy industry cut off their

supply in early March, resulting in a 500% increase in the cost of cheese. Aronson has fought hard to keep mac and cheese prices consistent at Cheesy Cow, yet the business still pays for a higher-priced cheese.

As a small business owner working through a pandemic, Aronson learned the importance of mental health and loved ones: “Everyday is different, protocols are different; I’ve learned to go with the flow and not stress about the little things. Everyone is stressed and after going through a pandemic, my employees have become family,” she shared. “People still need socialization, so having Coffee Hound and Cheesy Cow open at even 50% is so important to me. People need a safe socialization option

in order to maintain good mental health without becoming lonely or stressed during these times.”

