

Here's what diners want as restaurants reopen with caution

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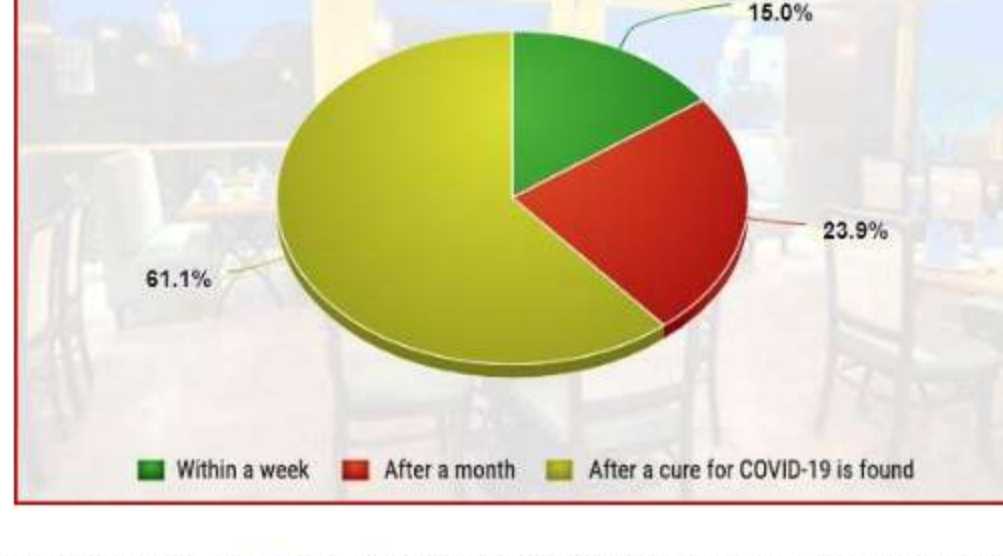


Customers dining at a restaurant at Connaught Place in New Delhi. (Photo | Parveen Negi, EPS)

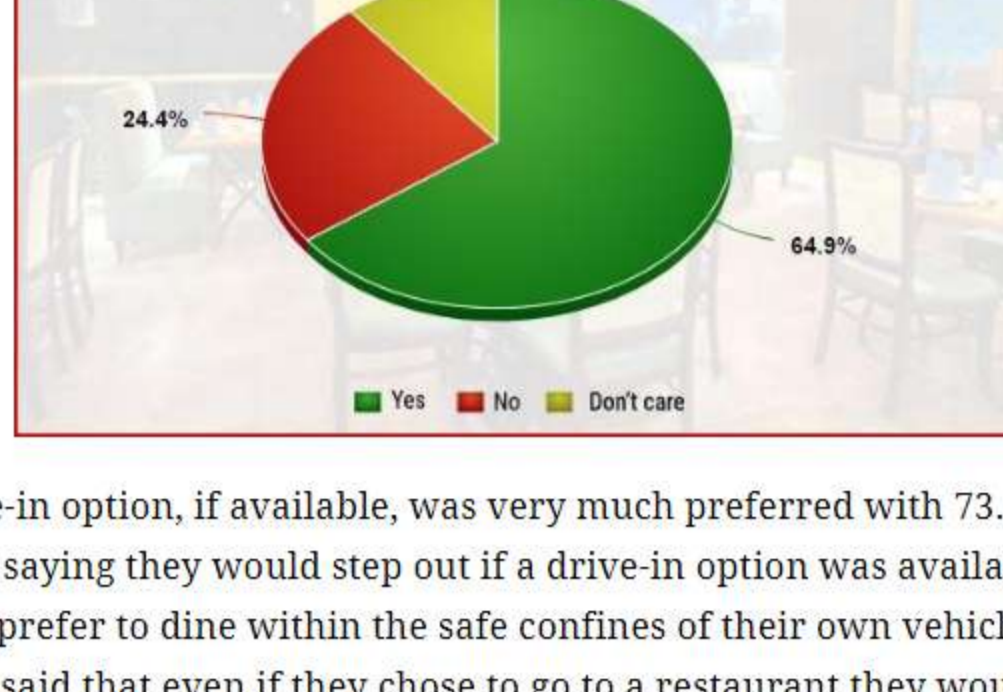
By Sonali Shenoy

Express News Service

Restaurants have been given the green signal to re-open by the government. But the big question is: who will go to them? At a time when COVID-19 cases continue to rise, Unlock 1.0 is getting mixed reactions from once-restaurant regulars. *The New Indian Express* carried out a Twitter poll to find out what customers prioritise the most when it comes to a 'safe dining experience' in the backdrop of staggering restaurant openings across the country, since June 8. Disposable menus, frequent sanitisation and PPE kits for staff, as well as cordoned off sections for large groups, top the list. This is over and above the government SOP for restaurants that specifies no air conditioning, seating at 50 percent capacity and food bearers to wash their hands every 30 minutes.



So, the most secure option of course continues to be, to simply stay home. Possibly why 61.1% of responders said that they would rather wait for a cure for COVID-19 before leaving their homes. This seems to be a strong sentiment reflected by several citizens and with good reason as the number of cases continues to climb. "The truth is there is no way I will dine in at a restaurant during this period. Probably when there is a significant reduction of cases, or when a vaccine comes out!" Rohini Rau, a doctor at Cauvery hospital and a popular face in the theatre circuit told us.



A drive-in option, if available, was very much preferred with 73.2% of people saying they would step out if a drive-in option was available and would prefer to dine within the safe confines of their own vehicle, while 68.3% said that even if they chose to go to a restaurant they would considerably decrease the time spent there. Although, the no air-conditioning mandate of the Tamil Nadu government's SOP for restaurants - might likely become one of the other factors for wanting to make a quick departure - given the unbearable afternoon heat.



Other guidelines include a one-metre distance to be maintained between dining tables; staff to wear aprons, masks and headwraps; vegetables, dhal and rice to be cleaned with 50 PPM chlorine; and thermal screening for all customers at the entrance.



Mandates apart, protective gear like masks and gloves play a big part in making customers feel 'at ease'. "Going back to our favourite places to eat is based on trust. While there is a lot that you do see, there is lots that you don't see, when it comes to hygiene. So definitely the basics like masks on the service and kitchen staff, regular sanitisation of all areas, adequate spacing and availability of hand sanitisers, are important factors to consider while dining out," says TV anchor and columnist Paloma Rao.



We took it a step further and asked how many would consider going the extra mile and investing a portion of their bill toward PPE and sanitisation at a restaurant, and 30.9% said yes immediately. "I would definitely dine at restaurants where strict safety protocols are followed and it's only fair to pay extra for the same. Other precautionary measures such as capacity limits, disposable, environment-friendly utensils, and contactless payments can also be incorporated to make it a safer environment," says make up artist Akriti Sachdev.



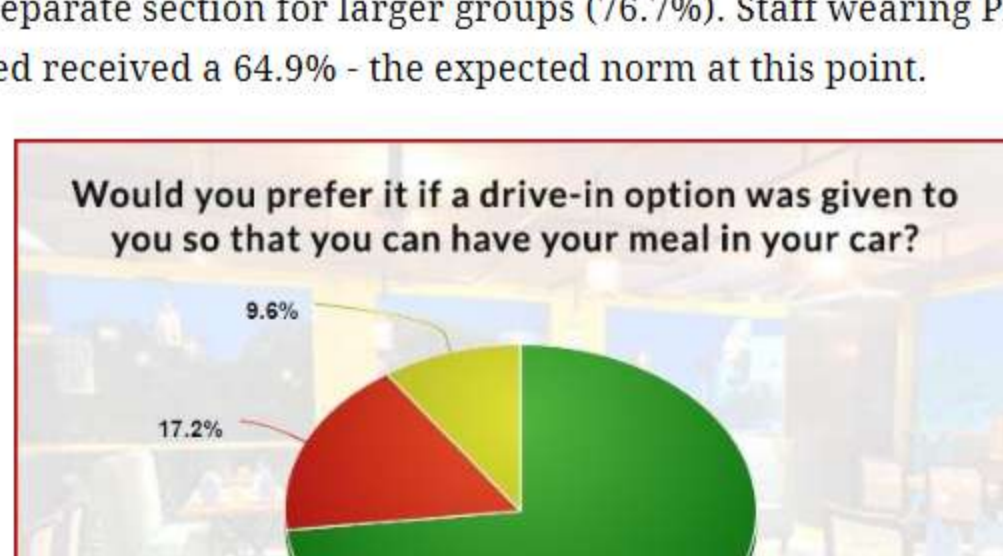
However, a louder 53.4% resounded a strong no to paying for safety gear and 15.7% stayed on the fence in the 'maybe' category. Environment activists are concerned also about the massive amounts of wastage that is a byproduct of dine-in hygiene protocols - given that many of these PPE kits are designed to be single-use or disposable. Citing wastage as a reason, fashion designer Vivek Karunakaran tells us, "I think it would just be more responsible to opt for a takeaway unless it is absolutely necessary."



Cuisine preferences also play a part in what customers will be willing to step out for. Regional fare turned out to be the most popular choice - garnering 42.5% of votes, with a slimmer 32.3% choosing fine dining and 25.2% opting for fast food.



Other visible hygiene cues that the poll reveals will make customers feel safer and more comfortable at a restaurant are biodegradable menu cards (77.1%), temperature checks and hand wash upon entry (59.2%), and a separate section for larger groups (76.7%). Staff wearing PPE, as expected received a 64.9% - the expected norm at this point.



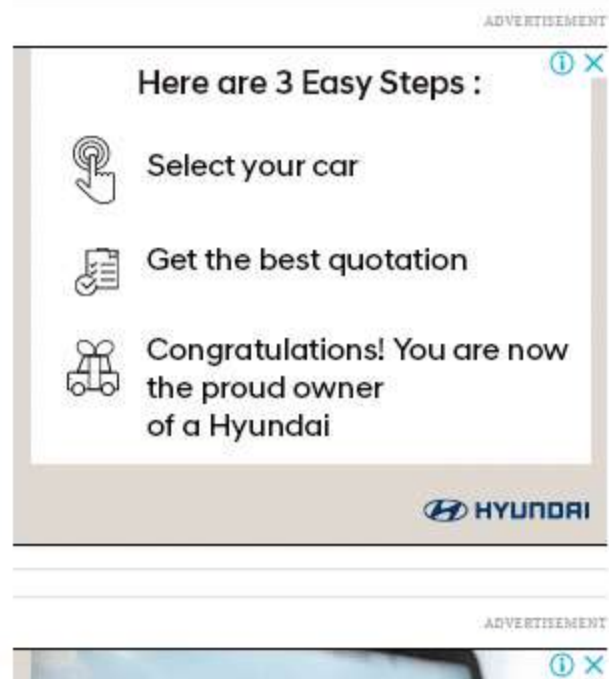
For reasons that range from a manpower shortage to lack of funds to whether it will cost more to a man than to stay closed - a number of restaurateurs did not immediately open their doors on June 8. "As of now, we are going to open in a phased manner," says Sandesh Reddy, chef and owner of Sandy's Chocolate Laboratory, Old Madras Baking Company, HuTong, as well as handling operations for bakery chain French Loaf and Wang's Kitchen. "We are going to open Sandy's (Chocolate Laboratory) first and use that as a learning for the rest of the restaurants," he elaborates.



Chef Vijaykumar Manikandan (of Chefs M&N Pvt Ltd) who consults with brands like Cafe Meraki, Parambriym, Aloe - Belstead, and The Hideout Bistro anticipates "only 30 percent of people dining out for at least a few months ahead".

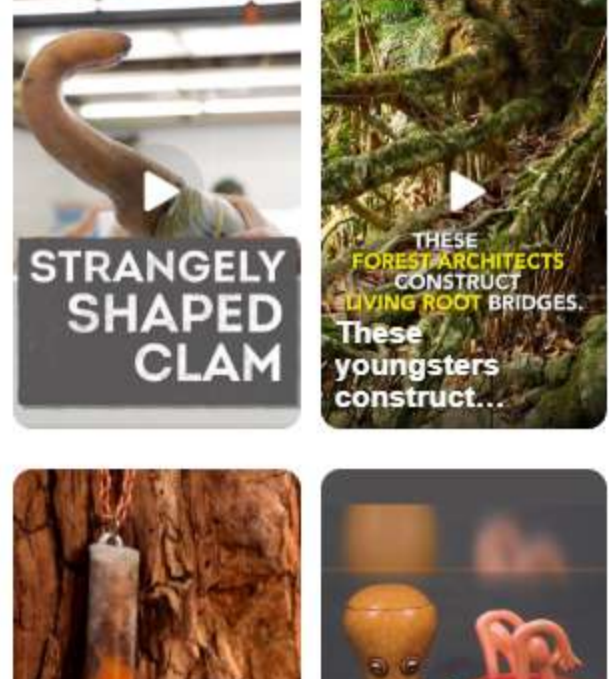


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