

Final Michael Stewart

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: The restaurant business has been devastated during Covid. Michael Stewart, owner of Tavern on Jane in New York City's West Village, shares his story of survival. Michael thanks for joining us today. Welcome to the podcast. Let's start from the beginning. How long have you been in the restaurant business in New York and how long have you owned Tavern on Jane?

MS: I've been in the restaurant business in New York probably close to 36 years, owner of Tavern on Jane; I'm in my 26th year of ownership of Tavern on Jane.

KK: Is Tavern on Jane a landmark building?

MS: Yes it is. It was built in 1842 and originally, I believe from the understanding I have it was a paddock for Sir Lord Abingdon so they kept their carriages and horses and whatnot in this building back in 1840. Since then, it's been many different forms of restaurants, a bakery, a speakeasy many different things over the years.

VC: Our podcast is audio only, so for our listeners who don't know New York and don't know your restaurant, could you describe what it looks like?

MS: Absolutely. You walk into the Tavern and right away you get a sense of being in a place that's special, number one and it's got a very historic feel. When you enter the tavern, it's got tin ceilings, it's got wide plank oak floors, it's got a 20 foot mahogany bar on the one side and on the other side it's got banquettes that are elevated to give everyone a similar height and seating in the bar area. Then we have the original brick walls, we have three little kind of distinctive rooms and they are all very comfortable.

KK: I know you're in the Meatpacking District. I think you were there before the Meatpacking District became so famous.

MS: When I came here we were still known as the West Village and I believe we still are you know, part of the West Village. As the Meatpacking District is defined we are on the very edge of the Meatpacking District, but we've also been a big part of the West Village since the inception of Tavern on Jane.

KK: Can you tell us a little bit about what you experienced during Covid? I know that you had to close the Tavern at the beginning.

MS: Yeah, like everyone else it came upon us quite quickly and one day we're hearing about it and the next day we're getting warned that there might be some ramifications for the industry and then within a few days, we're told that we're going to be shutting down.

It wasn't something you could wrap your mind around and get prepared for. It was something that you had to kind of deal with on the fly. So on the 16th of March last year that was our last day to be open and have customers in the restaurant. And we did have some people in. And initially earlier in the day we were able to be open until 10:00PM and then at 5:00PM they made an announcement we had to be closed by 8:00PM. So obviously, things were getting a little out of control and so I had to make some decisions quickly. It was the day before St. Patrick's Day. I had 400 pounds of corned beef, and expectations of having my normal, really busy really great St. Patrick's Day. So I couldn't sit on it, and so what we did we just decided right away, we were going to start doing to go and delivery and people needed to eat so, I had done to go and delivery on a platform as far as something like GrubHub or Seamless but I signed up with them so within a couple of weeks, I was able to do delivery and to go food and it really worked out well.

VC: Did you have to make any alterations in your menu during this time?

MS: You know initially we had to because we were kind of limited to how we could operate and function. But within a short amount of time, we started running the dinner menu full time so we would run it from 12 noon until, in the beginning I think we were able to stay open until 10:00PM to go and delivery, or that was our decision. We were trying to minimize the amount of workers and the number of hours just because the revenue was down so much and you wanted to keep people working so we never closed. Some people were able to get on unemployment but we kept everybody working that needed to and I think it was helpful to them and obviously to us.

KK: Did you expect your workers to be tested for Covid?

MS: Yeah, everybody was tested fairly regularly. Initially it was really hard to get a test because if you didn't exhibit symptoms, so we immediately set up, anyone who was working as soon as masks were issued as mandatory, I always have a big supply of masks, gloves, the whole nine yards. We already had gloves full time because that's necessary by the Department of Health, but getting masks, getting everybody to function in a little more conscious manner, I think by doing that you know, we were able to get on top of it very quickly.

VC: You have to let any of your staff go?

MS: I didn't let anyone go. I just didn't have enough shifts for people to work so some people were able to collect unemployment and some people were able to work. Initially, because I got the PPP I paid everybody a salary even if they weren't working for the first two months of the PPP and then at that point in time I had blown through that some people went on unemployment until I could get more working and I think we finally got some outdoor seating we were able to get more people working so we were up to, I think, we have 28 full and part-time employees, we were up to somewhere around 22 or so, so we had a lot of people back to work. Some people just did not want to come back.

KK: You mentioned PPP. Can you tell us exactly what that is?

MS: Yeah, its government funding it's called the Payment Protection Program, the money is to, it's earmarked for certain items. 60% is mandatory for payroll and the other 40% can either be used to pay your utilities and that sort of thing and rent. So it's really earmarked for three things. If you use it for anything other than that it becomes a loan and not a grant. So it's important that I maintain the proper usage of the funds because if I don't I'm going to be stuck having it as a loan and it was a significant amount of money so I can't afford that so it helped me tremendously, but there already was pressure on the business.

VC: Just so the listeners know, this is New York City and it's winter and we've had some pretty cold days and a bit of snow recently, and you've been doing outdoor dining. So can you tell us, describe your outdoor dining setup and tell us how that's been going for you.

MS: We were able to get Jane Street closed, and when we were able to get Jane Street closed it gave us the ability to set up a dining area outside. Originally, when we set it up it was in like August and so I was able to set up planter boxes as a perimeter. We had a very really nice open feeling to it, underneath the trees and the stars and the sun, it was really, really quite nice. So we had basically 28 seats on the street and then we had some seating on the sidewalk. So all totaled, we had like 40 seats outside. So when the weather was nice we could actually do quite a good amount of business having the outdoors because we didn't get the indoors until October.

KK: Sounds lovely to sit out there in the summertime but what happened with the snowstorms?

MS: Once everything started getting a little bit cooler I bought some tents. And so, I bought three tents, they're 10 feet by 20 feet, they're 10 feet wide and 20 feet long. I have a tented area which is 60 feet by 10 feet, so about 600 square feet, and I have the tables pretty much the same arrangement as I had before but now we are protected. I have sides which help to keep the wind and everything else down and when the weather's nice we bring the sides up, it's really great.

VC: Do you have heat lamps?

MS: I do.

VC: Tell us about your involvement with the surrounding community. There's an organization called Frontline Foods.

MS: We did Frontline Foods and we had a customer who's a regular customer here who came in right when we were getting ready to close and said "listen, I'm working with a new company and it's a charitable company called Frontline Foods and we'd like to have you guys participate." And we said "sure, we'd love to" and so we were able to

sign up with them and I think we did three or four deliveries with Frontline, we did the precinct, we did the hospital and a few others.

KK: You had told us that you and your wife had Covid. Do you want to discuss that?

MS: I'd be happy to. I found that I had Covid on what would have been the 20th, so Friday the 20th I was diagnosed with Covid and my wife as well. And, we immediately went into quarantine and we quarantined for two weeks. I had very light symptoms, really nothing to write home about. My wife, on the other hand, she had a more adverse reaction to the Covid so she had a cough for easily the week, she ran a fever for eight days and she still has a little bit of a lingering cough. We both lost our taste and sense of smell which was really kind of very strange, you know, not enjoyable by any stretch. So we both came through it pretty well. We were tested a few weeks after that and we both tested positive for antibodies. Fortunately or unfortunately, we had it early, nothing too serious that we couldn't deal with at home.

KK: Did you get your taste back?

MS: I got mine back probably in a couple of weeks and then Mary Anne, hers took a little longer to return and I don't think she has it 100% as of now.

KK: Right now you have indoors which is only recent, 25% capacity but I think they changed it and it's going to be 35%. That's got to be wonderful for you. Can you tell us about that?

MS: Yeah, we've been at 25% for I guess, we started on the 12th of February so it's just not even been two week yet and they decided we could go to 35% in the city. Some people say it's very generous, I, on the other hand say why don't we just go to 50%. I get they're erring on the side of caution but I think we've been a little too cautious with regard to dealing with it. You know, I'm not a scientist but I know that the transmission rate in restaurants is exceedingly low and I know that I do everything I can to ensure the safety and proper protocol to make people comfortable and happy and safe so 35% is going to be great. It gives me eight additional seats, so that's -- listen anytime you're getting more, it's good. But again, we're still at only 35% so I'm normally at 74 and I'm going to be at 26 seats.

VC: I understand that the city, and maybe the State, I don't know, they send around inspectors to make sure that people are in compliance with the protocols. Have you had any issues with these inspections or with the inspectors?

MS: We haven't had any adverse issues. I've had every major agency come and visit, so I've had the fire department in a number of times, I've had the police department a number of times, I've had the DOT a number of times, SLA's been in, we haven't had any issues, no fines or anything like that.

VC: So there have been obviously many, many challenges during Covid. What do you think is the most challenging issue that you have encountered?

MS: I believe the length of time that this has been going on. When it started you thought it would be something short-lived, and from reports from different people, and the government, everyone led you to believe it was going to be over in a few months. So I think the hardest part has been its very much like Groundhog Day, it just doesn't end for business people not to know how you're going to make the next day, and it's tough.

KK: Do you see the light at the end of the tunnel?

MS: Yeah, I do. I'm feeling that if I could make it until April 1st, I would be in a much better position to survive predicated on the weather and then indoor seating and so I would be in a place to hopefully get the restaurant up and getting to its – well, it's going to take a long time until it gets back to its normal numbers – to get to where it's affordable again.

KK: You're almost there in April, so you made it, congratulations!

MS: Thank you.

KK: What do you consider the new normal for the restaurants and for Tavern on Jane?

MS: I think the new normal is just going to be, people are just going to be a little bit more cautious about what they do and their environment and I hope that once we've all had our vaccines, till we've been able to get that out of the way, move that forward, I think it's going to come in stages and so I think the new normal will change as we move forward. I think that it's going to take a period of time for "normal" to return and it may not ever be what it's been here in the past, but I'm hopeful that we're able to keep people comfortable, happy and that I could be profitable obviously, but it's hard to imagine the new normal completely.

VC: Exactly. It's totally new territory. Nobody's ever been through anything like this before so as they say, we're all going through it together.

MS: Yes, and listen, I guess we could all be, and get a little bit down on ourselves or get down on it and feel like we're the only ones but it's not the case because as you look across the city and you look at other businesses and what people are trying to do, they're suffering in this industry everywhere. And not just this industry, but you know, across the board so there is solace that there are other people traveling this road with you. You only hope that everybody's able to come out on the other side and have it be a memory.

KK: Absolutely, absolutely. If people want to know more about Tavern on Jane?

MS: Yeah, its tavernonjane.com is our web page and then we're on, like Instagram and Facebook and other social media platforms. If you go to Yelp or Google, we have five

stars on Google which is pretty amazing and then Yelp I think we're 4.5 stars so we have a really good rating and following. So you can find us.

VC: So tell the folks where you're located in New York City.

MS: Yeah, we're in the beautiful West Village. We're located on the corner of Jane Street and Eighth Avenue, which is three blocks south of Fourteenth and come and pay us a visit.

VC: Michael, thank you so much for being with us today.

MS: I really appreciate it and thank you guys for having me. And I look forward to continuing our discussion when we're able to hang out here.

VC: Absolutely, you know Kat and I are going to be there.

MS: Excellent. I look forward to it guys.