

Once a virus epicenter, Los Angeles set to reopen - partly

March 14 2021, by Brian Melley and Stefanie Dazio



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The last time Brittney Valles welcomed diners into Guerrilla Tacos, her restaurant was open for a mere five hours in July before being ordered to close again because of the surging coronavirus pandemic.

So, it's little surprise Valles is not rushing to open her doors now that Los Angeles County has given the green light to begin reopening more businesses that have been shuttered most of the last year.

"I'm antsy but optimistic," Valles said. "I'm curious how this is going to roll out. We're certainly not out of the woods at all. We're just entering a new area of the woods."

Monday's long-awaited reopening of many of the hardest-hit businesses in the nation's most populous county and epicenter of California's worst COVID-19 surge this winter is being met with a mix of elation and hesitation.

A glimpse of normal is finally possible with the return of inside restaurant dining and the reopening of movie theaters, indoor gyms and museums. But it will be anything but normal. Capacities will be greatly limited, cautions will be put in place, warnings will be given.

Nevertheless, doors will be opening to spaces patrons haven't been inside for most of the last year.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti closed bars and restaurants last March and days later California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued the nation's first statewide shutdown. Grocery stores remained open, restaurants could offer takeout, but cinemas, fitness centers, hair and nail salons, amusement parks and scores of other types of businesses were closed.

Improvements in case numbers in late spring led to a brief reopening that quickly came to a close July 1 as another surge of the deadly virus threatened to overwhelm hospitals.

When the state created a countywide system of color-coded tiers in August, indicating what businesses could open and at what capacity, Los

Angeles was placed in the purple—the most restrictive. It never changed.

But after weathering a winter surge that pushed hospitals to the breaking point and led to more than 10,500 deaths in two months, the county has been on the mend. Weekly new cases that topped 100,000 two months ago have fallen to about 10,000 and the percentage of people testing positive has dropped from more than 20% to barely 2%

It's part of a broader improvement throughout California that will have more than 90% of the state's population of nearly 40 million residents out of the most restrictive tier by Wednesday.

The good news took some business owners by surprise.

Earlier in the week, Greg Laemmle, whose family owns a chain of arthouse cinemas in Los Angeles County, posted a video about how the company has managed to stay alive as fortunes fell when a few anticipated months of shutdown turned into a year. It seemed clear a reopening was coming but he was overjoyed to learn it would arrive sooner than expected.

"It's amazing how much things have changed during the week from, 'We know opening is coming soon' to 'Go ahead and open,'" he said. "Thanks for the warning, guys."

The cinemas established by nephews of the founder of Universal Pictures had to sell two properties to stay afloat, but will lease them to continue operating, and may have to sell more, Laemmle said. Its staff of 150 to 200 was pared down to just five employees and streamed screenings online.

It will take four to five weeks to rehire and retrain employees on safety protocols and get equipment up and running at eight locations. With only

25% capacity, it doesn't make economic sense to immediately reopen its smaller theaters, but its larger ones will.

The last flick Chris Baugh saw before the pandemic shutdown was a rowdy screening of "Cats" at Alamo Drafthouse, a grub-and-pub cinema chain that recently filed for bankruptcy protection because of the pandemic.

Baugh, an unemployed political consultant, said he's making plans to return to the gym and movie theater since he was vaccinated as part of a Moderna vaccine clinical trial.

"Would I be this ambitious otherwise? No," he said, adding that he will remain cautious, continue to wear a mask and only gather with people comfortable with getting together. "No one's forcing people to go to the movies."

Museums, cinemas, zoos and aquariums can open indoors at 25% capacity. Ditto for restaurants, though waiters are encouraged to wear two face coverings and tables are limited to six people from the same household.

Gyms and yoga and dance studios can open at 10% capacity with masks required indoors. Retail businesses, shopping malls and salons can increase capacity to 50%.

Andy Kenareki, an actor who was able to get a first dose of vaccine because he also works as a school tutor, said he will probably dine out and see movies a couple weeks after his second dose.

But he's not sure what he's going to find with so many bars and restaurants having gone out of business.

"I'm just wondering what the nightlife is going to look like in LA once life is completely normal," Kenareki said.

Businesses and institutions that have survived have had to hustle, adapt and, for many, rely on government assistance. They reinvented spaces to accommodate people outdoors or drew viewers in for virtual experiences online.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art offered its normal programs online while keeping its outdoor spaces open. Visitors continued to snap selfies—many in masks—at the popular Urban Light display of 202 vintage street lamps and beneath the 340-ton (308,000 kilograms) granite boulder of its Levitated Mass public art sculptures.

Getting the Japanese American National Museum in the Little Tokyo section of downtown ready to reopen will take time, said Ann Burroughs, president and CEO. It has been expensive upgrading its ventilation system, buying personal protection gear for staff but it's committed to returning to normal especially at a time of rising anti-Asian violence.

"We've always stood as such a powerful bastion against discrimination and promoting diversity and culture, of all cultures," Burroughs said. "Museums can be extraordinary places of healing and self-reflection."

Valles said she doesn't plan to reopen indoor dining at Guerrilla Tacos in the downtown arts district until April.

She spent \$40,000 making the indoor operation safe this summer, only to be forced to close within hours. She's since turned a parking lot into an outdoor dining space, created a coffee bar with breakfast takeout and a burgers-to-go joint.

"Of course I want to open and go back to normal and (expletive) party,"

she said. "But I would rather be able to continue in what we're doing than make investments in an opening that isn't safe."

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