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Fall 12-18-2020

Closing Up Shop

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Keste Pizza and Vino is closing the doors at 271 Bleecker Street after 11 years of service. The well-known pizzeria, featured on Drive-In, Diners, and Dives and in The New York Times last year, is owned and operated by Roberto Caporuscio and has struggled to stay open during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to COVID-19, restaurants around the city have been shuttered, and Caporuscio's spot has added to the growing list. Although the Governor plans to allow restaurants to increase to 50% capacity indoors on Nov. 1, many [experts](#) doubt this will happen. Caporuscio still has one location in the Financial District, but he predicts that if the government does not increase indoor dining capacity, he will have to close the Fulton Street location within two months. "Let us work. We want to work," he pleaded. The owner said the Bleecker location will be closing immediately.

Keste may have started in a small location, but it has made major headlines during its 11 years of existence. The master pizzaioli, Roberto Caporuscio, has been critically [acclaimed](#) as having the the "#1 pizza in New York" by New York Magazine in 2009. In 2018, Ansa [described](#) how Caporuscio made five dollar pies to bring Americans closer to a true Italian tradition. In 2019, The New York Times [raved](#) about the addition of its unique focaccia bread that resembles a pizza. Caporuscio embodies the American dream. He strives to bring a taste of Italy to his customers, but the American dream is vanishing during these unprecedented times.

Caporuscio tried everything he could to keep the location alive. He expanded delivery and began shipping his wood-fired pizzas nationwide. He began delivering pizzas alongside employees, but still relied heavily on food delivery companies like GrubHub. Delivery platforms charged as much as 30 percent to restaurants, and even after City Council [voted](#) to cap fees at 15% during states of emergency, many restaurants, including Keste, could not earn enough from deliveries to survive. Caporuscio also went without pay for two months. Unfortunately, he says that the combination of high fees, insurance costs, rent and employee salaries all led to the closure.

The inability to open indoor dining has also been a stress to the business. Caporuscio said, "how can it be possible, the gym is open, the movies are open, all the rest of the country is open, and we spend money to make this safe and we are not open." Caporuscio and his employees have been looking forward to resuming indoor dining, but at the time of his decision, indoor dining was limited to just 25% of the normal capacity, and having no outdoor space, the small Bleecker Street spot would only be able to serve 11 diners. The pizza place could not remain open. "New York is the capital of the world for food. It is destroyed now," said Caporuscio.

Apart from struggling economically during the pandemic, safety in the city has been an issue. The NYPD [announced](#) a 166% increase in shootings and a 0.7% increase in overall crime during the month of August. A longtime employee at Keste was [shot](#) on a subway platform at Grand Central Terminal in August. The employee, named David Altamirano, was on his way to work at the pizzeria around 10:30 a.m. when he was shot by a complete stranger. Caporuscio was the

first person Altamirano called to ask him to find someone to cover his shift while on his way to the hospital.

Altamirano and several employees worked throughout the pandemic to deliver pizzas and also took part in delivering over 4,000 free pizzas to healthcare workers. The employees are of the utmost importance to Caporuscio, who says many of his 35 employees have been working at Keste for the entire 11 years of its existence. He says, “for us, that relationship we have with them is very important. We need to provide for our employees.” The employees had to take a small pay cut, but Caporuscio plans to keep all of them working at the remaining location.

Even before the pandemic, Keste was struggling to make a profit. “The biggest problem during COVID in New York is that businesses can’t save money. I am one of them. The people come and we pay the bills that way. The business was not healthy. We were already starving,” the owner said. Caporuscio turned to the government for assistance, and while the Paycheck Protection Program provided some support, weeks turned into months, and the loan could not save the restaurant from the losses it was facing.

Born in Pontinia, Italy, Caporuscio, now 59, immigrated to America in 2000. “I came to this country, because I love it. It was freedom, it was opportunity, it was control. I think now we don’t have that,” he said. Caporuscio commented that when he opened the restaurant in 2009, “it was the right time to come. It was the best time of my life. A dream to be in New York.” He introduced the Neapolitan pizza to the city using flour and ovens from Naples. He and his employees have crafted a unique and authentic Italian experience that was hailed as one of the best pizza places in the U.S. by Food & Wine in [2018](#).

Keste will still be around at their 77 Fulton Street location, for now. This second location opened in 2017 has a large outdoor area complete with \$8,000 worth of COVID-19 protection for clients including plexiglass partitions between tables, computerized temperature checks at the door and heat lamps for use outside. He will also resume classes inside the location, where small groups can reserve a time and learn to make pizza with the master chef. “People are scared to come out now. We need to make sure when they come here, they are safe. We are working very hard for that. Trust us and come here. We will take care of you,” he said.

Caporuscio is not alone. More than 1,000 restaurants [closed](#) around the city. As the holidays approach, indoor dining has constantly been in jeopardy. Governor Cuomo announced in a press conference on Dec. 11 that he believed closing restaurants and bars was important because these places are “one of the few areas that we think we can actually make a difference.”

Many restaurants have been struggling to survive based on [constantly changing](#) government protocols, and now many that do not have outdoor spaces will be forced to close. The possibility

of snowstorms and cold winter lurking in the near future could mean the end of business for thousands more.

Las Chelitas, a Mexican restaurant located in Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, is one such space that has no outdoor seating. Chef Yovany Quisquina is concerned about the ability to stay open, especially considering that his restaurant caters to the latinx community. This community has been hit particularly hard by COVID-19, leaving [thousands](#) sick or even dead. Quisquina said he wants to stay open and will work to survive during these trying times, but wants to please his customers. “If people appreciate our food, that, more than money, is what we like to earn,” said Quisquina.

Even with government loans and the opportunity to build outdoor structures to house tables for customers, the restaurant industry is struggling to stay alive. Andrew Rigie, executive director of the NYC Hospitality Alliance, [wrote](#) in the New York Post, “Keeping New Yorkers safe and healthy must be paramount. But New York cannot move forward if the city’s restaurants are at a standstill.”

Like so many other restaurants in the area, saying goodbye is very hard. “Our location on Bleecker... it’s my baby, it’s my heart. I lost sleep for days, but really, we tried everything,” Caporuscio explained. Now, he is looking to the future. He plans to add new menu items in the next few weeks to Keste on Fulton Street, including two types of gluten free lasagna, meatballs di Maria (named after his mother) and gnocchi.