



Back in business: Michael and Chris stand ready to serve at Tony's. Photo Mike Coles

Sigh of relief as Tony's starts trading again

By David Gritten

It's been a tough time for Tony's Continental, the family-run greengrocers' on the High Road. Various factors forced its closure in the first two weeks of April while its owners Chris Athanasiou and Michael Paphitis re-grouped and devised new business strategies for this year of coronavirus.

Their shop has now re-opened, to the relief of its fiercely loyal local customers, and both men are looking to the future with cautious optimism. "We were burned out," Michael says now of the recent closure. "We couldn't hack it anymore." Chris agrees: "It just wasn't sustainable."

Early reactions

Several factors were involved. "Once the virus started kicking off, people started panicking," Michael recalls. "Suddenly the small local shop was the 'in' thing, because we'd started social distancing, allowing only three

customers in at any one time."

So Tony's had more customers than they could handle, at a time when, as Chris says, "supplies suddenly became difficult. We don't have that huge network of suppliers that the supermarkets have, so we were limited in terms of what we could buy in."

Supply problems

At the same time, there was 'panic buying' at the markets, where food supplies were suddenly not coming in from Italy, Spain and Holland, because staff were self-isolating. The big chains bulk-bought everything they could, leaving less for independent traders like Tony's to buy.

"Suddenly we didn't have enough flour, eggs, beans, loaves or pasta," said Chris. "That was difficult for local people. And it's the locals who are in here, day in and day out,

who we want to help look after. Being part of this community [Chris's father Tony originally opened the store in 1971] means we want to look after them. To us, they come first."

That everyday chat

This is more than just business-speak. Chris and Michael are cheerfully sociable to locals who visit Tony's, and invariably chat to them. "That way," Chris says, "we know who they are and what they'd like. We put a lot of hard work into it. Our research comes through everyday chatting to people. We don't do pie charts or graphs; it's just through conversations."

He is cautiously positive about the future: "This was one of many hurdles. There'll be lots more twists and turns to come. But we have to be positive and help each other. We take every day as it comes."

Bravo for the man on the bike

By Daphne Chamberlain

Even in our strange new world, the Budgens delivery man on a bike with a trailer is still worth a second glance. The man himself, Keir Patterson, told us that several of his customers have likened him to Granville in the old television show *Open All Hours*.

Keir and his colleagues have certainly been working all hours to keep many of us supplied. When *The Archer* caught up with him after Easter, he had just had his first days off "for a good long while". He is actually the admin manager at Budgens, but when store manager Paul Gardner came up with the idea of delivering, he was happy to take it on.

Along came a spider

"It's my own bike, and I cycle in every day from Notting Hill," said Keir. "Getting it all done is hard work. I feel like the spider in the centre of the web, but it's not just me. It's all of us. Things are so hectic that I do worry in case people can't get through on the phone or details get lost. If you can't get through first time, please try again."

As well as the dozens of

phone requests, there are over 30 online deliveries a day. "It's getting the stuff off the shelves that takes a lot of time."

Delivery plans

Keir's trailer can take 100 kilos, which corresponds to three or four smaller deliveries or one very large one. It's weight that counts of course, and tinned goods make up a good proportion of sales.

At the time of writing there were plans to take on a trainee to help, and Paul Gardner and an assistant also deliver from a conventional van.

Budgens had actually started a delivery service before the Covid19 crisis, but it was in its very early stages, with just a few customers. Keir thinks that deliveries will continue after the crisis. "It's very worthwhile," he told us. "I do get a sense of fulfilment."



Door-to-door: Keir sets off on another delivery

Café reopens

After closing in the early part of the lockdown, the team at Coffee Bank in the High Road, N2, have reopened for business. Customers can now buy takeaways and pick up orders from the counter every day from 9am to 3pm.

Recycling restored

Recycling collections in East Finchley have been restored to weekly after going fortnightly for a short period.

Barnet Council found that it had enough staff operating on the collection lorries to keep the normal timetable.

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