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'Bring Your Own Blanket' outdoor dining campaign aims to help restaurants across CT

By Mark Zaretsky



From left, Gerry Barker, Rob Kauffman, co-owner of The Stand, and server Keya Recchia are photographed in the outdoor dining area of The Stand in Branford on October 16, 2020, to promote the Bring Your Own Blanket campaign for outdoor dining in the colder months ahead.

Photo: Arnold Gold / Hearst Connecticut Media



A sign for the BYOB (“Bring Your Own Blanket”) campaign, which aims to convince restaurants to keep serve outdoors into the fall and winter — and convince diners to just dress warmly and treat dining out like going to a football game. Photo: Gerry Barker / Contributed

If marketing man Gerry Barker, several chambers of commerce and restaurant owners from Branford to Cheshire to Middletown to Waterbury to Stamford have their way, restaurants all over Connecticut are going to keep serving meals outdoors well into the winter.

And well-bundled patrons will keep dining outside — and make an experience of it, BYOB.

But this type of BYOB — “Bring Your Own Blanket” — is a campaign to convince people to treat dining out like going to a football game — just dress warmly, go out to your favorite restaurant and have a good time. Meanwhile, organizers want to help restaurants that have been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic and provide an alternative for diners who still don’t feel comfortable sitting inside.

Barker, president and CEO of [Barker Specialty Co.](#) in Cheshire, began a few weeks ago by pitching the idea of fostering a “paradigm shift” in the way people think about dining out to a friend at The Stand, a restaurant in Branford.

Then the [Waterbury Regional Chamber of Commerce](#), which covers a 14-town area, got on board and started sending “BYOB” signs out to its members and other restaurants in the area.

The [Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce](#), which covers a 10-town area, then did the same — and the head of the [Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce](#) said his chamber will pursue the idea — with the [Greater Bridgeport Regional Business Council](#), which runs the chambers of commerce for [Bridgeport](#), [Stratford](#) and [Trumbull](#), also looking at it.

Meanwhile the [Stamford Chamber of Commerce](#) has been independently organizing its own “BYO Blanket” campaign — and while the [Greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce](#) hasn’t yet sought to replicate or jump on board with Barker’s effort, President and CEO Garrett Sheehan said he likes the idea.

“We’re putting up the signs as fast as we can,” said Barker. After coming up with the idea, “We decided just to do it right now with the Waterbury Chamber, to promote this.”

It was actually Barker's son, Max, who came up with the idea, Barker said.

"He said, 'People go outside to go to football games. ... Why won't people be cold to support their restaurants?'" Barker said. "In Europe, you're in Belgium or Latvia or Paris" and "people are sitting outside (even when it's cold) because the restaurants are so small."

Barker predicted, "It's actually going to be done all over the state of Connecticut. We're just kicking this off with the Waterbury Chamber of Commerce."

Prior to approaching the Waterbury Chamber, "I spoke with The Stand and they embraced it and they're on board," he said.

While Barker is in the business of providing specialty items to help people promote their businesses, "This is not a moneymaking venture for Baker Specialty," he said. Diners are being urged to bring their own blankets.

Barker said he was trying to come up with a way to help Connecticut's restaurants, which have been hard-hit by the pandemic.

"Changing perspectives of people is really hard," he said. But just as one example, "I ski," and when he does, "I'm in the cold and I'm eating in the cold and I don't think twice about it."

Amid the pandemic, many people "don't want to be indoors, but we want to socialize — even if we're sitting with our children or our friends," Barker said. "I can see this being very positive. ... Suffering a little bit, being a little cold, is not the worst thing.

"We love the idea," Barker said. "Every restaurant that we've gone to has just loved it."

Rob Kauffman, co-owner of [The Stand](#), said his initial conversation with Barker "was just him reaching out as a friend," although "we buy our merchandise from him. ... It just was a very unique, cute idea — to do anything to help the restaurants throughout the Northeast; anywhere where it's getting cold.

"It just was a creative way to get people to continue to eat outdoors," Kauffman said. "I knew right away it was a very nice idea. It was a cute, cute thing."

Like many restaurants, The Stand, located at 196 S. Montowese St. across the street from [Lenny's Indian Head Inn](#), has spent some money and done a fair amount of work to carve out an inviting outdoor dining area because so many people are skittish about eating indoors even as state restrictions on indoor dining have eased.

The Stand currently has 12-14 tables beneath a tent, served by propane heaters, plus another six tables out beyond them.

Throughout the summer, the restaurant continued to present live music — but mostly solo artists and duos, compared to the bands that used to play indoors.

The idea has been that “especially on a weekend, (people would) come in and enjoy some live music and maybe have a cocktail and a good meal.”

Lynn Ward, president and CEO of the Greater Waterbury Chamber of Commerce, said Barker, who is a member of the chamber, first approached her the week before last.

“He called me Wednesday afternoon and by Friday we delivered 55 signs to restaurants in the Greater Waterbury area,” she said. “Jerry provided us the signs” and “developed a social media campaign. We’re posting pictures of the restaurants with the signs. We’re encouraging people to dine outdoors and bring the blankets.

“The reason we’re doing this is, we know how important the restaurants are” to the region and its economy, Ward said.

The Waterbury chamber is giving the signs to its members and restaurants within the borders of the towns it represents. She said if anyone else wants a sign and is willing to pick it up, they can do so for \$25.

PJ Prunty, president and CEO of the Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, had never heard of the BYOB campaign before Thursday. But after hearing about it from a Register reporter, he contacted Barker and ended up joining the effort the same day.

“Look, it’s no secret that the restaurant and hospitality industry has been one of the hardest hit during this pandemic,” Prunty said. “We would certainly support anything that would support our restaurants.

“I think this is a great idea,” he said. “We would certainly be interested in supporting this locally with our restaurants. ... The reality is pre-pandemic they were operating on a razor-thin margin” and things have only gotten tougher.

“I am confident the restaurants throughout the Greater Danbury area will jump on board with this initiative and we’re looking forward to supporting our local businesses,” Prunty said.

Ward, from the Waterbury chamber, said, “We are helping PJ with his campaign so he doesn’t have to recreate what we did.” She said she is “happy to share our info.”

Brian Griffin, president and CEO of the Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce, who also learned about Barker’s effort from a reporter Thursday, said he plans to pursue it for Norwalk’s restaurants.

“Sounds like a very good idea and solution — and one that provides a fun and unique experience to the patrons, and needed patronage for the restaurants,” Griffin said.

Dan Onofrio, president and CEO of the Greater Bridgeport Business Council, said he first heard about the idea in a phone call early last week with Ward of the Waterbury chamber. He said he brought it up in a meeting with the Bridgeport chamber Thursday morning and would soon discuss it with the Stratford and Trumbull chambers.

He said it was likely that they’ll also participate.

“We’re always trying to do what we can to support the restaurants,” Onofrio said. “I mentioned it this morning on our Bridgeport Chamber call and many of the members were saying, ‘Yeah, sounds great.’

“If we can get another month or two out of this thing, that’s a good thing,” Onofrio said of outdoor dining.

Sheehan, from the New Haven chamber, said, “I think it takes a lot of innovative ideas right now” to keep businesses healthy during COVID-19.

He said of the BYOB initiative, “I think it’s a neat idea — even if people do that and then extend restaurants for an extra week.”

While all that was going on, Heather Cavanagh, president and CEO of the Stamford Chamber of Commerce, said she’s been working on her own “BYOBlanket” initiative and “I had no idea that others had planned on doing this.

“But I am sure many others will, as well,” Cavanagh said.

The Stamford effort was set to begin Thursday and run through Dec. 15 “in an effort to help our restaurants survive the winter months,” Cavanagh said.

Also among the participating restaurants so far are C.J. Sparrow Pub & Eatery and Viron Ronco Osteria, both in Cheshire, and Luce in Middletown — which got involved after Barker ate dinner there a few days before.

Like many area restaurants, they have gone through great trouble, and in some cases great expense, to carve out comfortable, serviceable outdoor dining areas that have helped get them through the summer.

Now they’re hoping that they’ll help get them through the fall — and maybe the winter, as well.

“We’re going to ride the wave until it crashes. We’ll see what happens,” said John Miller, co-owner of [C.I. Sparrow Pub & Eatery](#) on Main Street, which has served food, presented music — and even held [Tuesday Night Trivia Night](#) and a Breast Cancer Awareness fundraiser — all summer and now into fall.

Miller even colored his hair pink for the breast cancer fundraiser, which ended up raising about \$4,000.

As he spoke Tuesday night, he said, “I’m getting ready to host trivia — outdoor trivia. People dress for it.

“We’ll participate” in the BYOB campaign “and see what happens,” Miller said.

As the pandemic wears on, “We’re making the best of it,” Miller said. “We kind of have a little makeshift beer garden — 12 tables.”

Right now, “We’re in the process of putting Plexiglas in the bar,” he said. “We’re plugging along. ... We’re going to offer outdoor seating as long as people want to sit outside. ... We’re going to rock it as long as we can. ... Our whole thing is to get to spring. We’re going to offer outdoor seating as long as we can.”

Perhaps surprisingly, “We had a really good summer, all things considered,” Miller said. “We had live music outside all summer. The staff has been really outstanding and rolling with the punches, as well.”

Also in Cheshire, Viron Rondo, owner of [Viron Rondo Osteria](#), spent a considerable sum of money to construct a large, comfortable, inviting outdoor dining space at his Highland Avenue restaurant. He’s not ready to close it yet — and as part of that, he’s got a “BYOBlanket” sign at the restaurant.

“We’re encouraging all of our customers to do that,” Rondo said. “We have heaters outside. We have fire pits. We are enclosing some of the areas outside, and in a couple of weeks we’re going to enclose some more.”

In addition, “We installed a lot of dividers between the tables ... so we can assure our guests that they are safe.”

Rondo, whose outdoor dining area is far more elaborate than most, said business actually was pretty good this summer.

“In the summer months it’s been 90 percent” of what it usually is, he said. “It’s a very beautiful space and we have had tremendous support from the community,” he said. “We’ve had three very busy months since we reopened and we are getting ready for a challenging winter.”

As part of his effort to make sure customers feel safe coming to eat, Rondo has worked with its air-conditioning contractor to install the latest CDC-compliant filters in all their air-conditioning units that essentially bring a constant stream of fresh air into the restaurant.

“They are approved by the government ... and they are basically preventing the virus from spreading,” he said. “We are basically doing everything we can to keep the restaurant as safe as we can for our customers.”

On Main Street in Middletown, Luce Restaurant owner Sammy Bajraktarevic has a “BYOB” sign in front of his place — which he obtained when Barker ate dinner there Monday night — and said he also wants to keep serving people outside as long as he can.

“I’m going to stay open regardless,” he said. “My tent, I’ve already installed the heating system.”

Luce, which has a 60-foot-by-30-foot tent with 16 tables, also has done OK so far with outdoor dining.

“Right now, it’s packed,” Bajraktarevic said. “People love outside. People want to sit outside.”

JoAnn Ryan, president and CEO of the Northwest Connecticut Chamber of Commerce, said many people are looking for ways to think “out of the box” to help area restaurants and retail establishments.

While the Northwest chamber, which represents a 21-town area in Litchfield County and the state’s northwest corner, hasn’t jumped on board with the BYOB campaign, Ryan likes the idea and said the chamber has a new Restaurant & Retail Peer Group that met for the first time Thursday.

“In Litchfield County, we have a wonderful group of restaurants” that need to be supported, Ryan said. “We do have to do something to help them. ... I just hope that people are adventuresome. I think all of us need to think out of the box and do what we can to help these restaurants.”