

Angry Donkey adapts to survive pandemic

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Nestled in downtown Michigantown, Angry Donkey Restaurant at 230 Main St. is a dining destination determined to survive the challenges faced by dine-in establishments during the pandemic.

The Angry Donkey was purchased by husband-and-wife chefs Keltie and Joe Domina in the summer of 2018.

“We are in a rural setting, but we provide American food in a great atmosphere,” Keltie said. “We have all kinds of things. We do a lot of fresh fish, we do hand-cut steaks, we make our own burgers – everything that we do is made here, in-house. So, we want to bring that rural, homemade mom and pop kind of thing, just with a little more eclectic flair.”

The Dominas say business was going very well before the pandemic hit in March.

“We were really hitting stride,” Joe said. “We had a great business base built here, and we had three other venues that were catering in. Our business here at the restaurant was really good with a lot of large parties and special events. But, since COVID, we have had to dial that back quite a bit. We have done our best to stay afloat.

“We were trending very good,” Keltie agreed. “Not only were we still getting the support of our local people here in Michigantown, but people half an hour, 45 minutes away were coming. It is more like a destination restaurant. We serve a lot of local people from Frankfort, Lebanon, Kokomo, Russiaville. We just love them all. We do draw a lot of people from Carmel, Westville, Lafayette and Logansport. So, all of the numbers were trending positively.

“Our catering business, as well, was taking off,” she added. “We had lots of weddings. We have three venues that we are the exclusive caterer in right now, plus we cater in a variety of different places in Hamilton, Carrol and Clinton County. That was going well, and it is getting back to that, but we had four months where we just stopped everything.”

Like many traditionally dine-in, dining-experience-focused restaurants, the Angry Donkey had to focus on curbside services to make it through.

“We were always curbside from the day we shut down and the governor said we could do it,” Keltie said. “We were curbside all through March, April and May, and we opened up mid-June in the dining room. In the middle of June, we were at 75 percent, I believe. We are more like 50 percent now, but we have all three rooms open, so we don’t feel that crunch as much. We can spread people out.”

“It has been a challenge,” Joe said. “I don’t think there is a restaurant in the world that can work at 50 or 75 percent of its capacity and remain as profitable as they want to, but you try to do the best that you can. We are fortunate that we have a big building, and we can spread things out a little bit. But there have been times where we could have used more tables.”

Curbside service is still big today as many people try to keep their risk of exposure low in order to ride out the pandemic as safely as possible.

“People are afraid,” Keltie said. “We get people all the time that say, ‘This is the first time I have been out for six months,’ and we respect that. We still do a lot of curbside business. Our curbside business was a couple percentages. Now it is quite a bit. A lot of people are just picking up food to take home because they still don’t feel comfortable about coming in.

“We did delivery for a bit there, but we are so far out here that it is hard to get reliable people to do that,” she added. “The managers and I ran food here and there, but pickup is the best. We did pickup for Easter and Mother’s Day, and it was huge. I never put food in boxes so much in my life. We have a very loyal following of really wonderful people who come just about weekly if not to pick up to-go food twice a month or more. So, they have helped sustain us.”

The Dominas say there has been an increased focus on sanitation – even more so than the usual – since the start of the pandemic.

“I have been in constant communication with the health department – just making sure we are doing the right thing, crossing all the t’s and dotting all the i’s because we want to make sure we are serving food in a safe environment,” Keltie said. “I am kind of a sanitary freak so, as far as cleanliness, we have taken that to the next level. In my opinion, we can do that all the time every day. We have been trying to train our staff a little more on those things.”

“I think the biggest part of the challenge for us is maintaining the course,” Joe said. “We are very fortunate to have my wife on the team because she is very tuned-in to all the regulatory compliances we have with sanitation and keeping our place safe for our guests. We focus on that daily with increasing our sanitation – not only in the kitchen but in the dining room as well. We sanitize our tables every day before we start. We sanitize them every time after someone eats. We sanitize the chairs, and we are constantly rethinking ways to make sure that we are safe. We have employed all the proper guidelines for seating. There have been times when we could have had more people in here, but we didn’t put more tables in because we wanted to be compliant.”

The Dominas applied for and received help from the CARES Act in the form of the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP).

“We have a small business loan, which was wonderful, and they helped us out,” Keltie said. “We got that first round of PPP, so that was a blessing. The Farmers Bank is our bank, and they have

been such an amazing partner. They have just been there for us, called us, checked with us. They come in, and they eat in here. It is just neat. The Farmers Bank has been great.”

“We have been very blessed with the support of the community and the constant commitment of our staff to believe in us and keep going forward,” Joe said. “We are thankful for all the help that we have gotten from the federal government and the small business administration so that we can stay engaged, keep our people paid and keep the doors open.”

Now the Angry Donkey is applying for help in the second round of relief.

“It is based on the 2nd Quarter of last year, and sales were down \$100,000 from last year to this year,” Keltie said. “(It would just help) us sustain day to day. We are not looking at adding, building or painting. We just need to sustain. The second round will help get us through hopefully the next few months with payroll.

“It costs a lot,” she added. “We can run with a smaller staff, and we have, and we can cut costs. But we have people in the kitchen that this is their livelihood. If we continue to cut their hours, how are they going to pay their rent? How are they going to pay their mortgage? So, that will really help us have gainful employment for our kitchen staff and our managers up front. Everyone else who works here is part-time, works another job and that kind of thing. We fill them in as needed, but we have people who can hopefully count on this as their income.”

“I just actually sent my application in yesterday for the second payroll protection plan,” Joe said. “So, we will see what happens. There are no guarantees with that stuff, but we are optimistic that we will get some help. If we do, that’s great. If we don’t, we will figure it out. We are going to stay open.”

The Dominas thank their regulars for helping them keep the doors open through the pandemic.

“The support that we receive from our regulars is huge,” Keltie said. “Especially when we first closed and had to do curbside, they would leave a \$100 tip for a hamburger. The staff would share it. Servers didn’t miss a beat there for a bit. It was beyond and above generous. And we still see that a lot. People are coming in a couple times a week. People are picking up to-go. It is great.

“Cindy Loveless works for Shine 99. She is amazing,” Keltie added. “She is a regular here. People like her and Russ Kaspar and the people at The Farmers Bank that we have worked with before, they want to support us, but we have so many other people across the street who come week after week. I don’t see that trickling off. I see that same support, and it is just really beautiful.”

The Dominas look forward to the day when they can pack the house again at the Angry Donkey.

“We are very excited,” Joe said of this year. “We are hopeful that we can reopen our brunch here pretty soon, and it is going to have to be different than it was. It is going to have to be plated versus doing a buffet. But we want to get back to being open five days a week instead of four.

“We started as series of spirit and wine dinners again this year,” he added. Our first one is in a week. Before it was even posted, it was sold out at 50. So, we are confident that those things are going to do well. We are going to try to do 10 maybe 12 of those this year. They are five-course dinners, and they range in cost from \$55 to \$75 a head depending on what we are featuring. This next one we have coming up is with Easly Winery out of Indianapolis. We always try to focus on a local brewer, local vintner or a local spirit distiller. We have had some good, good dinners with some of the local spirits, wines and beers in this area.”

“Once they do feel comfortable to come out, we would love to have them,” Keltie said. “We are socially-distanced. We wear masks. We have many steps in sanitizing our foods and our surfaces to make sure that when you do come, you will feel safe and comfortable. The food is the same if not better. We try to do great specials every week. But a lot of your specials and a lot of your favorites are still on the menu, and you can get those either to go or here.”

Keltie says that everyone at the Angry Donkey loves to get to know their guests.

“We like to know your name,” she said. “It is kind of like family. It is all about the hospitality that you receive. We provide great food made here in-house by a trained chef, but it is the hospitality I think that also brings people back. During COVID, people are isolated and want to get out. When they do get out, it is nice to have a smiling face and a person who is genuinely interested in them. We want them to come back.”