

Series of last restaurant meals during coronavirus ends in Chino Hills



Sammy Elias cooks in his restaurant Mes Amis in Chino Hills on Wednesday. Mes Amis switched Friday to takeout only. (Photo by David Allen, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

By [DAVID ALLEN](#) | dallen@scng.com | Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

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Eating out is part of my routine: daily for lunch, often for dinner, sometimes for breakfast. It's a way to get out of the office or out of my house, to try a different kind of food, to have a change of scene, to read.

That routine gradually ground to a halt over the last week. Last Sunday I [ate a birthday lunch in downtown L.A. with friends](#). Later that day, the mayor of L.A. ordered dining out in his city to cease.

It was as if a door had slammed shut behind me.

On Monday, working out of the Bulletin's office, I went to one regular haunt, [Nancy May's '50s Cafe in Rancho Cucamonga](#), for lunch. Owner Nancy Westenhaver was there.

"I have some news for you," Westenhaver told me. "After today we're closing for two weeks."

My face fell. But I felt lucky. I had stepped across the trap door before it sprang open.

I sat down to bacon and eggs, then lingered over an iced tea while I read and relaxed in a familiar setting.

Westenhaver didn't relish cutting her staff loose without pay and taking a loss on food, but she had decided that morning that closing was the right thing to do. "We have a lot of older customers," she said.

The retro diner was ahead of the curve, but not by much. L.A. County called a halt to dining in. Riverside and Orange counties soon followed. True to its Wild West ethos, San Bernardino County only recommended that restaurants stop seating customers. Rebels.

Tuesday I had lunch scheduled with my friend Doug. I expected him to cancel, but he texted: "Still on track for lunch today! Assuming any place is still open?"

One last lunch? Well, OK.

I was working from home in Claremont, which is in L.A. County, so that eliminated anything in my town, or Pomona. But there was always San Bernardino County.

I phoned [Clyde's Hot Chicken in Montclair](#) and asked if its dining room was open. It was.

So we met there. The popular restaurant was less popular that day, but people were walking in or driving through for takeout, and the few of us in the dining room were suitably dispersed.

Doug and I tucked into our chicken and talked about the news. We also talked about science fiction anthologies we were reading. It was weirdly therapeutic.

After lunch out, normally I'd have eaten at home for dinner Tuesday. But would I have another chance to go out for dinner in the near future? I might not.

Having had good luck in Montclair at lunch, I phoned another Montclair favorite, [Cafe Moderno](#), that evening and asked if its dining room was open. It was. So there I went.

"This might be my last dinner out for a while," I told the young woman who took my order. One booth was occupied, I took a second and a third soon filled, besides the people coming in for takeout.

After my chicken kabob salad, I refilled my cup of iced tea for the road. It might be my last iced tea for the near term.

Wednesday morning dawned. I had lunch scheduled in Chino Hills with Peter Rogers, the mayor, at [Mes Amis](#), a Lebanese restaurant. This, too, I expected to be canceled. Surely Mes Amis would not be open. Rogers checked, and it was.

One more last lunch? Well, the sun was out and a visit to Chino Hills suited me. As a journalist I do need to be out and about. So I drove down there, for what proved to be my final meal out.

Rogers and I greeted each other with an elbow bump. He also demonstrated the toe tap, where you raise a foot and bump shoes with the other person. We took seats two tables away from the nearest diners.

A field representative for County Supervisor Curt Hagman, as well as mayor of his own city, Rogers had a perspective from two layers of government. His City Council had met the night before to [declare a state of emergency](#) and close city facilities, but “there was no will to go around like martial law and shut people down,” he explained.

Likewise, the county’s guidance was that “the state is encouraging you to close your restaurant,” Rogers said. But as to whether that was mandatory, that was “ambiguous,” he said.

Thus, apparently we could eat lunch with clear consciences, or nearly so. (I won’t presume to speak for a politician’s conscience.)

Sammy Elias’ Mes Amis had [started in Chino Hills in 2010](#), closed due to rent issues in 2017, [moved to Upland](#) and now was back in Chino Hills, where Elias had opened earlier in March. Just in time for the pandemic.

As before, the menu notes Mes Amis’ sole other location: [London, England](#). That’s where Elias’ brother, James, opened the sister restaurant in 1991. Rogers and I have each dined there. It’s now closed due to coronavirus, Sammy Elias told us.

“If I feel we need to shut down, we’ll shut down,” Elias said. “I’m just taking it one day at a time.”

If he closed the dining room, he told us, he would drop his service staff temporarily, keep the kitchen staff and switch to takeout. He refuses to use delivery services, which he said charge 30% of the meal price, steep enough that he wouldn’t make any money.

On my way out, the server refilled my iced tea and put a to-go lid on it. So that’s two iced teas in my fridge.

After lunch I walked past a row of restaurants in the same shopping center. A couple of them were open but had no customers. Starbucks was doing to-go only. [Las Cascadas](#) had a notice that it would reopen March 30. Noodology’s notice said it would reopen May 1.

We’re all making it up as we go along. Trying to do what’s right.

On Thursday, I ate my Mes Amis leftovers, washed down, naturally, with iced tea.

Later that day, a county spokesman sent out a clarification that said “the state and county recommend” that restaurants not offer seated dining, but “restaurants can stay open if they choose to do so.”

That, finally, was countermanded by Gov. Gavin Newsom, who even later Thursday ordered restaurants across the state not to seat customers, full stop.

Mes Amis, which had no diners Thursday anyway, pivoted on Friday to takeout only.

David Allen writes from a seated position Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. Email dallen@scng.com, phone 909-483-9339, visit insidesocal.com/davidallen, like [davidallencolumnist](https://www.facebook.com/davidallencolumnist) on Facebook and follow [@davidallen909](https://twitter.com/davidallen909) on Twitter.