

Restaurant and Hospitality Economic Impact

Stefano Coppola

First, I would like to thank the committee for giving me your time to hear my story.

My name is Stefano Coppola, Executive Chef and Owner of Morse Block Deli and Pearl Street Pizza, both on Main St. in the beautiful city of Barre.

Ever since I opened both of these establishments, my goal has always been to highlight Vermont's unique and celebrated food systems. We are very unique when it comes to food and hospitality. Of course Maple, Dairy, and Beer come to mind, as awards and accolades have poured into our state for our contributions to these Vermont staples.

Beyond these iconic Vermont goods, there are SO MANY other amazing and unique foodstuffs, just waiting to be discovered by not only tourists to our state, but also residents and natives as well. It seems to me that almost every town, no matter how small, has at least one vegetable farmer, beef rancher, fermentory, potter, cheesemaker, brewery, beekeeper, cidemaker, etc. that gives their hometown a sense of pride.

When I first opened Morse Block Deli, almost 8 years ago, Vermont was in a very different place. A global pandemic, political extremism, and natural disasters were not on my mind as things I would have to deal with as a small business owner and novice entrepreneur. But alas, here we are. Stronger, smarter, more resilient and more pragmatic because of it.

That being said, I have seen way too many of my friends, mentors, and colleagues have to shutter their businesses in the wake of recent catastrophes. It's heartbreaking. The State did some very good work helping businesses through the Pandemic, and later the Flood, but there is still much progress to be made.

Pearl Street Pizza would have had to close its doors, only 18 months after opening, if it wasn't for the generosity and help we received from our Barre community, Industry Partners, and a Go Fund Me from patrons, friends, and family.

There was definitely a gap where the state offered assistance and where we needed to be. I STRONGLY encourage everyone here to support the Flood Recovery Assistance

Program (FRAP) so that when something like this happens again- and it will- we are more prepared to help the Hospitality Industry. Help us in a way that doesn't leave us drowning in debt, or up the creek without a paddle.

Another real-life challenge for us is Staffing. The Eclipse a few days ago made it quite apparent how important Vermont's Hospitality Industry really is. Around 150,000 tourists- who normally wouldn't be here this time of year- flooded our state and needed a place to eat, drink, and sleep. Lodging and Restaurant establishments typically run with barebones staff this time of year to save on labor costs. It was the perfect test, and as I see it, we passed with flying colors. This was only possible, for my businesses at least, because of our employees.

Skilled staff is becoming increasingly hard to find, and much more expensive, than when I opened my first business 8 years ago. There seems to be a growing gap between our industry and individuals willing, and skilled enough, to do the work necessary.

In my community, there are some places that are trying to train culinarians and teach them the skills needed to join the workforce. Joey Buttendorf at Capstone Community Action, and Kristine McCheffrey at the Central Vermont career center are doing great work in this field, but it's only a drop in the bucket. Training and preparing individuals with a passion for cooking sounds like an easy enough thing to accomplish, but with the financial hurdles and lack of structure, it is not. There is a need for programs, training, and apprenticeships in our industry. Links between the industry jobs and a trained workforce are currently unavailable.

Vermont is a big, fat emerald in the crown of the United States. We are a leader in organic, locally produced food and beverage. With the right funding, we can build on this, and bridge the gaps between my industry and link up with other statewide initiatives.

I thank you for your time and consideration.