

BEATING THE PANDEMIC, ONE BITE AT A TIME: HOW THE GASTRONOMY SECTOR IN BRITISH COLUMBIA IS FORGING ITS OWN PATH FORWARD

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This research was conducted during the second COVID-19 lockdown in British Columbia, Canada. Its aim was to reveal the opportunities that emerged for gastronomic experience providers which enabled them to build economic, social, and or environmental resilience during the pandemic. Using an interpretative, qualitative approach and case study methodology, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Nineteen responses were collected and reflected the following key findings. First, technology was a primary tool used in paving the way for strategic and operational changes. Second, expansion into retail as a revenue diversification tool is key to creating sustained economic growth. Finally, the sense of community is at an all-time peak as shown by collaborative spirit, customer loyalty, and philanthropic initiatives across the sector. The findings also suggest a post-pandemic gastronomic scene in British Columbia that is heavily supported by domestic palates, a diversified offering, and pandemic-proof experiences.

Key words: Opportunity; Gastronomy; Community; Resilience; British Columbia

Introduction

A search for gastronomic experiences in British Columbia (BC) reveals an abundance of experiential opportunities that include ethnically diverse restaurant fare, farm-to-table dining, thriving wine tourism, agritourism, farmer markets, food tours, cooking schools, and countless other offerings. These terroir and culturally inspired experiences have positioned BC as a leading regional destination for gastronomy enthusiasts. Much credit goes to the region's abundance of natural food resources

and diverse climate and marine ecosystems that enable an entire range of vegetation, fisheries, and meat production to the highest possible standards.

Indications of BC's gastronomic performance and outlook can be observed in several areas. For example, the restaurant industry in 2018 contributed 5% of gross domestic product with more than 3.4 million daily restaurant visits recorded (Restaurants Canada, 2018). In 2019, BC's accommodation and foodservice sector contributed more than \$7 billion in revenue and employed more than 64 thousand workers (Destination BC, 2021).

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According to Restaurants Canada, the food service industry in British Columbia was poised to achieve a 4% increase in sales between 2019–2023, despite slowing economy projections at the time, which may be attributed to rising costs in labour and food (Restaurants Canada, n.d., 2019). These projections may have been based on the 12,511 eating places accounted for by Statistics Canada (Government of Canada, 2021b). Another anecdote to mention is the 5,667 farms in BC in 2016 that were identified to sell directly to consumers (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016).

Agricultural tourism or agritourism also appeared to be promising. The number of farmers' markets in BC has grown in recent years as the demand for local produce has risen—in just one decade, the 19 farmers' markets in BC grew to over 125 (Vaugeois et al., 2017). As interest continues to grow, farms could diversify by offering agritourism experiences through recreational activities, educational services, and overnight stays (Vaugeois et al., 2017). Recent indicators according to the 2020 annual report of the BC Association of Farmers' Markets, indicate there were 135 farmer markets, including 68 online markets, compared to 152 in the previous year of 2019. (BC Association of Farmers' Markets [BCAFM], 2020). It is noteworthy to highlight that the number of pageviews of the BC Farmer Market trail website has increased by 226% between 2019 and 2020. Another milestone for farmer markets in BC was the successful lobbying to consider them as an essential service (BCAFM, 2020).

As of July 23, 2021, COVID-19 (2019-nCoV) had infected 1,421,447 Canadians, including 148,187 cases and 1,760 deaths in British Columbia alone (Government of Canada, 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a significant demand shock to the restaurant industry (Gresch & Sharma, 2020), mostly associated with employee layoffs, closures, budget cuts, and changes in service models made to accommodate public health orders. By March 2020, restaurants across Canada employed 1,221,300 monthly workers, generated \$95 billion in revenue, and served 22 million customers daily. By April of the same year, restaurants employment rates fell by 50% (Restaurants Canada, 2021). This decrease correlates with the indications stating that one tenth of restaurants nationwide, or 10,000 establishments, closed permanently within

the same period (Restaurants Canada, 2020a). In terms of travel indicators and consumer perceptions, 74% of British Columbians indicated “probably” or “definite comfort” in visiting restaurants in June 2021 compared to 59% in January 2021 (Destination BC, 2021).

This is a turbulent time for the gastronomy sector in BC; it is also a time to reflect and adapt to new realities. It may be a valuable chance for gastronomy experience providers to solidify their market positioning, value, and resilience. In our research, we look at how the relevant business community in BC was able to build resilience by seizing economic, social, environmental, or any other opportunities herewith. Furthermore, self-declared ethnic gastronomy businesses are identified in the research to look for any trends and indicators that may have affected them differently.

Literature Review

Initial Pandemic Response in BC

The first case of COVID-19 in British Columbia was confirmed on January 27, 2020 (BC Gov News, 2020a). By March 11, 2020, the WHO (World Health Organization) declared the pandemic (WHO, 2020), and as a result, the Province of British Columbia declared a state of emergency on March 18, 2020 (BC Gov News, 2020b). Following the declaration of the pandemic, province-wide restrictions were mandated to limit the spread of COVID-19. Under the Emergency Program Act, face coverings were enforced for everyone to wear in public indoor spaces, except for those with exemptions (Emergency Program Act, 1996). On March 20, 2020, the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) ordered foodservice establishments to terminate indoor dining but were permitted to operate takeout and delivery services in the meantime (Kotyk, 2021a). In addition, restaurants and bars were ordered to prevent the sale of liquor after 10 pm (CBC News, 2020). Due to fluctuations in the number of COVID-19 cases in BC, guidelines for businesses were continually changing. As a result, restrictions on indoor and outdoor dining, room capacities, gathering sizes, and hours of operations continued to change throughout the duration of the pandemic. As cases surged in November 2020,

new restrictions were created to limit social gatherings—initially from November 7 to 23, gatherings were restricted to members of the immediate household only and travel outside the local region was prohibited unless it was absolutely essential (Coyne, 2020). The restrictions on social gatherings extended into January and February of 2021 as cases rose (Migdal, 2021). Outdoor gatherings of up to six people were permitted under certain guidelines (Azpiri & Hua, 2021) while indoor dining restrictions were officially lifted on May 25, 2021 (Kotyk, 2021b).

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Gastronomic Businesses

The literature suggests that the pandemic has negatively affected restaurants in their ability to run efficiently. The Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2021) in the US informed the public that COVID-19 spreads primarily through direct contact or within 6 ft or 2 m to someone that is infected with the virus, which had its implications for the food service sector. The CDC identified that the lowest risk for restaurants and bars is to limit their services to “drive-through, delivery, take-out, and curbside pick-up”; additionally, outdoor seating with tables spaced out 6 ft apart would entail more risk (CDC, 2021). Food industry employees are unable to work from home, and as a result, are at a higher risk of catching and spreading COVID-19 (CDC, 2021; Rejeb et al., 2020).

According to a study done by Brizek et al. (2020), indoor dining restrictions and limitations on capacity for outdoor seating have diminished restaurants’ financial viability in South Carolina (US). Due to the high fixed costs of operating food-service establishments, 77% of restaurant owners felt like they would not be able to sustain their business if the outdoor dining only policy was to last over 6 months (Brizek et al., 2021). Their study revealed that many restaurants have had to let go of their staff. It was found that only 28% of restaurants were “able to rehire more than 75% of their pre-pandemic staff” (p. 5). Businesses in heavily tourism-dependent destinations were especially impacted due to the travel restrictions and border closures, and 60% of restaurants believed that pre-pandemic tourism levels are important in creating

demand (Brizek et al., 2021). Similarly in Canada, the travel restrictions have had severe impacts on the tourism industry, which includes food services (Liu, 2020).

It appears that small, privately owned independent restaurants were disproportionately affected by the pandemic in comparison to chain restaurants that have larger support networks and resources. With indoor dining limitations, chain restaurants had the advantage of being on mobile apps for online ordering and delivery and pick-up services (Castrodale, 2020). As a result, some chain restaurants and food service providers in quick service such as McDonald’s and Domino’s have seen increased sales (Castrodale, 2020). Meanwhile, it was reported that some independent restaurant owners have had to pay out of their own pocket to cover costs for their business to keep it running (Brizek et al., 2021).

The global disruptions to the food supply chain have been key in negatively impacting the gastronomy sector. Deaton and Deaton (2020) identified three factors that have contributed to food shortages and, in turn, increase in prices: (1) challenges to international exchange, (2) farm financial stability, and (3) transportation. Due to the border closures, foreign workers in Canadian food production faced challenges amid travel restrictions (Deaton & Deaton, 2020). Though the government eventually made exceptions for foreign laborers in essential services, much uncertainty regarding their availability remained throughout the pandemic (Deaton & Deaton, 2020). In addition, several farms faced productivity loss due to sickness from COVID-19, impacting their ability to keep up with the food supply and demand (Deaton & Deaton, 2020). Similarly, the food supply chain was further impacted by the limited number of workers in transportation due to sickness (Deaton & Deaton, 2020). In BC, workplaces that had three or more employees with positive tests for COVID-19 were required to close (Uguen-Csenge, 2021). Therefore, the food availability crisis faced during the pandemic has sparked a deeper awareness for communities to develop contingencies during such emergencies, as well as the need to curb the reliance on international trade (Deaton & Deaton, 2020). Due to the disruptions in the food supply and demand, prices of essential food items such as rice and flour have risen, as seen

in India (Petetin, 2020). It is unclear whether the increases in prices seen in some countries will be permanent (Deaton & Deaton, 2020).

Researchers Maticena et al. (2021) found that dietary changes were observed during the pandemic, as a result of changes to the food supply. They found that people in Italy cooked more at home during the first lockdown. Nearly 50% of respondents indicated they prepared more meals from scratch in comparison to prepandemic levels of home cooking. Interestingly, their research revealed that 67.8% of those cooking at home found it to be pleasurable and enjoyed the process of cooking their meals. The researchers suggest that during the period of lockdown, people came to appreciate food in its “raw, fresh, seasonal, local and unprocessed form,” and that the pandemic was an opportunity for people to rethink gastronomy—to eat well (Maticena et al., 2021, p. 19).

Petetin (2020) agrees that the pandemic has enabled people to rethink food, in particular, the distribution of food through the supply chain and urgency to reconsider the current food system. Petetin attributed the supply disruptions to the long supply chain and the limited involvement of farmers throughout the process of distributing their products. Moving forward to postpandemic, Petetin recommends using the food democracy model in place of the current supply system. The food democracy model is based on the idea that community members should be involved in the process of creating the food supply system so that they can be intentional about choosing what they want to consume in a way that reflects their values, which is in contrast to having a system imposed on them that would hinder their ability to access more sustainable options (Petetin, 2020). Kamal (2020) advocated for Alternative Food Networks (AFN) in British Columbia, explaining how AFNs can nurture a sense of community that will restore and enhance local food identity in the region. Similar views are expressed in the research of Matteucci et al. (2021), whose study suggests that the entire model upon which destinations organize tourism must be reconsidered. This was also discussed by Higgins-Desbiolles (2020), who explained that the pandemic exposed the social and ecological injustices resulting from tourism under the current structure, which is built on globalization and

mass tourism. She also proposed alternative models based on community involvement and prioritizing the well-being of locals.

Naturally, community partnerships and relationships have received more attention during this pandemic. Hailu (2020) suggested that the relationships between food processors and the food service providers have changed. Because restaurant closures have become more common, food processors have strategized to increase their supply to retail stores while decreasing their supply for the food-service industry. For instance, US-based food processor Cargill decreased its orders to foodservice establishments from 40% to 15% by March 2020 (Hailu, 2020). Interestingly though, restaurants also have turned to food distributors to sell prepackaged goods during the pandemic, which is an indication of the increasing popularity of retail (Kamal, 2020). Hobbs (2020) argued that trusting relationships between buyers and sellers, in which both parties share risks and make sacrifices, is essential in achieving a stable and successful supply chain.

Opportunities for Gastronomic Businesses During the Pandemic

While the negative impacts of the pandemic are evident and widely discussed in the literature, business opportunities that have come out of the pandemic for gastronomic businesses are one area of study that should be further explored. One factor that enabled restaurants to pivot was the availability of financial support, services, and programs from governments—the CARES Act Program that was offered in the US was found to be helpful by 81% of restaurants (Brizek et al., 2021). Similarly in Canada, financial support from the government was available during the pandemic for businesses in several forms and through various levels of government.

The various levels of governing in Canada introduced several support mechanisms for individuals and businesses impacted by the pandemic. On the federal level, the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) was designed to help cover a portion of wage expenses to encourage businesses to rehire their laid off workers, while the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS) was created to help businesses pay for rent costs during the lockdown

(Government of Canada, 2021b). The Canadian federal government also supported businesses in the form of a loan of up to \$60,000 through the Canada Emergency Business Accounts (CEBA). In addition, a Regional Relief and Recovery Fund (RRRF) offered an interest-free loan of up to \$60,000 (BC Gov., 2021b).

Meanwhile, provincially, the government of British Columbia provided over \$50 million in relief funding for “hard-hit businesses” on the week of April 12, 2021, in which restaurants, bars, breweries, and wineries were included (BC Gov News, 2020c). Eligible businesses were able to receive the Circuit Breaker Relief Grant of up to \$10,000 to help pay for various expenses (BC Gov., 2021a). Small and medium-sized businesses were also able to receive up to \$45,000 for the Recovery Grant, while tourism-related businesses were able to receive an additional \$5,000 to \$15,000 (BC Gov., 2021a). The Government of BC also provided the Launch Online Grant of up to \$7,500 to help businesses build or improve their e-commerce (BC Gov., 2021a). Sector-specific support was also initiated for agriculture, agrifood, aquaculture, and fisheries sectors, while the BC Agri-Business Planning Program, the Tourism Relief Funding Stream and the Online COVID-19 Safety Certificate Program (BSAFE) supported farms and tourism businesses (BC Gov., 2021a).

The pandemic was an opportunity for businesses to demonstrate their resilience, which G. Richards (2020) defined as the “ability to return to the original form after being compressed or strained” (p. 9). Sobaih et al. (2020) found that business resiliency through “business planning, leadership, creativity, and innovation” (p. 9) had a direct effect on the development of sustainable tourism. Planned resiliency had a larger impact on the performance of a business during crises than adaptive resiliency. Their study also revealed the need for governments to support small businesses in tourism, both financial and nonfinancial (grants, loans, training), to ensure successful recovery postpandemic (Sobaih et al., 2020).

However, G. Richards (2020) challenged the view that resiliency should be the focus of businesses in the tourism sector. Resiliency as a means to return to normal in not just the economic context, but also environmental, social, and cultural

contexts means that it is highly unachievable for many businesses after the pandemic. G. Richards argued that the pandemic is an opportunity for businesses to invite change and adjust their systems and business models by phasing out things that are not working—through creativity and innovation. This is also supported by Higgins-Desbiolles (2020), who suggested that tourism must be “reset” to eliminate injustices and oppression caused by the flaws of the system it supports. The combination of both resilience and creativity is what will enable businesses to recover from the impacts of the pandemic, for the long term (G. Richards, 2020).

G. Richards (2020) also stated that creative resilience “build[s] new possibilities for the future” (p. 13). Restaurants have demonstrated creative resilience during this pandemic, which is evident in the creative and unconventional activities that have been initiated. For example, the single-diner restaurant “Table for One” in Sweden was designed in response to the pandemic restrictions, with the goal of allowing guests to immerse themselves in a solo experience to enjoy peaceful solitude in an act of self-care (Akerstrom, 2020). Similar concepts have been implemented around the world. In Aberdeenshire, the Chester Hotel set up outdoor transparent igloos to maximize their seating capacity while maintaining physical distancing regulations to allow guests to dine safely (Thomson, 2020). In BC, outdoor patios are becoming “more sophisticated, more innovative, and more fun” as restaurants are shaping a new “patio culture” by creating dining domes, gardens, and sidewalk tables (Ryan, 2021). Restaurants have also pivoted to offering groceries and meal kits to customers, which proved to be popular in Canada (Desai, 2020).

While the negative implications of the pandemic cannot be overlooked in the literature, there is an opportunity to learn how gastronomic businesses have pivoted and demonstrated resilience, creativity, and innovation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outlook and Perspective/Recovery

It appears that pessimistic responses were more common as the pandemic progressed. Brizek et al. (2021) found that survey results indicated a downward trend in positive outlook as time progressed,

when they conducted their survey in the spring of 2020 on the outlook of the tourism and hospitality industry for the following 18–24 months. According to data collected in May 2020, the main concerns were regarding unemployment and motivation loss. In their study, Madeira et al. (2021) identified four major perspectives about the postpandemic period. The Portuguese restaurateurs that participated noted themes of pessimism, resilience, uncertainty, and opportunities. In terms of their strategies for the future, the need to focus on communication through marketing on social networks was mentioned by participants. During periods of crises, Madeira et al. (2021) suggested that the restaurant industry should begin planning the recovery process as soon as possible through advertising and communication, also ensuring that safety-related information is easily accessible to customers. While it is impossible to generalize views about the outlook and perspective of gastronomy postpandemic, many restaurant owners and chefs have universally expressed similar views.

A study conducted in Turkey found that chefs commonly believe that the pandemic will eliminate the popularity of all-inclusive foodservice systems, such as buffets (Bucak & Yigit, 2021). Further research revealed that the pandemic has helped create consumer awareness about food waste (Rejeb et al., 2020). By removing such a system, sustainability could become more of a reality by reducing waste created by all-you-can-eat forms of dining. Turkish chefs also noted that the pandemic would bring changes to the menu planning process. As a result of rising costs of imported food, local ingredients will become a bigger focus in the menu moving forward. Therefore, the trend to use local food will continue to grow (Schwark et al., 2020). Due to the food availability crisis during the pandemic in Canada, there will be an elevated interest to reinvest in local farms, processors, and manufacturers to achieve a balance of international exportation and domestic production so that in future crises, communities may become more self-sufficient (Deaton & Deaton, 2020). Bucak and Yigit (2021) found that chefs are considering using more healthy ingredients by emphasizing nutrition in the development of new dishes, which comes as a response to strengthening the immunity of diners by using organic and healthy foods.

While Kolodinsky et al. (2020) remained hopeful that the food system disruption will turn into an opportunity for localized food systems, Hobbs (2020) rejected the notion that the local food movement will have a significant impact on the economy long term postpandemic due to the lower variety and higher cost. However, Hobbs agreed that the pandemic has brought an opportunity for consumers to strengthen an existing interest or gain a new one in purchasing locally sourced food. Furthermore, Worstell (2020) examined the CLIMATED model for ecological resilience in food systems, in response to the disruptions that were faced during the pandemic. The model is characterized by: (1) connectivity, (2) local self-organization, (3) innovation, (4) maintenance/redundancy, (5) accumulation of value-added infrastructure, (6) transformation, (7) ecological integration, and (8) diversity. Worstell (2020) proposed that these characteristics should be applied in food supply systems to contribute to greater ecological resilience.

Several researchers found evidence that online shopping will be a growing trend even once the pandemic is over, due to the convenience and increasing ease of access (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Rejeb et al., 2020; T. J. Richards & Rickard, 2020). This will encompass online shopping for groceries, restaurant meals, and meal delivery kits (Hobbs, 2020). Therefore, it will be important for gastronomic businesses to have a strong online presence because they are competing with grocery stores and meal delivery kit companies. Consequently, this will have implications for farms. Though farmers' markets make up a small portion of the produce market in Canada, they have the most engaged customer base (T. J. Richards & Rickard, 2020). The pandemic has impacted farms' abilities to engage and physically interact with their guests, yet it has presented an opportunity to expand their customer market by offering local delivery services in collaboration with their local communities (T. J. Richards & Rickard, 2020).

Another perspective among the Turkish chefs is the increase in food safety knowledge among staff, as heightened food safety training and inspection becomes the norm (Bucak & Yigit, 2021). Portuguese restaurateurs believe that tools are needed to “equip, train, plan and simulate in the area of health for pandemics” to “safeguard us in case of

a wave of infection” (Madeira et al., 2021, p. 9). Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) suggested creating an employee task force for addressing sanitation issues and creating awareness. Restaurants Canada recommends appointing a Health and Safety Point Person for every shift, as well as staggering start times to ensure that there is no overcrowding and enough space for physical distancing (Restaurants Canada, 2020b). Moreover, it is also recommended to have mandatory temperature checks for employees at the beginning of their shift and keeping it in records at the entry and exit points (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). These additional sanitation measures will likely become the norm postpandemic (Bucak & Yigit, 2021; Madeira et al., 2021).

The literature suggests that fine-dining restaurants suffered considerably during the pandemic. Many renowned restaurants are shifting their offerings to accommodate the take-out model and lowering prices to appeal to a larger demographic base. For example, Seattle-based fine dining restaurant Canlis started offering delivery services and drive-thru for burgers and salads, explaining that “fine dining is not what Seattle needs right now” (Pershan, 2020). Therefore, there is an opportunity for businesses to reinvent themselves through diversification. Schwark et al. (2020) believed that the pandemic will foster creativity and innovation among restaurants that have made it out of the pandemic.

Overall, it is difficult to say with certainty what the foodservice sector will look like in BC after the pandemic is over. The literature reveals that the restrictions imposed by health authorities and the government have impacted consumer behavior in Canada. What is clear is that online shopping and delivery will be here to stay. Supporting local producers has been emphasized during the pandemic, and many researchers agree that it will be reinforced postpandemic. Regarding the frequency of restaurant visitation for indoor dining postpandemic, uncertainty remains (Goddard, 2020). However, it is evident that the pandemic has provided opportunities for gastronomic businesses to diversify.

Methodology

While the COVID-19 impacts on local businesses and restaurants have been repeatedly discussed in the past months, this study aimed to explore the

opportunities created in the gastronomy sector because of the pandemic. Particularly, the research explored how the business community was able to build resilience and create economic, social, and environmental opportunities for growth.

This study used an interpretive and qualitative approach. While grounded theory methodology was first considered to present this research, case study methodology was determined to be the best option forward due to its flexibility. This flexibility allowed for an in-depth study of participants’ experiences of resilience within a British Columbian context. The methodological approach also allowed for the investigation of the “how” and “why” questions from various perspectives, which spanned across multiple restaurant categories and other relevant gastronomic businesses. Yin (2003) revealed that a case study is suitable for studies that are about “contemporary set of events” that the investigators have little control over. Yin also emphasized that defining the research questions will help to determine the best methodological approach. Questions that aim to answer the “how” and “why” are best utilized for case studies, as opposed to “who” and “what” and “where” questions that are frequently used in surveys or archival analysis (Yin, 2003).

Case studies develop theories for the purpose of analytic generalization, as opposed to representing a sample (Yin, 2003). Therefore, using the case study methodology in our research supports the transferability of place-specific outcomes to other regional contexts, and it also supports the trustworthiness of the qualitative research results. The specific and generalized outcomes are presented within the discussion section to follow.

Research Method and Data Collection Procedures

The interview tool was created “in order to discover meaningful patterns descriptive of a particular phenomenon” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 3). The interview method was appropriate because it would allow the researchers to acquire in-depth perspectives on subjective experiences without having to test an initial hypothesis. The structuring of questions provided further flexibility in navigating the conversations to inform the initial research questions. Before data collection began, preliminary interview questions in semistructured

format were developed and tested during a pilot study. Adjustments were made afterwards based on feedback received. The final interview tool included five demographic questions at the beginning, followed by nine main interview questions, excluding subquestions. Interviews were conducted between March 30 and May 24, 2021, and carried out virtually in order to minimize risk associated with exposure to COVID-19.

Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Strategy

The study population consisted of owners and senior leaders of gastronomic businesses in British Columbia including restaurants, food tour companies, farmer markets, farms, and various other product and service providers. There were 212 invitations sent out that, at a response rate of 11%, resulted in a sample size of 19 responses. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods was used. The researchers used open source and publicly available information found on business websites and media outlets to acquire email addresses of participants for recruitment.

Once a convenience sample was established and contacted, several respondents suggested additional research participants, giving way to a “snowball” effect in gathering additional responses. Self-selective sampling was also used when recruitment was announced on an e-newsletter to members of a local destination management organization. All participants in the research were offered an opt-in/opt-out opportunity to participate. No members of the population were intentionally excluded.

With 19 responses received from across the province, the research provides a preliminary exploration of the reactions, outcomes, and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the industry. These findings provide basis for potential further research and inquiry into more specific subcategories of business or regions within the industry. A breakdown of the interview recruitment efforts is presented in Table 1.

Of BC’s eight regions consisting of Vancouver Island/Coast, Mainland/Southwest, Thompson-Okanagan, Kootenay, Cariboo, North Coast, Nechako, and Northeast (Welcome BC, n.d.), three quarters of participants were based in the Mainland/

Table 1
Recruitment Invitations

Establishment	Total <i>N</i> (<i>N</i> = 212)	Region	Total Obtained Participants (<i>N</i> = 19)
Bakery	4	Mainland/Southwest	0
Cafe	9	Mainland/Southwest	0
Catering	6	Mainland/Southwest	2
Culinary Lesson	8	Mainland/Southwest	1
Delicatessen	4	3 Mainland/Southwest, 1 Vancouver Island/Coast	1
Delivery	2	Mainland/Southwest	0
Education	2	Mainland/Southwest	0
Event/DMO Initiatives	10	9 Mainland/Southwest, 1 Vancouver Island/Coast	1
Farm/Agriculture	14	10 Mainland/Southwest, 2 Thompson-Okanagan, 2 Vancouver Island/Coast	3
Fishery	1	Mainland/Southwest	0
Food Tour	15	6 Mainland/Southwest, 6 Thompson-Okanagan, 3 Vancouver Island/Coast	2
Fromagerie	2	1 Mainland/Southwest, 1 Vancouver Island/Coast	0
Market	10	8 Mainland/Southwest, 1 Thompson-Okanagan, 1 Vancouver Island/Coast	0
Patisserie	2	Mainland/Southwest	0
Restaurant	94 ^a	84 Mainland/Southwest, 7 Vancouver Island/Coast, 3 Thompson-Okanagan	8
Retail	2	Mainland/Southwest	1
Winery/Distillery	27	17 Mainland/Southwest, 7 Thompson-Okanagan, 2 Vancouver Island/Coast, 1 Kootenay	0

Note. ^aThis includes 47 Casual, 29 upscale, 18 fine dining establishments. 1 Asian, 3 Asian-French Fusion, 1 Belgian, 2 French, 1 Fusion, 2 Indian, 4 Indigenous, 5 Italian, 2 Italian Fusion, 1 Italian Japanese Fusion, 5 Japanese, 1 Japanese Fusion, 2 Korean, 2 Lebanese, 2 Malaysian, 2 Mediterranean, 5 Mexican, 1 Palestinian, 4 Seafood, 1 Spanish, 2 Thai, 1 Ukrainian, 3 Vegetarian, 1 Vietnamese, 40 Contemporary (West Coast).

Southwest region, almost a fifth were based in the Vancouver Island/Coast region, and the remaining one participant was in the Thompson-Okanagan region. While the research aimed to get a broad overview and participation from various business types, restaurant participants made up almost half of the responses. The participants' years of experience working in the food and beverage industry ranged from 3 to over 35 years. Nearly half of the respondents that were interviewed identified as an ethnic business, offering ethnically inspired cuisine and/or culinary experiences.

Establishments in the category of restaurants were further broken down into segments: casual, upscale, and fine dining. Restaurants categorized as casual are characterized by "affordable menu items that span a variety of customer tastes", often suitable for "large groups of diners" and takeout (Anderson & Westcott, 2021, p. 119). While slightly more expensive than casual restaurants, upscale restaurants are

defined by their relaxing and comfortable environment and attentive service, often suitable for social gatherings (Anderson & Westcott, 2021). Fine dining restaurants offer exquisitely presented dishes prepared by highly trained culinary professionals, characterized by a high average check (Anderson & Westcott, 2021). Additional demographic characteristics of the study participants are shown in Table 2.

Data Collection

All data were collected in accordance with the BC Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) regulations. The 19 virtual interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, in which an invitation was sent to the participants' email. Overall, the interviews averaged 28 min, with some lasting up to 48 min. Interviews were audio recorded and stored on OneDrive with prior

Table 2
Demographic Features of Participants

Code	Region	Type	Ethnic Category	Position	Experience (Years)
A	Mainland/Southwest	Restaurant (Fine Dining)	Japanese Italian	Kitchen Operations Manager	18
B	Mainland/Southwest	Restaurant (Upscale)	Italian Fusion	Owner and Managing Partner	36
C	Vancouver Island/Coast	DMO	No	Visitor Services Manager	15
D	Mainland/Southwest	Restaurant (Casual)	Lebanese	Director of Operations	11
E	Mainland/Southwest	Restaurant (Upscale)	No	CEO	35
F	Mainland/Southwest	Retail	No	President and CEO	30
G	Vancouver Island/Coast	Food Tour	No	Owner-Operator	35
H	Mainland/Southwest	Farm	South Asian	Director of Customer Experience	8
I	Mainland/Southwest	Restaurant (Casual)	No	Marketing and Business Development Coordinator	20
J	Mainland/Southwest	Restaurant (Casual)	Italian Fusion	Co-owner	7
K	Mainland/Southwest	Catering	No	Sales Manager	30
L	Mainland/Southwest	Farm	No	Production Manager	25
M	Mainland/Southwest	Food Tour	No	Founder and President	11
N	Mainland/Southwest	Catering	Middle Eastern	Founder and CEO	5
O	Mainland/Southwest	Culinary Lesson	Various	Founder and CEO	3
P	Thompson-Okanagan	Hotel and Restaurant (Fine Dining)	No	Director of Operations	5
Q	Mainland/Southwest	Agriculture	No	Manager Director	4
R	Mainland/Southwest	Restaurant (Casual)	Palestinian	Co-owner	8
S	Vancouver Island/Coast	Delicatessen	No	Owner-Operator	10

consent. Interview notes and transcripts were also documented, generated, and stored on the OneDrive.

Data Analysis Techniques

As all interviews were transcribed, transcript contents were investigated through multiple rounds of data analysis including inductive and deductive approaches, as the combination of inductive and deductive approaches would allow for deeper understanding of the topic during the analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2017). In the first round, inductive analysis took place where initial sets of codes were identified in the data and determined in an open-ended repetitive process. In the second phase, codes was read and reread through open-ended pattern coding to eventually identify overarching themes around economic, sociocultural, and environmental impacts. The final stage in analyzing data included a deductive approach in which knowledge was tested when final knowledge themes were created and refined with the initial research questions in mind. These themes were: (1) Diversification, Technology, and Economic Sustainability, (2) Capitalizing on Community, (3) Challenges and Concerns, and (4) Outlook for British Columbia's Gastronomy.

Both authors were involved throughout the data analysis process in an effort to emphasize credibility. In a further step taken to emphasize credibility and confirm the results, we sought to corroborate the data between different participants by looking at synergies and similarities in information. This process also helped in the analysis of data findings.

Research Findings

This research examined opportunities that empowered gastronomy businesses in British Columbia in creating economic, social, or environmental resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. A common and overarching idea that emerged throughout the interviews was the opportunity participants felt in having the time to reflect, strategize, explore, or simply focus on tasks that may have been neglected in the past. Arguably, this gift of time could be considered as the means through which businesses were able to give birth to their creative and strategic shifts that are discussed later in this section. Another

heartwarming observation was the empathy that was very prevalent in many participants towards their peers in the industry; this empathy provided validation for the increased collaborations and sense of community mentioned in our findings as well as existing research and literature.

We also wanted to expose some of the challenges that were mentioned during the interviews. Although the goal of the study was not aimed at analyzing challenges but rather opportunities, we recognize that both areas are linked in a relationship that indicates some challenges inspired forward thinking and creative innovation.

The findings presented herewith are explored to derive meaning by synthesizing anecdotes, views, and opinions that are merged into four pillars of discussion.

Diversification, Technology, and Economic Sustainability

A third of participants shared their desire to expand into retail by promoting their products on grocery shelves and through meal-kit delivery channels. This view is consistent with prior research findings that stated the appeal of retail due to convenience and increasing ease of access (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Rejeb et al., 2020; T. J. Richards & Rickard, 2020). As such, the lure of retail was derived from its view as a stable and sustainable channel of revenue. This interest also correlates with observations of changing consumer behavior that have increasingly favored home cooking or home delivery and, as a result, an increase in retail and grocery store shopping. Farm attractions, restaurants, and catering companies are attempting to enter this area of distribution and active steps are being taken in adapting menu items, ingredients, and dishes for longevity and expanded shelf life. Participant (N) indicated:

we were approached by big companies like Fresh Prep, big meal kit companies, and they've offered us sort of a sustainable source of revenue.

Understandably, retail supports business continuity.

An overwhelming majority of research participants received financial aid and subsidies from the various levels of the Canadian government, many equating the help with a life thread to continue

operations. While some of the funding was purposed for specific operational and fixed expenses such as wages, rent, e-commerce upgrades, and the like, some funding was provided unconditionally, which allowed recipients to spend it on areas of greatest need such as on personal protective equipment (PPE), cleaning products, or otherwise. Although government intervention revolved around the provision of emergency funds, some participants acknowledged the positive changes made to industry regulations and bylaws such as patio building regulations. A further opportunity is highlighted in which the government liquor and cannabis branch has eased its liquor sale bylaws, off-sales, and the change in bulk liquor pricing, which helped restaurants increase competitiveness. Additionally, the recent permission for alcohol consumption in parks across some municipalities has elevated foodservice providers' ability in selling full range picnic, dinner, and brunch baskets, hence expanding product and service selection.

The data indicated an interesting rationale for expanding operations in larger multiunit restaurant establishments. For instance, these establishments identified favorable conditions for expansion into new business locations as they see opportunity in a buyer-friendly commercial real estate market. These hospitable conditions have been created out of more than 10,000 restaurant closures due to the pandemic (Restaurants Canada, 2020a). An added advantage multiunit restaurant operators found themselves in was their ability to alleviate branch-specific losses by relying on their size—if one of the business units was not performing well, another may have a better chance of enduring difficulties, thus redirecting resources and cash flow efficiently. For example, one Vancouver-based restaurant operator, participant (D) let go of one of their restaurants in South Granville to focus on the more lucrative business units in other busier locations. Another restaurateur, Participant (R), explained:

you hear lots of restaurants are going out or closing down. But there are lots of new restaurants opening up and I think this will continue to happen in the near future.

Almost half of the businesses interviewed identified with a new demographic of customers engaging

with them during the pandemic. Restrictions on travel and movement have empowered local travel and, as a result, increased local food consumption. These changing market conditions resulted in attracting new attention to existing gastronomy experience providers. Participant (L) explained this by saying, “we actually benefited greatly because our local community found us,” which is an indication that business visibility and awareness have increased during the pandemic. Another participant (Q) stated, “word of mouth has been huge for us too.” These examples of increased local demand for local gastronomic experiences also enabled businesses to better define their “true” customers by assessing their loyalty. In this regard, Participant (H) said:

We got the customers and the community members that really love us, that support us, that believe in us and know who we are—they have become defined.

This sentiment of customer support and increased loyalty was echoed by an overwhelming majority of research participants, including two participants (D & E) who repeatedly mentioned customer love and loyalty during the pandemic.

Although it is unclear what sustained the considerable levels of customer support towards gastronomic businesses, our data suggest that social media played a significant role in business/customer relationships. The indications point to the use of social media in two areas. First, for announcing service changes and COVID-19 protocols, and second, for promoting business activities, products, and new experiences during the pandemic. These observations align with findings from a Portuguese study conducted by Madeira et al. (2021), which emphasizes reliance on social networks by Portuguese restaurateurs.

Technology adoption played a massive role in helping gastronomy businesses navigate their strategic and operational direction during the pandemic. While social media continues to play a big part in nurturing connections with customers, other technological platforms have enabled businesses to grow in their various attempts to capture market share. Participant (S) explained in referring to the pandemic:

It also made us have a better online presence. I think we did well at pivoting. We got our ordering stuff figured out, and our online selling of some of our products. It made us have a better presence that way and get set up better which was something that probably wouldn't have put as much energy into under other circumstances.

An example of the technologies referenced by participants in the interviews was Tock, which enabled their respective businesses in scheduling meal pickups, event drop-ins among other things. Participant (H) explained how Tock helped her manage customer expectations for her new farm experiences:

We had to create time slots for people to visit the farm, so that really helped curbing the expectations so customers knew that, OK, we have to book a time slot, I have this much time at the farm, and these are the protocols that they're taking.

Food delivery service platforms such as DoorDash, SkipTheDishes, and Uber Eats, among others, were also referenced as participants further elaborated on technological opportunities and new partnerships. The considerable expansion into food delivery services has taken place despite cumbersome fees, as some participants explained. Technological adoptions were not always restricted to new applications but also to existing ones, as participant (B) explained:

Overnight, we had to get an online presence and luckily my existing point of sales system had an online ordering mechanism that we had never explored before. So, within 24 hours we were able to have online ordering.

Another participant (J) expressed a similar sentiment as her restaurant "hit the ground running" because her business model already accounted for considerable take-out operations and hence did not need to shut down to set that part up. Notably, participants B and J are unlike many other restaurants who had to shut down for up to 2 months while figuring out their next steps.

Research observations clearly indicated that e-commerce and marketing proved helpful to business operators, whether used in delivering virtual cooking experiences with zoom, enhancing search

engine visibility, or shifting to online menu platforms, which according to another participant (R) made his life easy.

Capitalizing on Community

Research participants emphasized their sense of social responsibility, collective prosperity, and philanthropy. For example, Participant (E) stated that he:

wanted to be one of these leading companies of making sure that the unfortunate are being looked after in Vancouver.

His initiative not only achieved its purpose, but also created new corporate partnerships with large donors, enhanced corporate image, increased publicity, and kept restaurant staff working as they cooked, packaged, and delivered meals to front-line workers and other community groups. In another case, participant (K) partnered with a city-run housing provider to prepare meals for the vulnerable, all while achieving favorable publicity and enhanced community relations. Additionally, participant (N) indicated her continued wish to support women entrepreneurs through various initiatives and projects.

The social impacts of the pandemic were not only manifested in community philanthropy. Vendor and competitor relations have also improved in some cases. For example, participant (Q) indicated the potential of a new business partnership that may enhance the attraction's offering and customer experience. Another farm participant (H) mentioned a collaboration with a restaurant in Vancouver. Participants (J and E) shared positive sentiments about working with other food-service providers in cross-promotional campaigns and joint projects together. Some of the collaborative projects and local initiatives mentioned by the participants included Island Good in Vancouver Island, FromTo Delivery Service, and Breaking Bread.

Participant (P) emphasized the importance of looking at the greater good by saying:

I think there's a collaborative spirit in the air that's taken the ego away, and people are really thinking about how to help each other. It's just bigger than all of us and I think people are recognizing

it. Forcing people to put their ego aside and ask, “how could we help one another in a way that makes everyone matter?”

It has been clear through the data that all participants shared a sense of collective prosperity in multiple ways, forms, and actions.

Challenges and Concerns

This pillar synthesizes the various challenges and concerns that were revealed by our participants. We relate these challenges to some of the operational and strategic shifts we observed in the responses in ways that could verify cause and effect phenomena, hoping to offer a repository of solutions based on similar challenges in the future.

Gastronomic businesses in BC were quickly exposed to changes within their wider environment and within their immediate circles. Notably, the status quo of customers, staff, partners, and even competitors in some cases was subject to change without prior notice. For example, participant (L) witnessed increased attention from nearby residents, but a total stop to her educational groups and services. Participant (Q) had seen an almost complete shift in audience from school groups to families, who were deemed to be more COVID-friendly clients. In other circumstances, corporate and business partners have changed such as in the case of participant (A). In participant (N)’s case, she found herself dealing with a whole new competitive landscape when she decided to pause her catering business from groups to pivot into a takeout model by servicing individuals and households. While such examples illustrate changes impacting individual businesses, they also explain the need for adaptations, learning, acquisitions of new equipment, or technological upgrades. In one case, a food tour company in the lower mainland pivoted operations entirely into a gifting business, which illustrates the creativity some businesses have built to maneuver their path forward during the pandemic.

What is clear is that these changes in the business landscape may have caused some “forced” learning or exploration, which were not always manageable or even achievable in the past. Creativity has also emerged by some participants who identified it as a crucial skill to business survival, such as participant (H) who indicated:

I just think in general; the past year has forced us to be creative and it’s forced us to think outside the box and because we’re constantly thinking about, what can we do? How can we do it? Then ideas come to mind.

Another challenge was identified in managing customer expectations and “policing” public behavior in accordance with COVID-19 protocols. Participant (D) acknowledged the bizarre shift in business priorities that have conventionally placed customers first, a philosophy that had to change during the pandemic. Customers now are dictated how to behave and “educated on what to expect.” This shift has made it harder for businesses to make customers happy, which was a concern expressed by several respondents. Participant (J) echoed this sentiment and elaborates by saying:

only negative impact is dealing with customers that don’t follow regulations, wear masks, anti-vaccinations.

This may have propelled businesses to rely more on social media platforms in announcing changes in service, business hours, promotions, and other business-related information. Participant (H) elaborated:

In marketing—sharing our story with people and sharing what we’re up to . . . that was important to curb their expectations of how we are changing and improving our business.

Economic loss was not experienced similarly between all research participants. While some participants have been severely impacted, others were able to benefit from increased demand of all our farm participants. It is important to mention that increased demand for certain products does not necessarily mean increased business profitability. To elaborate, these farms had to stop some revenue-generating activities while keeping or creating others. Another factor to consider is the reduced service capacities and social distancing measures that may contribute to the false impression that a fully booked business is one that is running at full capacity. On the other hand, some participants acknowledged their businesses have seen little economic loss during the pandemic, especially those that were already reliant on take-out operations,

thus hitting the ground running when the pandemic was declared in British Columbia. Additionally, the complete inability to access emergency government subsidies by two of our participants may have exaggerated the negative economic impacts of the pandemic on their respective businesses.

Other difficulties highlighted by research participants included safety concerns for staff members as well as the challenges of trial and error with pivoting operations, adoptions of new technologies, and changing service models. It is also important to acknowledge the one ultimate challenge that some of the participants had to endure was the permanent closure of their businesses, such as the case with two participants who highlighted diminished foot traffic as a key reason for closure. Despite closures, however, both participants indicated alternative paths and other avenues that they were able to refocus their resources on.

Outlook for British Columbia's Gastronomy

When asked about their predictions for the gastronomy sector in British Columbia, participants expressed several views but overwhelmingly maintained a positive outlook with emphasis on strength and resilience of the sector. Their notions for the future also included space for online and hybrid experiences. While their industry outlook is positive, many participants also had positive aspirations of their own. For example, Participants (S, Q, & N) who represent a delicatessen, a farm experience, and a caterer, all within different regions of BC, expressed interest in acquiring or adding an in-house dining space to expand their businesses in the future. This may support the notion that despite the difficulties that restaurants have endured, the prospects are positive and supportive of a growing postpandemic dining scene that is diversified, competitive and flexible.

Observations from the data collected suggest two broad ideas for BC's future within the gastronomy sector. First, there will be changes in consumer behavior, and second, there will be more demand from residents on local, diverse, and unique gastronomic experiences.

The topic of changing gastronomic experience consumption patterns has come up repeatedly. While most participants agreed that the restaurant

industry will regain its growth momentum postpandemic, this may come with a few adjustments. To begin with, the convenience of take-out will take center stage and restaurants will be ready to serve and maintain growth within take-out and delivery channels. Another thought that emerged here is the increased demand for casual eateries and a lesser interest in fine dining experiences. This sentiment was expressed by two casual eatery respondents who identified a more challenging outlook for fine dining operations. The assumption being as one of the participants (D) explained:

If you're a fine dining restaurant, I'm sure they suffered a lot more than restaurants that were quick service.

However, of the two fine dining restaurants that were interviewed for this study, none appeared to have suffered particularly more than other types of establishments. In a rationale supported by G. Richards (2020), this could be explained by the importance of creativity as demonstrated by these businesses in adapting to the challenges of the pandemic. Another key finding suggests that British Columbians will be seeking more local food experiences and will reemphasize the importance of locally grown and locally produced dishes and food items, whether in retail, farms, or restaurants. Participant (L):

The whole "buy local" initiative that was going on for the last several years but really hit home during the food supply interruption, I think it hit the consumer and I think they finally got it.

Another observation that emerged refers to the changing work-life balance that took center stage during the pandemic. There is a general belief that reimagined workplaces in the future will impact food consumption behavior in Vancouver's downtown and other high-density town centers, thus impacting food service providers in those areas. As people are predicted to spend less time in offices, diners will spend their money closer to home and consume more local fare rather than dining at popular downtown eating spots. Additionally, a growing sentiment from our participants suggests that accessible locations and patio dining in restaurants will be stronger attributes affecting dining decisions in

the future. The location becomes especially problematic for highly tourist-dependent areas that saw major declines in foot traffic due to travel restrictions. This sentiment is expressed by participant (F), who experienced it firsthand by saying:

Well, our reality was we were located in a highly touristic area that was dependent on international visitors, and the area itself was not easily suited to going after the domestic market. Therefore, our adaptation was to close our doors.

Research participants who identified as serving or offering ethnic products and services stressed a positive outlook for unique and diverse gastronomic experiences postpandemic. Participant (L) suggested that:

People are going to be aggressively seeking new experiences, new kinds of foods, new kinds of cuisines, new kinds of events.

This opinion was echoed by participants (H & O).

Local is king, or so do the findings suggest. British Columbians today know more about their province's gastronomic offerings than ever before, thanks in part to the "stay close to home" orders that propelled interest in local farmers, food artisans, and restaurants. Participant (F) was confident:

I think people have rediscovered their own backyard. I think gastronomy in BC is going to change for the better for the long term, and people are seeing value in that.

He went to explain that consumers have had an inferior perception of domestic products and experiences in the past, which during the pandemic have been challenged, favoring food experiences. This notion directly aligns with others who expressed similar sentiments that were fueled by increased attention, more exposure and higher spending by clients, across the board.

Discussion

Research findings are used to generate several discussion points that pave the way towards a future that is more holistic, collectively driven, and locally inspired for the gastronomy sector in BC. While the discussions serve the BC context, these ideas can

be generalized and reflected within other regions and provinces, particularly if they share similarities in industry characteristics, consumer demographics, and societal values. The discussions are broken down into the following four key topics.

Resilience

Collective power and regional prosperity are highlighted within the BC context, which lend themselves well to the continuous innovation and collaborative projects observed through the study. The findings particularly draw attention to cross-promotional campaigns, cross-selling, and partnerships between businesses in an attempt to create business-to-business referrals and overall prosperity. An example was provided by one of the participants where they partnered with neighboring restaurants in a food delivery service project. Another example is where another restaurant participant promoted local brewery beer options on their menu, a tactic that was mimicked at other establishments. This notion of cross-selling is carried out primarily for two reasons: satisfying consumer urges to eat local and supporting business partners in mutually beneficial relationships. This holistic approach to industry resilience can also expand by promoting entire destinations all together, as indicated by one study respondent who repeatedly expressed interest in working within their community to elevate their region's profile as a tourist destination and food hub.

Several indicators suggest that gastronomy experience providers will be better equipped to face future demand disruptions due to public health emergencies, such as the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. This newly found resilience is a result of constant modifications to operational procedures and improved strategic insight. These adaptations increased confidence levels in facing change. For example, new abilities in hosting virtual events such as cooking lessons and tours can be offered with considerable ease and familiarity. Sudden changes in public health guidelines are handled with less anxiety due to well-established and flexible operational models. Additionally, businesses today are more exposed to diversification opportunities that help expand their range of products and services, an example of which is food retail that when done

correctly can bring added organizational expertise in recipe testing, product adaptations, product longevity, labeling, and marketing. Interestingly, the threat of competition was not mentioned in this study. This observation suggests that the future of the gastronomy sector will be more collaborative and emphasizes the greater good, which gives way to more sustainable growth and a more inclusive decision-making process. This is a concept that is repeated in the work of Higgins-Desbiolles (2020), who mentioned the significance of socializing tourism for the public good.

One cannot ignore the fact that during the pandemic the industry has progressed and expanded in terms of its functionality, accessibility, and distribution networks, giving way to increased efficiencies and alternative revenue mechanisms. Many relationships have been formed in part to satisfy operational and strategic needs for solutions that are safe, reliable, and timely to wither new realities of the pandemic. Some examples include the formations of new business partnerships with third-party delivery companies, food ordering systems, and new menu and payment solutions, notably many of which are technologically driven solutions. These observations also generate renewed faith in social media and its role in building, maintaining, and nurturing the connection with consumers and stakeholders alike.

Ultimately, making customers happy is what mattered the most to our research participants. This priority required adaptability and creativity as key attributes in making positive change and business transformations. Other researchers such as Schwark et al. (2020) shared similar thoughts as they believe that the pandemic will foster creativity and innovation as well as G. Richards (2020), who believes in organizational change through creativity. Such abilities, as shared through this study, support the idea of continuous assessment in response to changing market dynamics and expectations.

Regional Slow Food Travel

While public health measures restricted travel within the province and out of it, they enticed consumers to experience their geographical surroundings more closely, resulting in building intimate

relationships with local food purveyors and experience providers. Regional slow food travel may be one of the most interesting consequences of the public health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and arguably, this became a widespread phenomena not particular to the BC case alone. Slow Food International (2021) characterizes this type of travel as:

a new model for tourism, made up of meetings and exchanges with farmers, cheese makers, herders, butchers, bakers and winegrowers who, along with the chefs that cook their products, will be the narrators of their local areas and unique guides to the local traditions.

The notion of slow food aligns with that of community well-being and partnerships and supports a more sustainable future where consumers are more connected to land-based experiences through experiential learning and encounters with those who grow, catch, cook, and serve their food. Matteucci et al. (2021) noted that slow travel and proximity tourism are resilient forms of tourism that provide social, environmental, and economic benefits for destinations. The farms that were interviewed in this research expressed enthusiasm towards this movement.

In the BC context, the domestic market will play an increasingly significant role in driving demand for future gastronomic experiences. “Grown in BC” and “Shop Local” are some of the slogans that floated around during the pandemic. With increased consumer exposure to superior, locally grown and made food products, favorable impressions of the domestic “British Columbian” food experience were created. For example, consumers “found” their existing neighborhood restaurants and local beekeepers to be worthy of their time and money, as the pandemic shifted their attention to closer-to-home experiences. In a saturated market where businesses would have struggled to capture new market share within the same boundaries, these businesses suddenly experienced an increase in customers and even higher spending. Notions of loyalty may have also been impacted as consumers paid more attention to their local grocers, farmers, and restaurants than they did before. These newly found relationships will be hard to break, especially if businesses maintained their visions and

philosophies, kept innovating, and remained true to their value proposition.

Community Well-Being

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed cracks, fragility, and weaknesses in our food systems, while it also put many groups of people at further risk of poverty and hunger. This was immediately recognized by several research participants who took initiative to feed at-risk groups.

The sense of community was evident in multiple examples of partnerships that brought together corporate donors, restaurants and catering companies, and community organizations to feed various at-risk and vulnerable community groups. An earlier example presented included a meal distribution campaign to frontline workers, the impacts of which highlight our societal interdependencies and an increased awareness of the risk and sacrifice certain professions and community members endure in their day-to-day livelihoods. Marginalized groups such as women and the BIPOC community would also have an opportunity to be highlighted and engaged in community development, as was echoed by one study respondent.

One other dimension to add here is the opportunity some businesses found in further building on their corporate social responsibility and brand image during the pandemic. There is merit in assuming that there is an evident relationship between philanthropy and brand image. However, in the context of this research, businesses that donated their resources for philanthropic causes emphasized a primary reason was to keep their workers busy and motivated while extending them with a community-serving purpose. It is also noteworthy that some of the various government subsidies offered to these businesses may have been conditional to them staying operational, resulting in making decisions favorable to their philanthropic endeavors.

Consultative Governance

There is renewed faith in government that will facilitate future industry consultations and support industry innovation, resilience, and self-sufficiency. There would be a need for Canadian institutions to support and grow domestic food production and

food chains to better face future crises. Participant (L) ended her research interview by saying “I would be hopeful at some point the government is going to invest in farmers, and even small plot farmers”—a view that is also echoed by Deaton and Deaton (2020) as they mention the elevated interest in Canada to support local farms, processors, and manufacturers to achieve self-sufficiency to better face future crises. This idea is also reflected in the study conducted by Matteucci et al. (2021), who believe destinations must involve local communities in creating a more equitable form of tourism governance.

It would be prudent to assume that government regulations, particularly city bylaws, are more agile and nimble than previously thought. With changes to patio licensing, liquor permits in public spaces, and liquor off-sales, these new measures may be the start of a more consultative relationship between government and the business community and may pave the way for increased dialogue on emerging issues that can be addressed collectively and with empathy. These thoughts have also been discussed in length by Matteucci et al. (2021) via reference to social eudaimonia, in which the collective happiness and well-being in community are emphasized through a participatory model of relationships with reciprocal care and dialogue between government and community.

Conclusions and Study Limitations

Throughout this study, our purpose was to shed light on the British Columbia’s gastronomy sector experience in leveraging opportunities for growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. It quickly became clear that gastronomic experience providers were presented with unique opportunities for growth. Having had the time to reflect on their business priorities and their future, many businesses were able to leverage community and harness the power of collective prosperity. Advancements in technology and increased awareness of diversification strategies have certainly helped these businesses maintain their status quo and even thrive within a market environment that has been volatile to say the least. While not all gains were financially driven, the business community is left with a sense of belonging, customer loyalty, and increased community engagement.

The future of the industry will be shaped by trends born from the COVID-19 experience and while this may be true, the business community stands at a crucial point that may determine its place in a postpandemic world. The new business landscape will require nimble, well-structured operations that are driven by technology, a sense of community, and a diversified revenue model, all in order to accommodate sudden shifts in consumption behavior, supply disruptions, and government regulations.

Some limitations to the research were identified while conducting the study. The first limitation relates to the sample. This study may have benefited from acquiring a larger pool of participants that reflects all regions in BC, particularly the western, central, and northern regions. Alternatively, this study could have benefitted from narrowing down the geographical representation to create more reflective outcomes of particular areas or even produce a comparative analysis of these areas. One other identified limitation is that while the study was successful in gathering responses from the restaurant sector, it could have included more participants from other types of relevant businesses. Moreover, we do not know how the beverage sector, represented by breweries, wineries, and distilleries, or Indigenous owned or operated gastronomy businesses may have dealt with the pandemic because we did not receive any responses representing them.

Since technology was identified as a principal theme in the data and findings, future research could assess how technology drove positive environmental change. Additional value might be found in exploring staff insights and how they correlated with business priorities during the pandemic. A comparison study between the various types of restaurants would help shed light on whether the pandemic impacted these businesses differently. The same can be suggested on a geographical or ethnic basis.

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