

# Fear, hope and resilience: Inside critically acclaimed Wilmington restaurant Bardea's reopening

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Bardea is loud. On a normal night, the cacophony coming from the Wilmington restaurant reaches a decibel that makes co-owner [Scott Stein](#) worry it might be too loud — families celebrating birthdays, couples laughing on date nights, friends running into each other at the bar. They all add up to one big roar.

“It’s full of energy and life,” Stein said.

That all changed on the morning of March 16, when Stein and co-owner [Chef Antimo DiMEO](#) got an email from the state’s liquor control board informing them restaurants were no longer allowed to serve alcohol. The two looked at each other, and without saying a word, both realized they had to close.

“I remember it was sunny outside, but the atmosphere was different. You could hear a pin drop,” he said. “It was just that moment, it just clicked ... it was like something out of a science fiction movie.”

After 45 days of quiet, Stein and DiMEO are now breathing life back into their critically acclaimed "interpretive Italian" restaurant, which opened for pick-up orders on Thursday. After the pair opened Bardea in the fall of 2018, it quickly



BARDEA

Bardea Co-owners Chef Antimo DiMEO and Scott Stein reopened their James Beard-semifinalist restaurant in Wilmington for takeout on April 30 after being closed for 45 days.

became both a James Beard Award semifinalist and a crucial cog in the machine driving Wilmington's recent economic revival.

"This city has gone through so much, and the fact it's been back on the map, people are living and working downtown ... it's the golden era," Stein said. "We had the attitude of even if we serve 20 people, we'll do something. We had no routine, we were lost sitting at home every day."

As winds ripped through the river city and rain poured down around Stein, DiMeo and their skeleton crew of eight staffers Thursday night, they rang up 60 checks. Most were large orders, including for the family pack of a pork cheek, two-day ragu served with a hearty portion of ziti, crisp salad, asparagus topped with cured egg yolks and a coconut panna cotta. Some picked up Bardea's famous 50- to 60-ounce ribeyes that can easily feed a family of four, or six. Others went for the gnocchi, the meatballs, the pizza — comfort food, unsurprisingly.

Stein's staff was meticulous about packing the meals, serving sauce on the side so entrees didn't get soggy in transport, and triple-checking every order to make sure customers didn't drive home through the rain only to find an appetizer missing.

Its regulars had been thrilled to see the restaurant start offering takeout, he said. Some peeked through the windows, hoping to wave to their favorite server or bartender. Olympic figure skater and sports commentator Johnny Weir, a Coatesville native who trained in Delaware, excitedly posted a link to Bardea's takeout menu on his Instagram story, calling it his favorite restaurant.

"I think we are some symbol of hope, that hopefully some normalization will come back soon to downtown Wilmington," Stein said.

Hope and community-building are their main motivations, he said, since serving takeout isn't a sustainable way to keep its financial ship steady.

"This is not money-driven," he said. "Even if we did takeout and killed it every day, the economics aren't there. It's a losing proposition for us."

Stein has tapped every outlet he could find to try and shore up funds to stay afloat and support Bardea's staff. At the start, he helped raise \$7,500 through GoFundMe to help support his 45 laid off staffers before unemployment checks arrived. He tried applying for a U.S. Chamber of Commerce Save Small Business Grant, but

couldn't even get an application filed before the website crashed. He's applied for a \$15,000 James Beard Foundation grant but is still on the waiting list after the first two rounds.

He was able to secure a Payroll Protection Program loan through Mid Penn Bank and said the process was smooth, but he faces the same challenges most restaurants do since, in order to be forgiven, three quarters of the loan must be spent on payroll in a certain time frame. Stein's top concern is keeping his employees safe, but he also doesn't want to call back staffers when they've gone through the hassle of securing unemployment in case he has to lay them off again soon afterward. His only real hope is that Congress will tweak the rules or add considerations for the tricky situation restaurants face.

"We just need some subtle changes to it. It just doesn't work for the [restaurant business] model," he said. "Right now, we're going to just go about it and try to block out the rules, the forgiveness and just do the human and right thing."

Other worries weigh in the back of his mind even more heavily — if the coming recession turns into a deep depression, will there even be a need or desire for a higher-end restaurant like Bardea?

"That's what scares me the most," Stein said.

In the meantime, he's focused on serving as many customers as they can every day through pickup and, soon, delivery. Stein and DiMeo will take the next two weeks to see how business goes. If restrictions start to ease around the middle of May or early June, they hope to explore serving in-house again, likely at just 30% of their capacity and with an abundance of safety measures, including timed seatings and a new reservation system.

Whether or not people will feel secure enough to show up is hard to tell, but he hopes they do, sooner or later. Even as takeout operations ramped up in the restaurant on Thursday night, Stein said, it was still too quiet.

"It was nice to be back, but it just didn't feel right," he said Friday morning. "The soul was missing a little bit last night."

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