



Servers at Selanne Steak Tavern place dishes at table in Laguna Beach, California on the restaurant's first night of reopening its dining room [Wonho Frank Lee](#)

CORONAVIRUS

Here's What it Was Like to Actually Dine Inside a Restaurant Again

With masked servers and a fraction of its tables occupied, Selanne Steak Tavern in Laguna Beach was one of the first restaurants in Orange County to reopen its dining room

by [Matthew Kang@mattatouille](#) May 29, 2020, 12:44pm PDT

Photos by [Wonho Frank Lee](#)

Last week, in the middle of Memorial Day weekend, Orange County restaurants received the go-ahead to immediately [reopen dining rooms](#), roughly two and a half months since they were shuttered by the state to slow the spread of COVID-19. Three days later, I ventured south to Laguna Beach's Selanne Steak Tavern, one of a dozen or so white-tablecloth restaurants in Orange County that reopened May 27, along with Morton's, Mastro's, and Hillstone Group-owned Bandera. After nearly 10 weeks of mandated closures, I wanted to understand

what it would feel like to eat inside of a polished restaurant, and how the staff had adapted to the new normal of physical distance and face coverings. More than that, I was curious about whether Orange County made the decision to open dining rooms too early, as California continues to see a [growing number of COVID-19 cases](#).

While LA County, with a population of over 10 million residents, has led the state with 49,000 confirmed cases and just over 2,200 deaths as of May 29, neighboring Orange County, which has just over 3 million residents, has seen 5,700 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 142 deaths over the same time period. Because of the relative disparity between the two Southern California counties — and pressure from locals in places [like San Clemente](#) and [Huntington Beach](#) who thought Gov. Gavin Newsom’s [statewide mandate was overreaching](#) — Orange County pushed the state to reopen retail businesses and restaurant dining rooms on the quickest possible time frame.

Newsom laid out a number of metrics that counties needed to meet in order to [reopen more](#) “higher-risk” businesses, such as restaurant dining rooms. Initially the governor had stringent hurdles, like a limit of one new case per 10,000 residents, though that’s now been relaxed to 25 cases per 100,000 residents in the past 14 days. Even by the standards of this looser metric, LA and Orange counties fall short, with 142 and 56 cases, respectively, of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 in the past 14 days — yet the state approved Orange County’s request to reopen retail stores, shopping malls, and restaurant dining rooms.



Outside near patio



Family waiting to be seated

When it announced its reopening on Tuesday morning, Selanne published a list of measures it would take to protect both staff and diners. For starters, it's reservation-only, with reduced capacities and physically distanced tables; there are temperature checks, face coverings, and gloves for staff; symptom screening for guests before entry; and the waiting area has been abolished. With what seemed like a reasonable set of protocols, I drove down to Laguna Beach with Eater LA photographer Frank Lee, excited but also nervous to sit down for a restaurant dinner for the first time in 10 weeks.

Owned by hockey hall of famer and longtime Orange County resident Teemu Selanne — [the “Finnish Flash”](#) — Selanne Steak Tavern opened in 2013 inside a brick-lined cottage built in the 1930s across a front veranda, multiple indoor dining rooms on two stories, and a second-floor balcony. A fraction of the normal [occupancy of 158 diners](#) were seated inside: The bar area just behind the host's stand was closed due to physical distancing mandates, with numerous tables marked by a placard making them unavailable for seating; the upstairs patio, which could normally seat well over a dozen, held four diners while the front veranda, which usually seats upwards of 30, had about ten people. In all, it seemed like fewer than 50 people were sitting throughout the restaurant, less than a third of the restaurant's total capacity, though California has not mandated specific capacity percentage reductions.

A prominent sign outside the restaurant details expectations for guests, including wearing masks while entering the space and while moving throughout it — to use the restroom, for example. One large group celebrating a special occasion came in, lugging two strollers up the narrow stairs. A manager kindly asked the group to put their masks back on while a host escorted them to their tables upstairs. Scattered around the bar, a few two-tops sat in relative silence while two semi-hidden televisions across blared a replay of the Chicago Cubs and Cleveland Indians World Series from 2016.



We were seated inside the wine room, a triangular space facing the front of the restaurant laid out with four tables and lined with empty trophy bottles from over the years. Tables with white linens lacked utensils or water glasses per the restaurant's new safety protocol. Servers offered paper menus instead of ones typically presented in a thick leather-bound holder. (The restaurant's celebrated wine list still comes in a hefty leather book, however.) From my perspective, it seemed like tables were properly spaced — roughly six feet from the corner of

each table to the next — though I admittedly felt less comfortable inside the wine room than I would have at one of the tables on the veranda.

For all the physical-distancing measures, the paper menus and disposable utensils and public service announcements, by far the most striking difference between dining out in the Before Times and now is the sight of restaurant workers in masks. A [constant visual reminder of the pandemic](#) that continues to spread throughout much of the country and the devastation it has left in its wake, the masks also pose practical challenges, like trying to discern muffled lines from a server about the menu by looking intently into their eyes. The staff feels no less discomfort: Our server told us he longed for the day when he could safely work without a mask.

We ordered two salads and two steaks, plus some sides. The food was good, but more than anything, the experience of professionally plated dishes — sauced, garnished, and presented on dense white porcelain — felt like a true luxury. Even though I consider myself a fairly competent cook, I've never gone through the trouble of building a wedge salad mottled with blue cheese dressing and topped with perfectly ripe cherry tomatoes, much less broiling prime-grade steaks and ladling them with a silky bordelaise sauce. The initial anxiety of waiting for a table, sitting in a somewhat crowded room, seeing servers in medical-grade masks — all of it melted away like the compound truffle butter on my New York strip.



Matthew Kang

Still, the [risks involved with opening dining rooms are profound](#) at a time when COVID-19 continues to spread in the United States. States like Georgia and Texas opened weeks ago, and cases there continue to climb precipitously. Health experts like Santa Clara county public health officer Dr. Sara Cody have

said [California could be reopening too early](#), especially with the state allowing cultural, religious, and political gatherings of up to 100 people, increasing the potential second outbreak of COVID-19. Chefs like Carlos Salgado of Costa Mesa's celebrated Taco Maria have [insisted on keeping their dining rooms closed](#) because of the lack of testing, tracing, therapeutic treatments, or a vaccine — which is [likely more than a year away](#). Yet restaurants across [Orange County have opened in large numbers](#), with dozens of places already open and gearing up for reservations this weekend.

When I asked our server how he felt about reopening, he said that he was happy to be back at work. Kevin Pratt, the restaurant's co-owner, kept employees on payroll until the end of March and furloughed front-of-house staff while continuing to pay their benefits; the kitchen staff stayed on in order to operate Selanne's takeout service, which produced about 15 percent of the sales that the restaurant normally sees. The steakhouse never received a rent concession from its landlord.



On May 29, Gov. Gavin Newsom gave [LA County the go-ahead](#) to reopen restaurant dining rooms after county officials touted a 6.5% infection rate (lower than the 8% standard) and a seven-day reduction in the total number of hospitalizations for COVID-19. Earlier this week, the City of LA released a 17-page set of guidelines for restaurants before they can to reopen, detailing everything from physical spacing and cleaning standards to employee safety.

It's unclear when LA restaurants will actually open their dining rooms, but operators [will be able to look to nearby counties](#) for precedent. Will diners come back in droves or will they avoid public spaces until it's truly safe enough to sit inside restaurants? Based on just the first night in windswept Laguna Beach, it's clear some people can't wait to cut into a steak.