

10 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL EXPANDED WINTER PATIOS

Getting the most out of your outdoor space can increase revenue, create distance between parties and offer your customers a unique experience.

As municipalities begin to approve winterization of patios following the TESA red line extensions approved Liquor and Cannabis Regulation Branch (LCRB) until October 31, 2021, restaurants and breweries should soon be able to move ahead with winterizing their temporary pop-up patios.

This spring, across the country we saw restaurant, pubs, bistros and cafés create pop-up patios on sidewalks, in parking spots, in courtyards and closed streets. After forced closures and stay at home orders, customers are looking for new signs that businesses are rising to the challenge that COVID-19 is presenting. Any alternatives for the traditional indoor dining were well received – open air dining and take out caught on quickly.

As we move into winter, the cold, rain and snow will force some people inside and has a real potential to force operators to change course again. The BC Restaurant and Foodservices Association has done a scan of best practices around the world and collected creative solutions to keep customers engaged and feeling positive even on the most dreary Canadian winter day.

Here are 10 suggestions for how to take advantage of the perception of safety of outside, account for inclement weather and create fantastic experiences for patrons while adhering to new and changing guidelines.

1. BE REALISTIC ABOUT YOUR CLIMATE.

If your area is known for winter rain, buckets of snow or cold but clear days, you have to plan differently. In cold but clear areas, you may need to only create heat. In the rainy lower Mainland, you must have a rain cover or your space won't be functional. Be sure to fairly assess your location and your winter weather and create a plan that works to solve your specific site concerns. If you have particularly harsh weather, a winter patio may not be for you. Be realistic and plan ahead.



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2. CREATE LIGHT.

With the change of seasons, days get shorter across our Northern Hemisphere. Every outdoor space is going to need to have light to create the ambience you want to welcome guests and ensure that customers can enjoy the space during all times of the day. This requires power. You need to ensure that you have proper power source and wattage to make lights work. We recommend that you ensure that you choose lighting for safety and ambience.

The right lighting is important as you transition from day to night. Hanging outdoor string lights are great to brighten any area once the sun goes down. If your jurisdiction allows it, adding twinkling lights through the trees to illuminate our outdoor space adds ambience and winter joy. A string of lights also can be added to a pergola or gazebo. Decorative lanterns work well too. All of these options not only help to bring light into an otherwise dark space, but they also help to create an intimate and cozy outdoor dining experience.

Outdoor dining is still top of mind as owners want to keep employees and customers safe and have questions about maintaining outdoor spaces in inclement weather.

3. MAKE IT WARM AND WELCOMING.

Heat is a complicated requirement that often requires municipal permits and additional power outlets or dedicated circuits. In the summer, many jurisdictions allow propane heaters – however, once covers or walls of any sort are involved, propane heaters are an absolute no as the risk to staff and guests of carbon monoxide poisoning is particularly problematic.

For open spaces in cold places that allow wood burning, fireplaces or chimineas are a fairly easy way to offer warmth. The glow of the fire enhances the experience and creates direct heat for your guests. If you consider adding a wood burning fire, it is important to consult your municipal rules for open fires, ensure that you have a source of good, dry firewood and that you have staff that are confident serving around fire or adding firewood as needed.

In jurisdictions that do not allow open fires, commercial patio heaters offer real solutions for operators at a variety of price points. Electric infra-red patio heaters are a great option and

can be ceiling mounted so that they heat a variety of tables at one time. Investing in quality heaters measured to heat the size of your space in cubic metres will make the difference between having them effectively warm your space and having your heating bill go up with considerable heat loss. We recommend you buy the best commercial heater and best warranty package you can, as you need these to operate consistently and keep your space comfortable for your guests.

Gas heaters are another real opportunity. For those who have gas lines installed, this has a double benefit as Fortis BC offers a range of commercial rebates that you could take advantage of. Get your small business help here:

<https://www.fortisbc.com/rebates/business/energy-savings-and-rebate-advice-for-small-businesses>

Finally, consider having outdoor blankets to keep guests warm and feel cozy. If you go this route, make sure that you have a rigorous washing protocol and that the blankets can be washed in a commercial machine.

4. PROTECT YOUR GUESTS FROM THE WEATHER.

Consider investing in a way to cover your patio or portions of it. Start by removing your patio umbrellas, as they are impossible to secure in winter weather and can be blown away. Tents are also likely to be problematic for many jurisdictions because if they aren't anchored or appropriately duty rated, they can move, blow away or collapse under rain or snow.

Best option: Install a commercial awning that can roll out or in depending on the weather. This allows for airflow but isn't for every weather condition. An awning can also be used in summer for shade – so this has a more year-round benefit.

- If your TESA patio is on private land, you may be able to apply for a building permit to add a rigid roof structure.
- Larger markets may offer commercial event tent rentals, which can be a great option if you have the space and resources, but these will not be suitable for sidewalk or curb lane patios. If you are going this route, consider that having vinyl walls still become walls – and you don't want to create a COVID-19 greenhouse. Airflow is essential. Clear vinyl walls, with vents that can be rolled down to protect from wind and rain while allowing for some ventilation can be an option.

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- In resort areas, you might want to consider something more unique and experiential. Everyone has seen the Geodesic Domes/Igloos that are blowing up social media. These could be something unique for your guests and apparently don't require as much set up as you think!

If you are going the innovative, magical route, make sure to price your experience accordingly – unique Instagrammable moments can be highly sought after and drawn in new customers. Our friends at Russell Hendrix do have 13-foot domes available. Made by Phoenix Domes, these are rugged enough for Canadian winters, 100% water proof, fire/flame retardant, resist temperatures down to -45°C, and can withstand a wind load of 80-100km/h!

Make sure you consult the building and licensing department of your municipality. All installations must have wind ratings, snow ratings and be flame/fire retardant.

And if there's heavy snowfall in your area, make sure structures—such as pergolas and awnings—won't be damaged from the heavy weight of snow.

5. DON'T JUST WINTERIZE YOUR SPACE FOR FUNCTION, THINK ABOUT HOW THE SPACE FEELS TOO.

Guests walking or driving by will choose to visit the space that has the most curb appeal. It's about the combination of looking safe/solid, showcasing COVID best practices and looking unique and welcoming. Simple touches can make a difference: ambient music can add a calming vibe, plants can help create separation between tables.

The use of planters and other sturdy dividers to make sure your space is presentable and doesn't look haphazardly put together. This is more important as we shift into winter and the weather is a greater factor in decision making. The solid feel will attract confidence in your businesses plan to make outdoor dining safe.

6. CONSIDER CREATING A DEDICATED WINTER PATIO MENU.

If you want to capitalize on the outdoor dining opportunity, a specific menu that considers temperature, distance from the kitchen and your target guests is essential. No one wants to sit outside, and be served food that is cold but was meant to be served warm. Comfort food, seasonal drinks, premium

warming beverages and lunch specials that capitalize on the light of clear (if cold) days offer real opportunities to convert walk by into guests.

As the seasons change, you may want to look at prix-fixe offerings that include a few choices from 3 different categories but limits your investment in ingredients, reduces waste and manages your labour cost.

Make sure you post an easily readable version of you menu curbside or patio-side so that customers can make an educated decision based on your offerings. Don't forget to ensure your menu is weather proof and has visual appeal. Call out your best sellers – or the items that tend to draw customers in.

7. CHOOSE THE RIGHT FURNITURE FOR YOUR AREA.

In order to make sure that you can safely welcome guests, commercial furniture designed to tolerate winter conditions are essential. There are specific challenges to cold weather patios – consider the duty rating of the chairs, the weather resistance of the surface, weather your chairs have drainage holes to ensure no pooling of water on seats.

If you have soft furniture, make sure that you have fabric that is resistant to mould and mildew and can be spot cleaned when necessary.

Here are tips for protecting patio furniture based on the type of material:

- Aluminum furniture should be brought indoors or covered with a layer of car wax and a protective furniture cover.
- Fabric furniture is highly susceptible to damage when left outdoors, so be sure to bring it indoors for the winter.
- Teak wood furniture has a concentration of naturally occurring water- and rot-repellent oils, so it is naturally protected against the winter elements. But still consider covering it if left outside to protect it further.
- Wicker furniture should be brought indoors for the winter since it is susceptible to damage when left outdoors for extended periods.
- Plastic furniture is robust and durable, but to extend the lifespan of your furniture, cover it, store it away from the wind, or bring it indoors.

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8. KEEP YOUR PATIO CLEAN AND FREE OF LEAVES, DEBRIS AND POOLING WATER AND ACCUMULATION OF SNOW.

Whether a guest considers your patio or another one, may come down to how clean your patio appears and visible cleanliness is often a sign to guests, in the time of COVID, that your business is taking the necessary precautions to look after guests.

We suggest that you create a rigorous cleaning schedule that can be followed as part of your COVID-19 response plan.

Things to include in your outdoor cleaning plan:

- Regularly maintain the surface of your deck or patio using a broom or a leaf blower to remove debris. You can use a brush or pressure washer for hard-to-clean spots. Removing leaves and debris will help prevent stains from forming on your patio.
- Make sure to re-level outdoor tables after guests leave. A wobbly table outdoor in the cold can be a guest disaster.
- Monitor and winterize flowerpots, fountains, and other patio décor. If you have emptied your flowerpots for winter, consider adding cut branches and berries for a welcoming winter feel and replace and refresh as required. If you have a fountain and have shut it down, don't just leave it empty – can you add plants or rocks or cut branches to make it a winter feature? Don't leave spaces empty and looking dilapidated.
- To avoid mold and mildew growth over the wet winter months, use a chemical or natural cleaner on wood and cement surfaces. Murphy's Oil Soap, water, and a bristled brush can also be used to clean wood. And for some hard-to-clean stains, consider using a solution of 1 part bleach to 2 parts water.

- If you have metal furniture, make sure that you don't have rust. Rust looks dilapidated and it can stain guests clothing. Use a soft-bristled brush to remove rust from metal furniture and cover these spots with appliance paint. Once the paint dries, apply car wax to the metal surfaces for extra protection from the elements and to avoid rust.
- Store any furniture that you aren't going to be using this winter in a place that is dry and away from the sight lines of guests.
- Consider covering furniture with waterproof tarps or furniture covers that are UV, mildew and water-resistant on days when you are closed to ensure the best guest experience on the days when you are open.
- Make sure to clean your gutters and drain pipes so they won't overflow onto your deck or patio when it's raining heavily, or snow is melting.
- If you have a concrete, stone or cement patio, repair any cracks or broken stones immediately to avoid tripping hazards.
- For wood decks, replace rotting boards, tighten screws and secure railings (these are more often used in winter as steadying guests as they walk by).
- If you have stairs, ensure they are level and not slick when wet.
- If you have a patio area on the street that you are maintaining over the winter, consider adding reflective tape to the railing so that in low light, it is more visible for traffic and bikes.
- At the first sign of pests, get a pest control company and ensure that your space is regularly serviced.



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9. ARM YOUR STAFF WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB.

Dining outside has unique challenges for your staff as well. Your guests may be wearing a raincoat or a parka, but your staff must transition from inside to outside multiple times a shift. Plan ahead to ensure staff are comfortable, dressed appropriately and have the right footwear.

- Set up a rotation that allows for the employees to spend some time inside the restaurant.
- Supply synthetic tee's or other clothing that layers well and helps to wick away perspiration.
- If you need to provide winter gear, consider getting branded windbreakers or light coats. Branding adds polish to your establishment.
- Footwear is everything. If you need to give your staff an allowance for outdoor footwear, discuss this at a staff meeting BEFORE the real winter weather rolls in.
- Allow employees to take water or warm up breaks.

10. MANAGE GUEST EXPECTATIONS.

We recommend reservations and asking guests as they come to your hostess stand whether they want to dine in or dine out. Give them an orientation of what dining out looks like and include your patio information proactively on your social media and your website.

Make sure your patio looks great and that your promotions online match the actual experience. Regardless of whether they are literally sitting on the street, guests want and experience and they want to experience hospitality.

Guests need to know in advance if your indoor or patio dining is more in demand – it's useful to include that in your promotions as well. For patio dining, you should be clear about your back up options. If it starts to downpour or the temperature drops, what are your guest options? We suggest a **take the rest home** option that is easy to execute. If people make patio reservations and the weather that day is a disaster, you may want to have a **text for weather** option where you text guests 2 hours before their meal to provide a take out or dine in option. If you recommend take out, you could offer a free warming beverage for the person picking up the order to signal your concern for your guests OR offer a 10% discount for pick up.

One final note:

The BCRFA and our partners at the Alliance of Beverage Licensees and the BC Craft Brewers Guild wrote to over 80 municipalities to request patio extensions and we continue to advocate actively on this file. We are confident that doing outdoor dining right is one of the keystones to ensuring that restaurants in BC continue to build business back this fall and winter. This is going to require an investment – and in COVID-19 times, spending additional money is challenging. Thankfully, outdoor dining build outs are far less costly than dine-in ones. Be realistic about what you can afford and plan accordingly.

Two final reminders:

- Make sure you have all necessary permits in place and your staff knows where they are.
- Make sure you have insurance that covers your outdoor dining space.

