

Against all odds: How 4 new small businesses in Madrid are staying afloat

Small businesses in Madrid are more at risk than ever of having to shut their doors. And perhaps the most unlucky of all are the ones that opened up just a short time before the lockdown—some only a week before.

Despite having the odds against them, these four newly-opened businesses are putting on a brave face and determined to keep their shops open and their dreams alive. Here are their stories on how they've managed to stay afloat throughout the lockdown and how they're continuing to fight the good fight. They also offer sage advice for other businesses on how to survive a global pandemic.

1. Naji Specialty Coffee



After working in the hospitality industry for 20 years—mainly in cafes as a barista—Naji Alasil dreamed of one day owning his own coffee shop. After spending months searching for the perfect place and doing extensive renovations, his dream came true when he opened Naji Specialty Coffee in the charming central neighborhood of Chamberí in January 2020.

Naji quickly grew popular with people flocking to the beautifully adorned shop to sip on delicious coffee and unique concoctions, such as lime espresso and Naji's famous pistachio latte.

Naji was only open for 40 days when Madrid went into lockdown. Obviously, this was a devastating blow after all of the time, money, and effort Naji spent to open up his dream cafe. However, he didn't lose hope.

"Of course I was sad that we went into lockdown straight away after I had opened. Nevertheless I was very happy that I

managed to open the cafe prior to the lockdown—at least I saw my dream realised. And I knew once the lockdown [was] lifted, my customers would come back. I just kept a very positive outlook altogether.”

As soon as businesses could start operating again, Naji jumped into full swing, serving takeaway coffee from 9am-9pm most days. He was one of the first coffee shops to reopen on a full-time schedule because he wanted to make up for time lost during the lockdown. Slowly but surely he’s rebuilding the momentum he had before the lockdown began.

Undoubtedly, his positive attitude and hustle were his biggest tools for getting through the lockdown and helping see Naji Specialty Coffee through to the new world.

His advice for small businesses?

Prioritize your customers and their safety, be patient, take each day as it comes, and never give up no matter the obstacle at hand (even a global pandemic!)

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2. Tidbit



Canadian business partners Shawn and Arthur had successfully been running a North American-style coffee and dessert shop in Alicante for five years when they decided to pack up and head for the big city. They moved to Madrid, rebranded their business from Canada Cupcake Café to Tidbit, and opened shop in Fall 2019.

They began acquiring a loyal customer base who would come to enjoy their array of delicious treats—largely vegan—including cookies, cakes, ice cream, brownies, and cinnamon rolls as well as specialty coffee and teas. Their reputation for being one of Madrid's best suppliers of treats (vegan and regular) was swiftly growing, and then COVID-19 brought momentum to a halt.

Arthur and Shawn were greatly concerned about their business and the economy in general, but tried to focus on moving forward instead of on fear. They shifted their focus to the takeaway part of the business and polished their online ordering system to accommodate the lack of walk-ins due to the lockdown. They also offered their products through popular takeaway services such as UberEats and Deliveroo, and in the later quarantine phases began to start up takeaway service.

Now that Madrid is no longer under lockdown, businesses are slowly coming back to life and Tidbit has once again opened its doors for customers to pop in for a treat in their tiny but cozy interior or call ahead for pick-up or an eco-friendly bike delivery.

Shawn and Arthur hope the love and support for small businesses only gets stronger, especially now when these shops that make our cities so special need it more than ever.

Their advice to other businesses during these trying times?

“Plan ahead, be aware of the time needed to recover, focus on the offer and demand in your area. This is the ‘chair swap’ game, when all businesses close, relocate or rebrand.”

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3. EatMyTrip



After finding success opening her first restaurant in Barcelona two years ago, Evgeniya Sukhacheva decided to branch out and open the second location of her trendy brunch spot, EatMyTrip, in Madrid. Evgeniya announced the opening of the second location in the beginning of March 2020—days before coronavirus sent Madrid and Barcelona into an indefinite lockdown.

Like many people, Evgeniya initially thought that the media was blowing the situation out of proportion and that normal life would soon resume. However, when it became apparent that the situation was serious and that the city would be locked down for a while, Evgeniya and her husband started to think of creative ways they could keep their business afloat.

The first idea they came up with was to start an online shop with delivery options for their Barcelona location which already had a following. Then they shifted to takeaway options before being allowed to reopen with limited capacity, a smaller menu, and a two-person staff (just them). Now, EatMyTrip's employees who were under *ERTE* (furlough) are slowly being incorporated back into the Barcelona business while Evgeniya is trying to figure out how they'll be able to open Madrid location and get it off the ground, (while also focusing on paying the rent, bills, and the loans for both locations).

Although the Madrid location remains closed indefinitely, Evgeniya hopes to be able to open it one day soon. In the meantime, the Barcelona location (C. del Consell de Cent, 378) is back to 70% capacity with more customers returning everyday.

Despite all of the adversities, Evgeniya remains positive and offers wisdom for other businesses in similar situations:

“Nothing lasts forever. We can plan something, but life can change everything. It’s [best to] take everything as it is, and try to smile at it, otherwise you will go mad. If you already created a successful business you’ll be able to do it again in the future. Just don’t lose yourself, and don’t forget about your health—it’s the most important thing.”

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4. Mazál



Tamara Cohen—originally from Philadelphia, USA—moved to Madrid in 2015 to teach English. She soon settled into a side gig baking hard-to-find American treats such as pumpkin pies and bagels and selling them to fellow expatriates before opening up an online shop to the public. Her small shop, Bruja's Bakery, quickly became the go-to place for American treats—especially bagels, which are hard to find abroad (and of good quality).

After making the spontaneous leap from English teacher to expert at-home bagel maker, she finally turned her side hustle into a full-time business with the opening of Mazál Bagels & Café in the central neighborhood of Chamberí in January 2020.

The opening of Mazál was highly anticipated and instantly a hit. The cozy brick-interior eatery would fill up fast with people eager to dive into a bagel brunch complete with mimosas

and coffee, as well as delicious challah, cookies, and cakes. However, when lockdown fell over Madrid in early March, Mazál was forced to shut its doors and think of a plan B.

Like many people, Tamara initially didn't think the situation was that serious or would last long. But as the situation quickly became grave, she became worried about her ability to pay the bills and stay above water.

Mazál was closed for a few days before they jumped into action and hired a delivery driver and started taking orders over social media, which became their saving grace. Their delivery driver, Juan Pablo, was with them for over three months, and proved integral to Mazál's survival in lockdown, covering over 3300 km doing deliveries during the three months.

Tamara says that before all of this, Mazál was primarily focused on growing as fast as possible, which meant doing as much as they could at once. However, priorities have since shifted—Mazál has now drastically simplified what they do which has helped them to stay organized and reach more people.

Although these circumstances have been anything but ideal for a new business, Tamara has remained positive, upbeat, and grateful:

“This is a strange time for everyone. At times, it's hard not to think that things might be 'weird' like this for a very, very long time. But if we have learned anything, it's to remember that things are weird for *everyone* and to take it one day at a time. You're doing great, we are all doing great, and we will get through it together. And thank you to [everyone]

from the bottom of our hearts for [the support].”

A positive attitude, gratitude, and resilience are undoubtedly a recipe for success.

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