

# *on the FLY*

## Understanding Vermont's COVID Customer: *Insights and Opportunities for Success*

December 15, 2020





**This research was conducted by On the Fly.**  
**<https://www.ontheflyvermont.com/>**

**We'd love to hear from you.**

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## Who We Are

On The Fly is an **independent, grassroots collective** of business, finance, and marketing experts **helping food and hospitality businesses navigate the COVID-19 crisis.**

We leverage an intensive sprint model to **achieve results for businesses that often take many months.**

**25+**

Experts from fields like hospitality, marketing, finance and business.

**3,500+**

Hours spent supporting Vermont businesses this fall.

**41**

Vermont hospitality, food + beverage businesses served this year.

We're proud to partner with the **Vermont Chamber of Commerce** and **Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development (ACCD)**. **We work at no cost to businesses** thanks to a grant from ACCD and the federal Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF).



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# Section 1:

## *The Survey & Our Respondents*



## Why Did We Do This Survey

On The Fly recognized **a crucial gap in information** on Vermont consumers attitudes and behaviors during this time.

We believe this data can **inform** and **inspire** action to help the hard-hit **food + hospitality industry**.

**As we talk about opportunities, keep these two things in mind.**

**Customers have never been more open to change.**

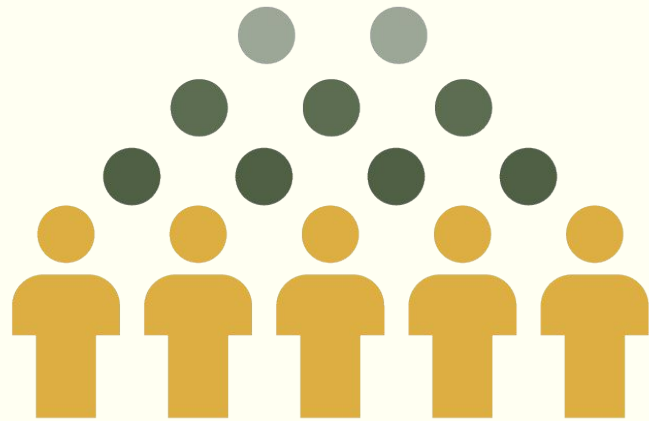
**Customers are hungry for certainty.**

Please don't forget.

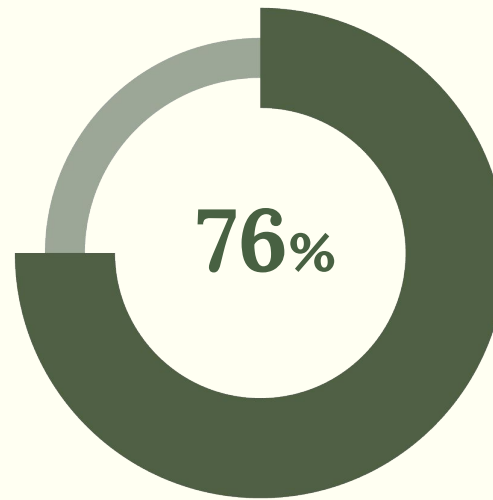
**THERE'S A LOT OF LOVE OUT  
THERE FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES  
IN THIS MOMENT.**

# Let's take a close look at the respondents

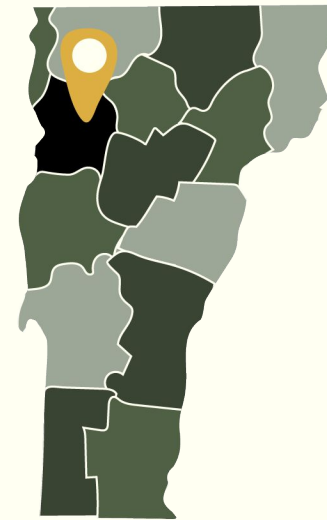
SURVEY FIELDLED ONLINE NOVEMBER 16 - 30TH.



**1,208**  
responses



Respondents who have lived  
in Vermont for 10+ years

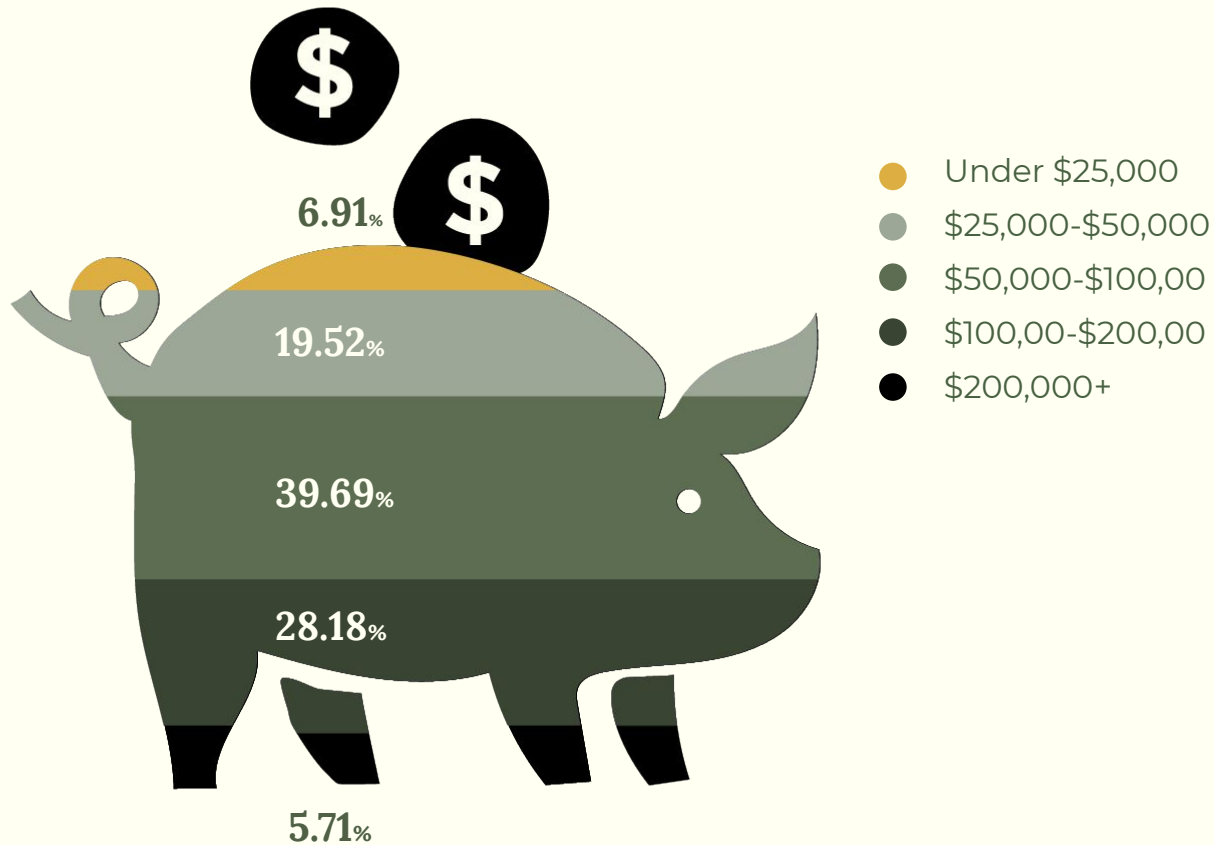


Respondents represent every  
country in Vermont with  
Chittenden County  
overrepresented.



One-third of respondents have suffered a negative financial impact due to the pandemic.

### HOUSEHOLD INCOME



Vermont reports a median HH income of \$61,973.

SOURCE: U.S. Census QuickFacts, 2019.

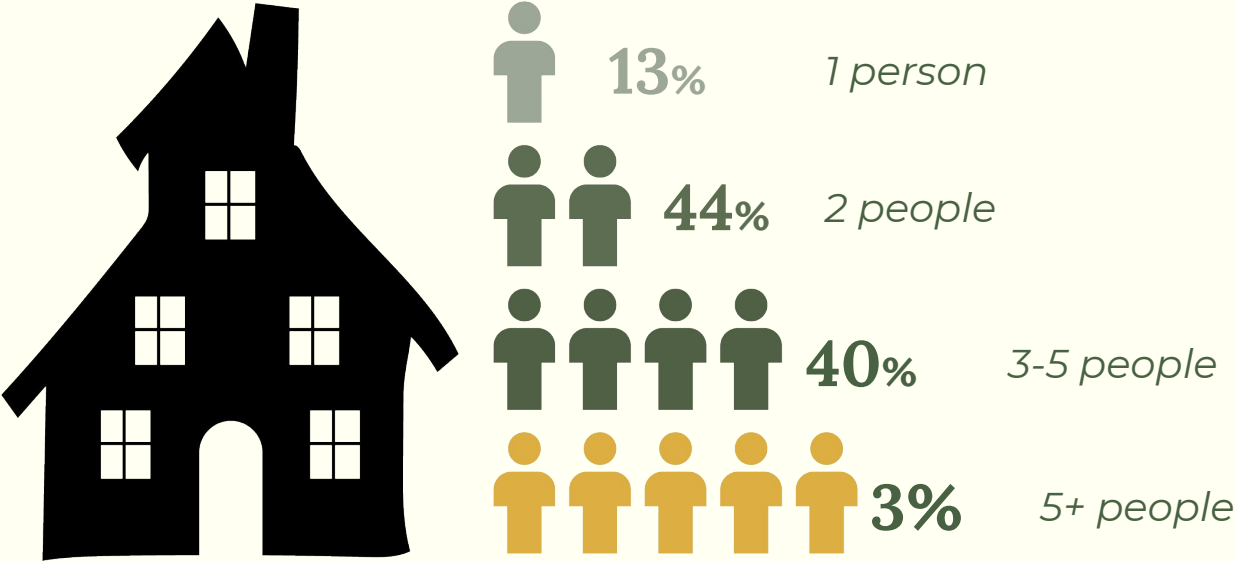
### FINANCIAL IMPACT

34%

of respondents reported a loss of income due to the pandemic, including **furlough**, **hour reduction** and **termination**.

# Respondents household size and age are well-aligned with reported facts.

## HOUSEHOLD SIZE



Vermont reports 2.3 persons per household.

SOURCE: U.S. Census QuickFacts, 2015-2019.

## AGE

Respondents median age was

# 43

which matches Vermont's reported median age.

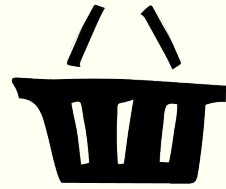
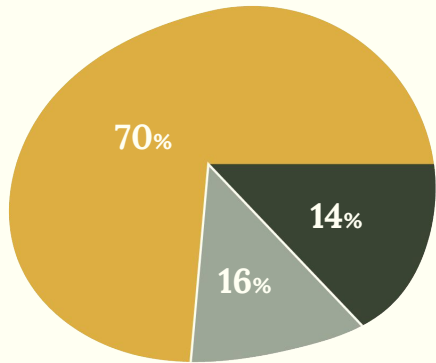
SOURCE: <https://www.healthvermont.gov/>

# Consumer spending shifts: reduced spending on away from home food and travel; greater dollars toward in-home food and beverage.



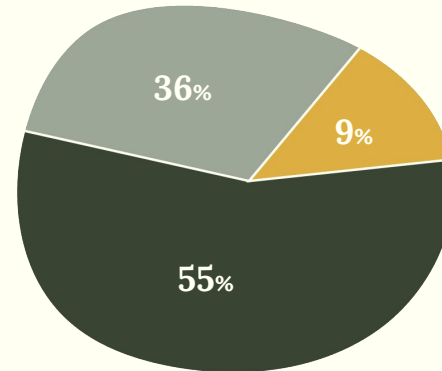
## BAR & RESTAURANT SPENDING

- Spending more
- No change
- Spending less



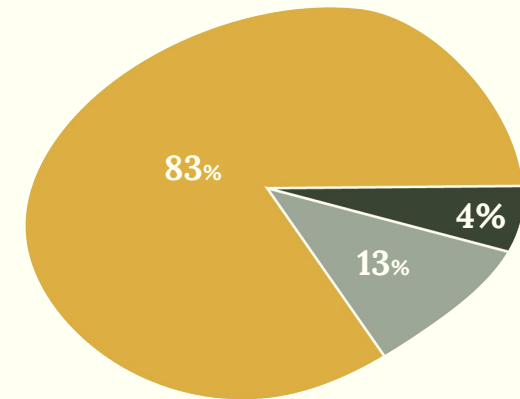
## FOOD & BEVERAGE SPENDING

- Spending more
- No change
- Spending less



## TRAVEL & ACCOMMODATIONS SPENDING

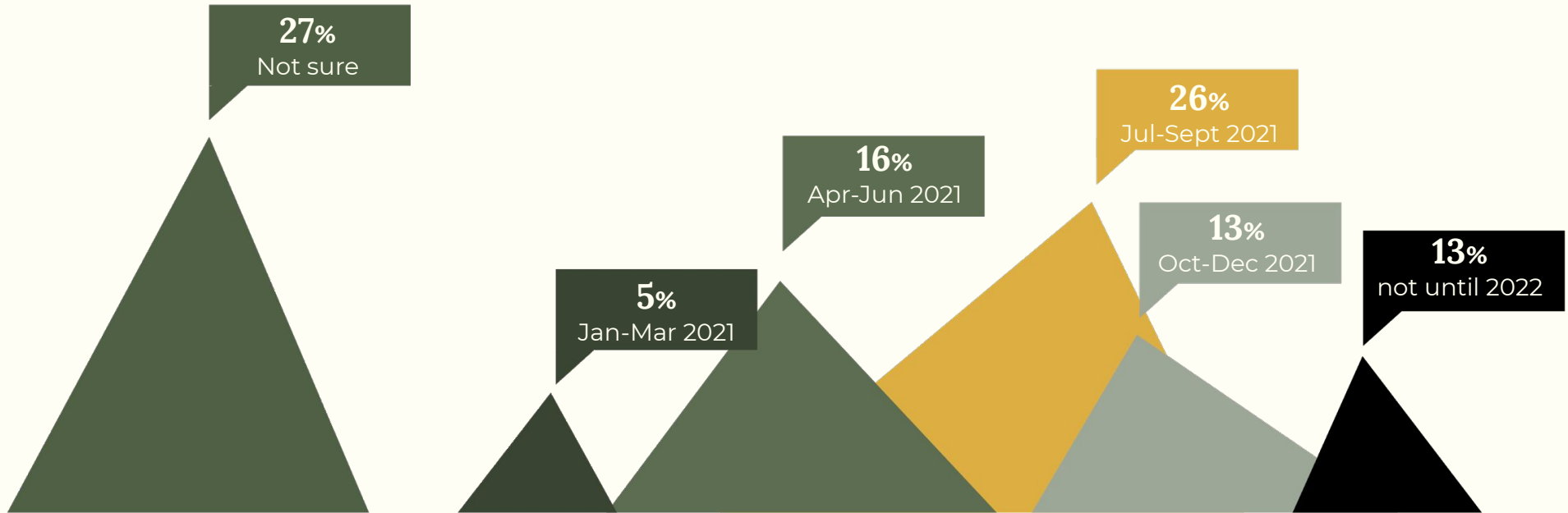
- Spending more
- No change
- Spending less



Vermonters are spending more on groceries, less on bars and restaurants – and significantly less on travel and accommodations.

# While there is a lot of uncertainty, most Vermonters expect a return to “normal” post July, 2021.

## WHEN DO YOU EXPECT TO RETURN TO PRE-PANDEMIC HABITS?



- **82%** won't feel comfortable returning to pre-pandemic habits until the vaccine has been fully distributed.
- **71%** are waiting for a drop in new cases.

## Opportunity: Offer what your customers need, in one convenient place.



- Make it easy to purchase from you--be clear about how to purchase / reserve / gift with your business



- Ask your customers what they want offered--you'll be surprised on candid and clear they can be. Then offer it!



### LEARNING:

**Vermonters are spending more on groceries, less on bars and restaurants – and significantly less on travel and accommodations.**

# Opportunity: Build trust with your Superfans and they (and their friends) will follow.



- Customers need to be told EXPLICITLY and FREQUENTLY what the new rules of engagement are for your business



- Your website is your new storefront--update your photography and copy to show you've reacted to the COVID crisis

**Worthy and COVID**

Your safety and comfort is our number one priority, along with the safety of our valuable staff.

Please review our Covid Rules before you arrive:

1. Please do not enter the restaurant if you have any symptoms of respiratory illness, including: fever, cough and / or shortness of breath.
2. Each guest must wear a mask at all times, except when they are at their own table.
3. Everyone must check in with the host before entering. The host will direct you.
4. ***For winter: please be prepared to wait in your car. We do not have an indoor waiting space.***
5. Please maintain a 6-foot-distance from other guests not in your party.
6. Respect and kindness during these trying times and especially to our staff is much appreciated.
7. Visiting from out of state? Please follow Vermont guidelines before visiting us. [Cross State Travel Information can be found here.](#)

## LEARNING:

Uncertainty has lead to distant visions of when we will return to “normal.”

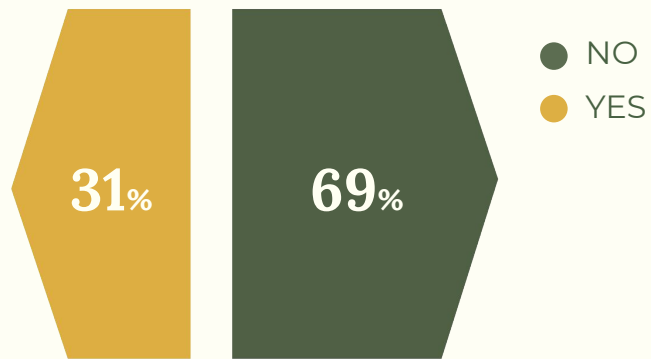


## Section 2:

# *Travel & Accommodations*

# 1/3 of respondents report overnight travel for pleasure within Vermont.

HAVE YOU TAKEN AN OVERNIGHT TRIP FOR PLEASURE WITHIN VERMONT SINCE THE PANDEMIC STARTED?



- About **1/3** of respondents report overnight travel for pleasure within the state since the pandemic started.
- Of overnight trips within Vermont: **34%** stayed in a hotel, B&B or inn, **19%** stayed in a vacation rental such as AirBNB, **22%** stayed with friends or relatives, **24%** camped.

HOW MUCH DID YOU TRAVEL (DAY TRIPS OR OVERNIGHT) FOR PLEASURE WITHIN VERMONT, COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEARS?





# ½ of respondents traveled out of state, primarily for leisure.

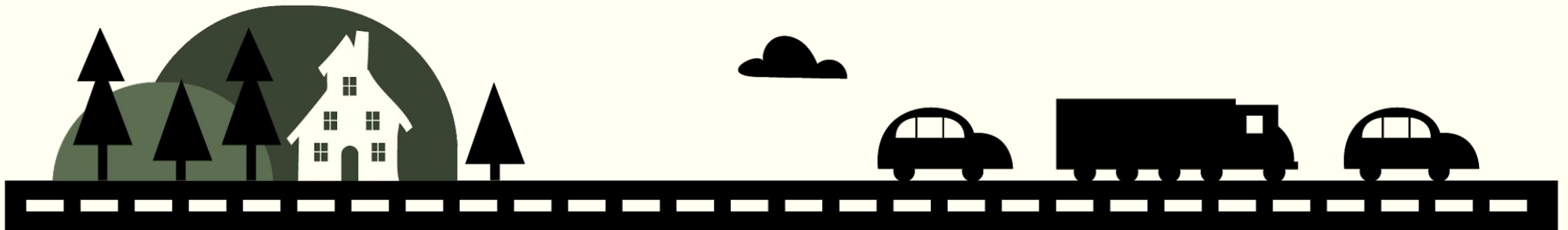
## HAVE YOU TRAVELED OUT OF STATE SINCE THE PANDEMIC STARTED?

47% stayed close to home.

53%

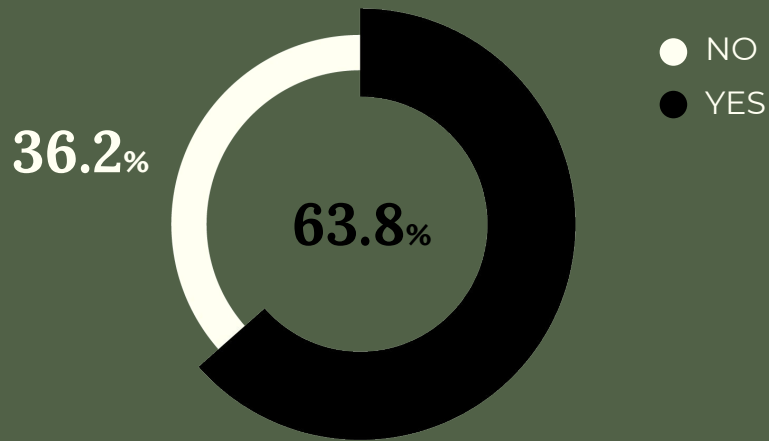
have traveled out of state (compared to just 31% that have traveled within Vermont for pleasure).

- Of those who traveled out of state, **62%** traveled for leisure while only **12%** traveled for business.
- Non-traditional accommodations were more popular for out-of-state travelers: **45.3%** stayed with friends or relatives, **20%** stayed at an AirBNB or camping, and just **26%** opted for a traditional hotel.

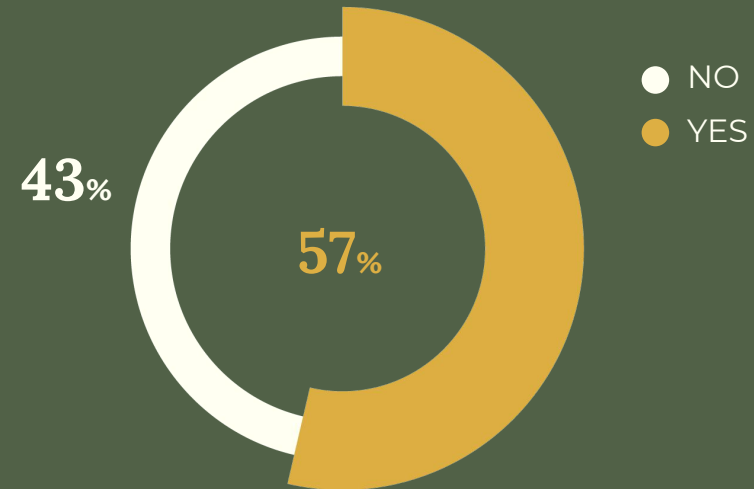


## Vermonters are optimistic about future travel plans.

DO YOU PLAN TO TRAVEL FOR PLEASURE  
WITHIN VERMONT IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS?



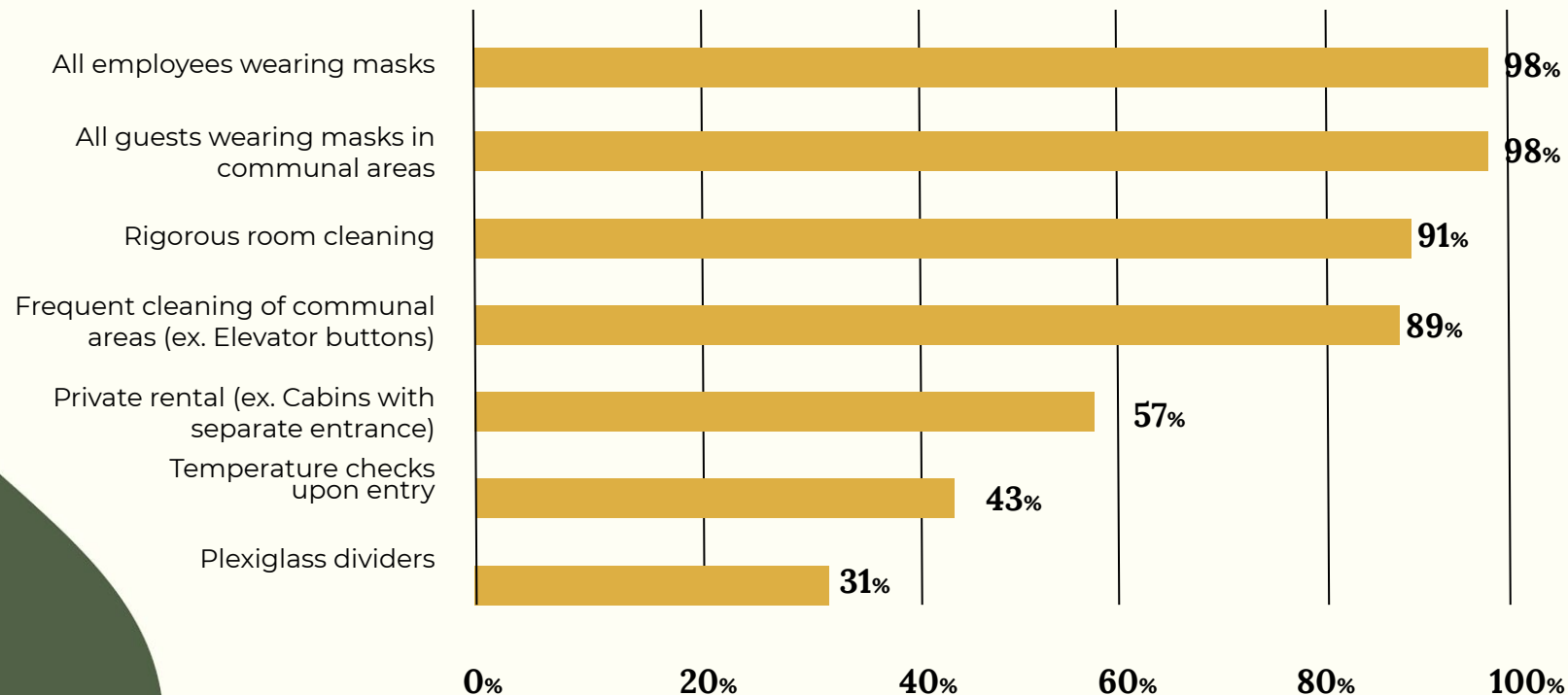
DO YOU PLAN TO TRAVEL OUT OF STATE  
IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS?



- Respondents were optimistic about future travel plans, with well over half planning trips both within Vermont and out of state over the next year

40% of respondents won't feel comfortable at a hotel during the pandemic. The rest expect rigorous precautions.

### WHICH PRECAUTIONS WOULD MAKE YOU FEEL SAFE AT A HOTEL?



40%

of respondents won't feel comfortable at a hotel during the pandemic.

"For overnight stays, I would feel comfortable with an AirBnB to ourselves, or cabins on a property. Overnight stays without much shared indoor space would be critical."

## In their words: travel & safety.

“[We’d love to see] discounts for Vermont residents.”

“[We are seeking] driving distance, knowing safety measures and how many people will be in the location I'm traveling to, flexible cancellation or refund policies, having back-up plans if I arrive somewhere and don't feel safe (*eg a park for a picnic if a restaurant seems unsafe*)”

“Open to it if there are activities to do in the area we are traveling. Would love an activity list of local events or offerings!”

”

**I feel very comfortable staying at hotels. The reason we are not traveling is more related to not being able to do activities once we get to our destinations (*restaurants, breweries & attractions not open or difficult to get into because of reduced capacity*).**

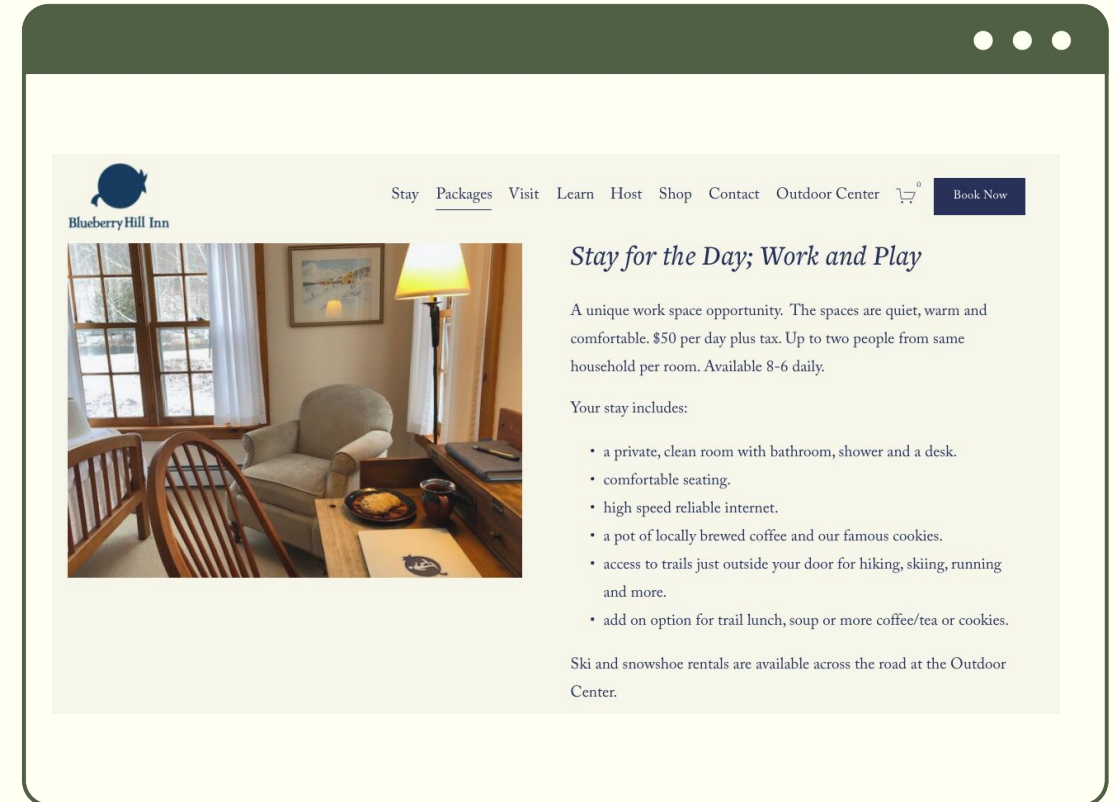
# Opportunity: Build trust by showing AND telling what you have to offer guests.



- Collaborate with nearby businesses to package and cross promote offerings



- Comfort with outdoor dining translates to outdoor activities--lodging is uniquely positioned to capitalize on this daytripper demand
- Again, make those COVID policies clear at every step of engagement with your customer



## LEARNING:

Guests want a clear, easy-to-understand picture of what it means to travel.

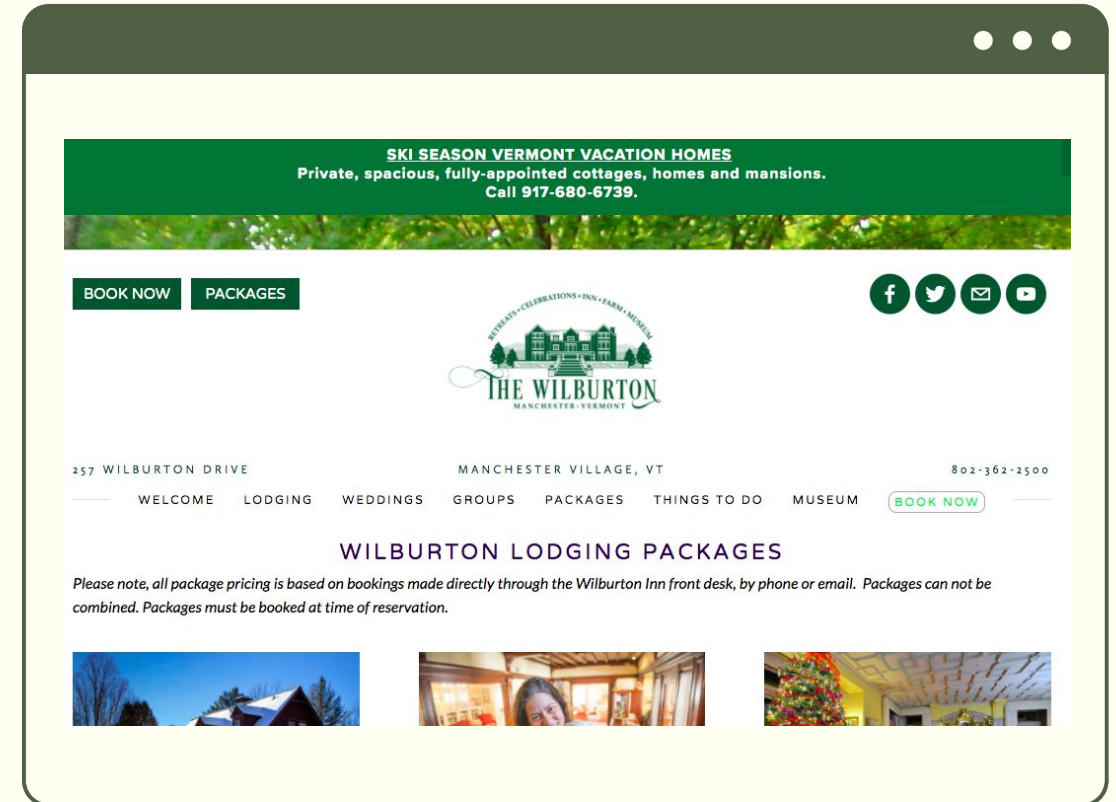
# Opportunity: Be the Ultimate Vermont Getaway.



- Highlight private access options like camping (it'll be back), cabins, private entrances, etc



- Offer special packages or deals for Vermonters, and promote them like hell--these are likely new customers for you
- Tell people they can book/reserve for 2021--many aren't considering it yet



## LEARNING

**Vermonters are looking forward to future travel in 2021, especially within their own state.**



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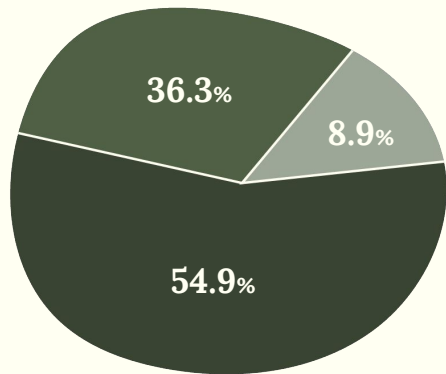
## Section 3:

# *Food & Beverage*

# Grocery Spending



## HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC CHANGED YOUR HOUSEHOLD'S GROCERY AND ALCOHOL SPENDING HABITS?



- Spending more overall
- No change to spending
- Spending less overall

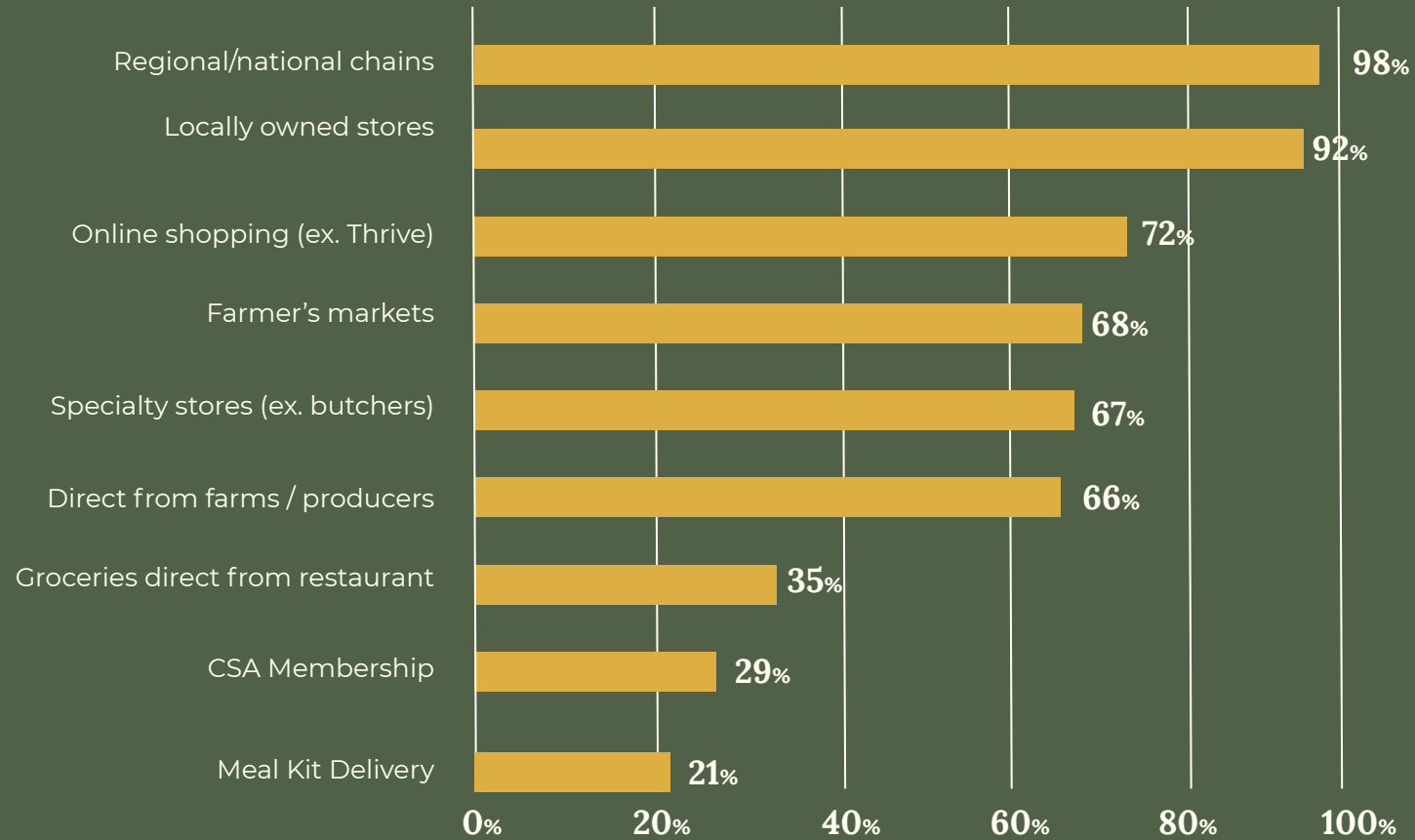
- **54.9%** of respondents have increased their grocery spending since the pandemic started.
- When asked how their shopping habits have changed, respondents reported increased spending at online stores like Thrive and Amazon (**35%**) and local grocery stores (**31%**).
- Farmers markets (**33%**) and specialty food stores (**18%**) saw the biggest decreases in spending.

- Meal kit delivery and CSA memberships were not popular with respondents, with **20%** or fewer respondents using either service before or during the pandemic.
- “Anything with contactless options and same day pickup/delivery will be my go-to until this is all over.”



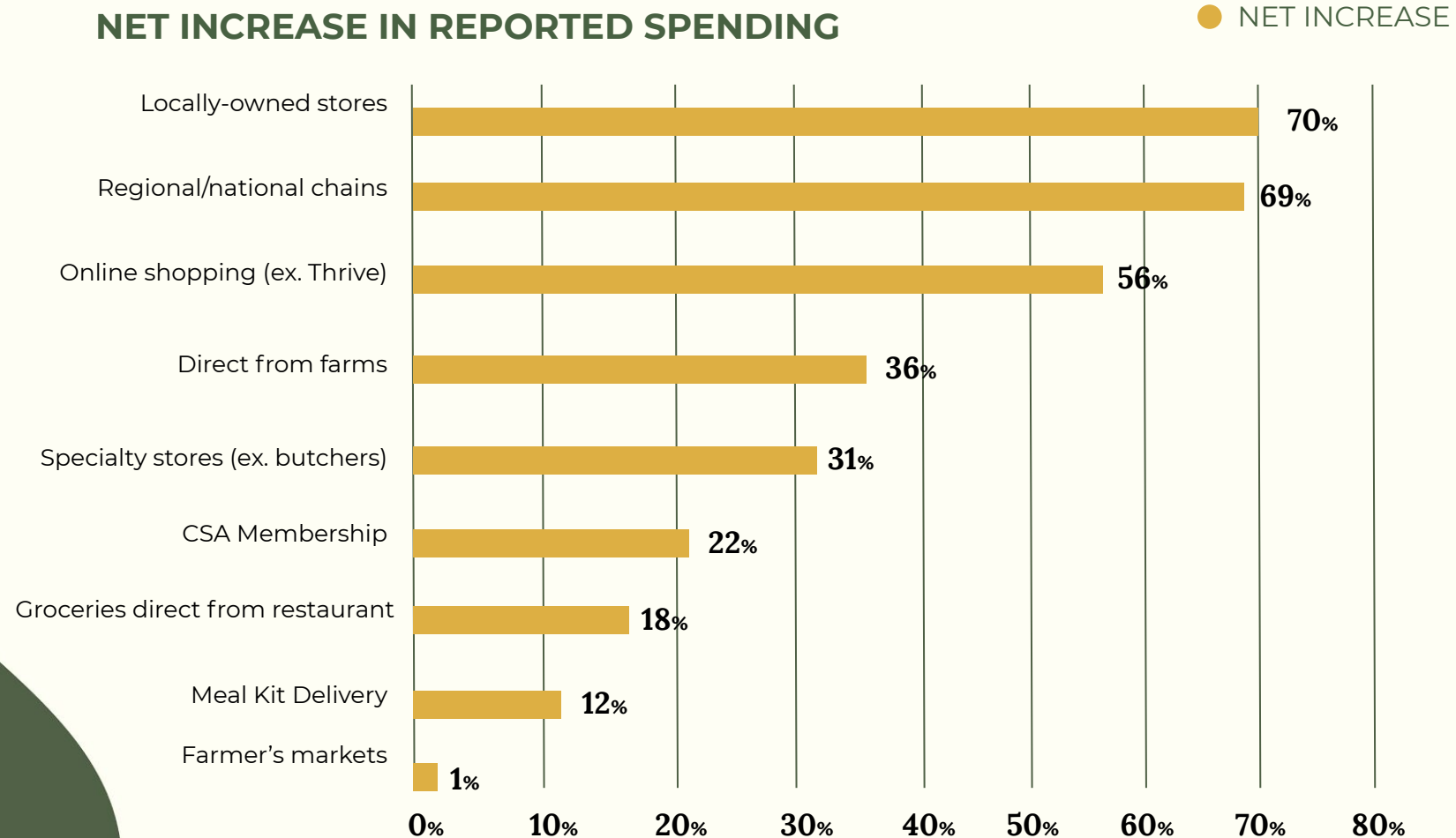
55% of respondents are spending more on groceries and are shopping across many retailers.

### WHERE ARE PEOPLE SHOPPING?



On average, respondents shop for food across **3** different types of retailers.

# Respondents report the greatest spending increases with locally-owned retailers.

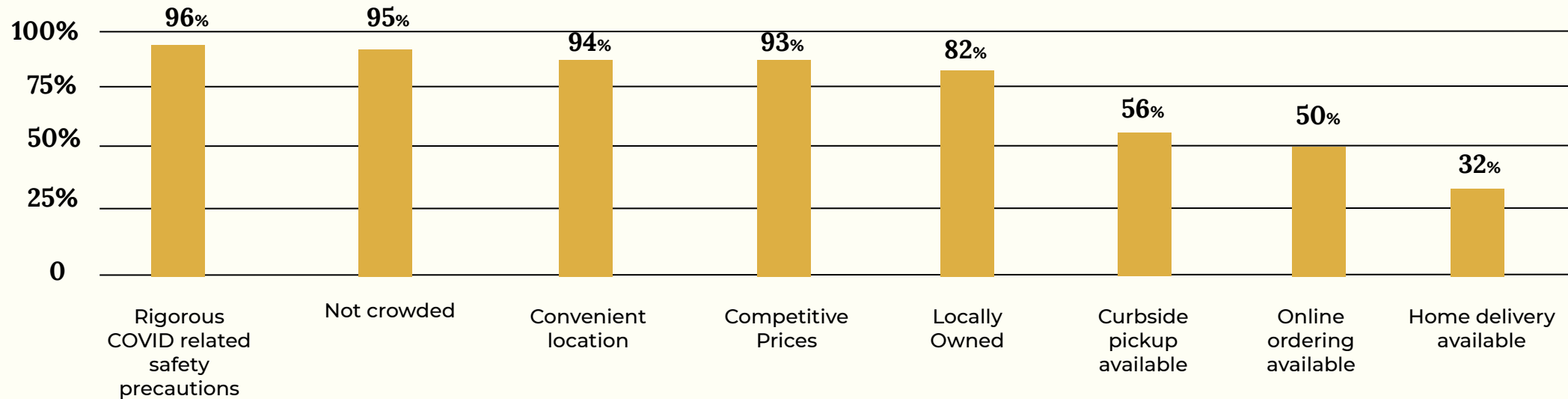


“While I would like to shop more at locally owned (and do buy some items from local farmers) - it is easier and faster to stop at the Berlin Shaws where I know I can quickly find what I need.”

# Consumers are seeking safety, convenience and value when shopping.

AS A RESULT OF COVID, HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING QUALITIES WHEN CHOOSING A GROCERY RETAILER?

● IMPORTANT

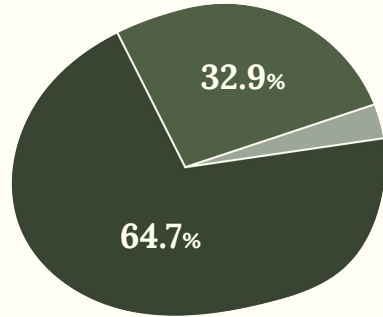


**56.8%** have used curbside pickup, home delivery or online grocery ordering since the pandemic started, though they did not mark these as important considerations when choosing a store.

“I prefer shopping at a grocery store that enforces the mask mandate. I also shop at off hours in the evenings so I have as little contact with other shoppers as possible.”

# Cooking at home: a blessing and a curse.

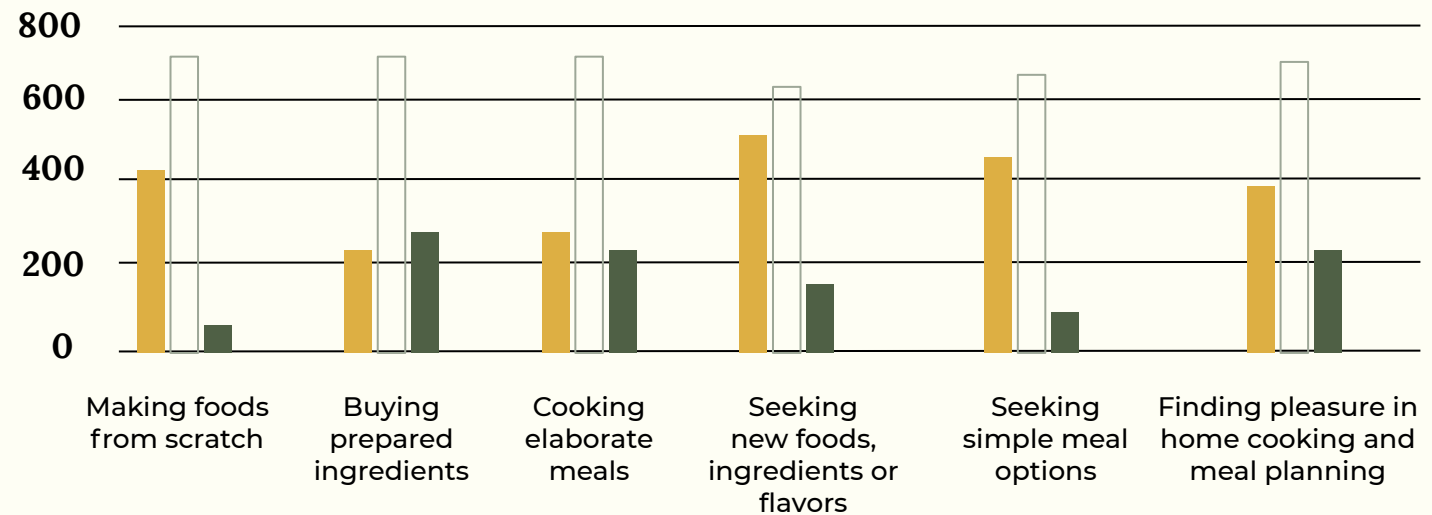
## ARE YOU COOKING MORE OR LESS THAN BEFORE DURING THE PANDEMIC?



- More than before
- The same as before
- Less than before

## AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC HOW HAVE YOUR HOME COOKING HABITS CHANGED?

- More
- The same
- Less



“Cooking has been a creative and collaborative activity for our household!”

## In their words: shopping for food.

“Appreciated being able to purchase some staple goods (flour, yeast) from a local bakery who branches out when there were shortages elsewhere!”

“We are enjoying picking up prepared meals from places like Shelburne Farms and Philo Ridge. We never would have done that before.

“I wish delivery was more widely available and affordable. Especially for local foods and coops. [I am] immunocompromised; going into a busy area...no way, unfortunately.”

“So tired that we order out a lot more and to support our local restaurants.”

”

**I used to go to the store to grab the ingredients to make whatever I was planning on making that day. Now I try to shop for 2 weeks at a time. That's changed what I buy and the meals I prepare.**

## Opportunity: Be the break from cooking at home.



- Offer takeout options that
- Up your average ticket: add on options for the next day (e.g. *scones and fresh juice for the morning, easy lunch for two*)



- Offer items easy for new home cooks (*sauces, grouped displays/packaged for specific meals or dishes*)

**SANTINI CATERING**  
—by Chef Susan LeClair—

Santini Catering has been serving Northwest Vermont delicious, home-cooked meals direct from our kitchen to your events. Bringing Chef Susan's unique sensibility, style, and taste to each affair, our menus stand out for highlighting the natural tastes of fresh food.

During COVID-19 we are offering Weekly Meals for pick-up and enjoyment at home. Click below to order this week's menu!

[Order Santini Catering To-Go!](#)

### LEARNING

Vermonters are cooking more, and making less trips to do so.

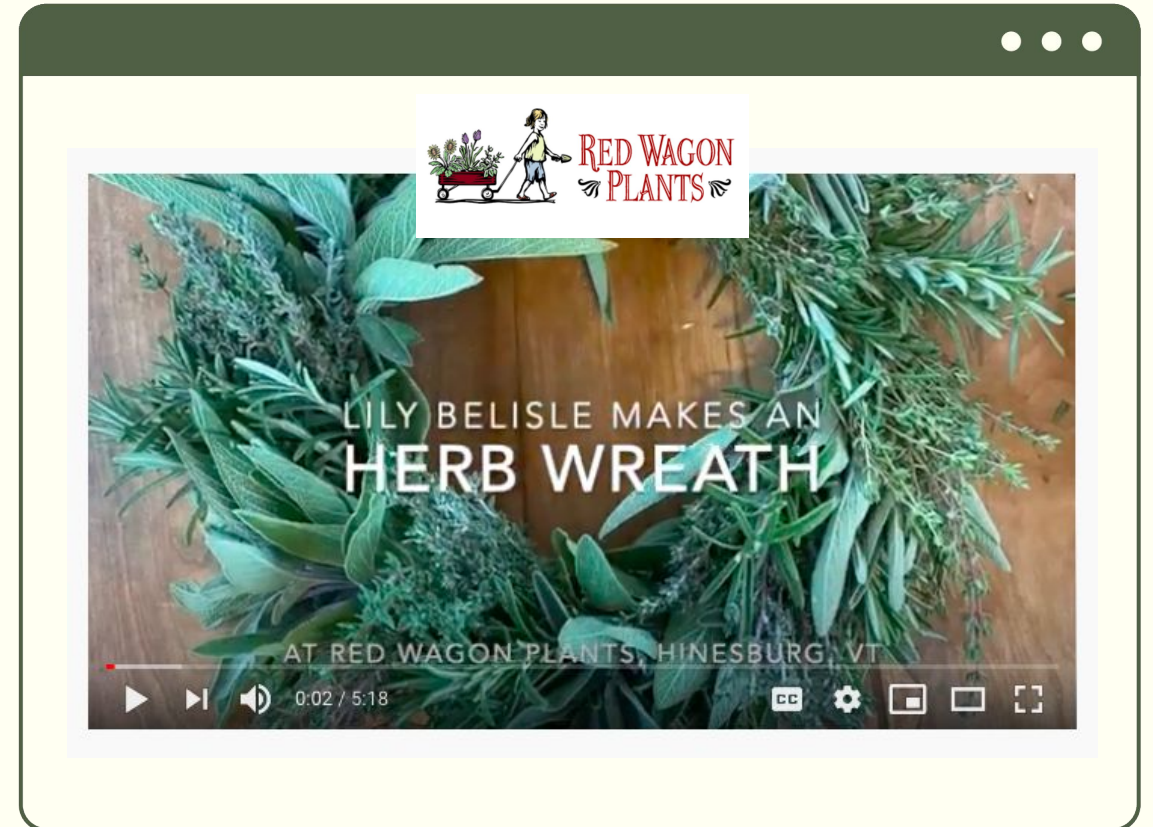
## Opportunity: Offer escape through food-related activities.



- Make takeout experience as appealing as dine-in with perks like small bites while you wait, playlists, or outdoor fires



- Offer activities that capitalize on this need: wreath making, cooking classes, cocktail classes, outdoor dining adventures



## LEARNING

**Significant interest in adventure + discovery through food.**



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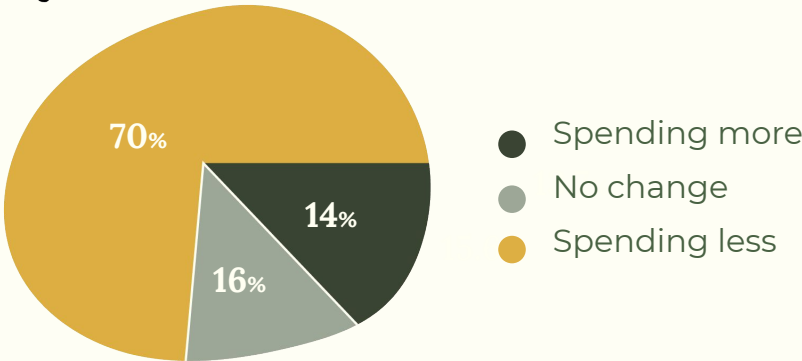
## Section 4: *Restaurants & Bars*



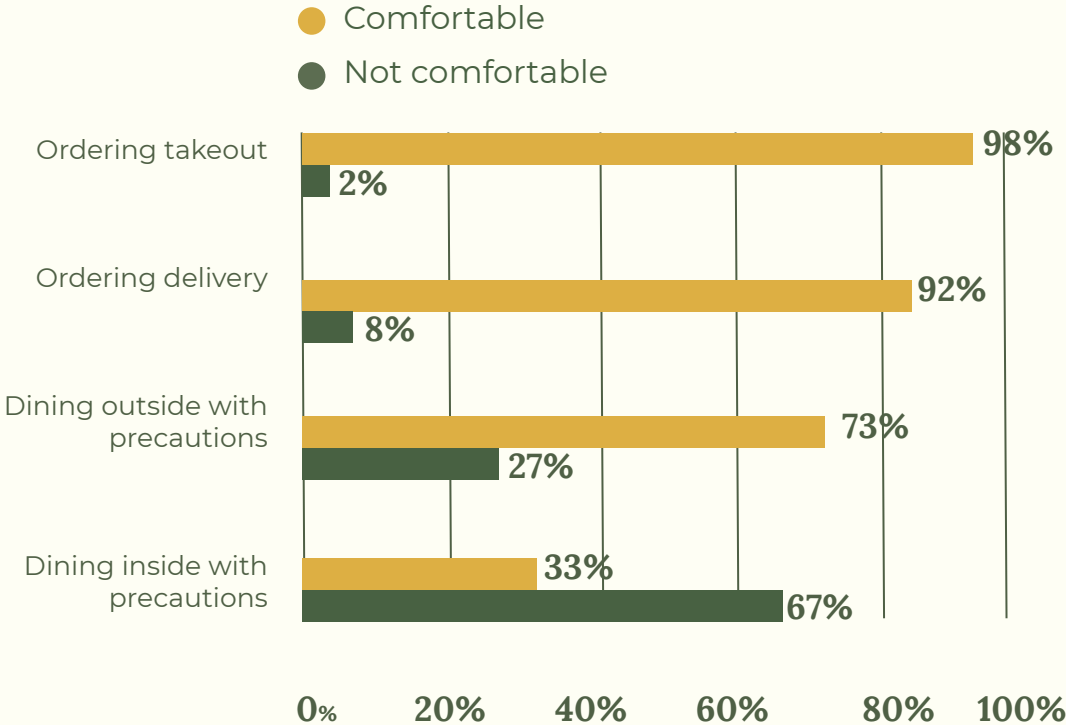
# Diners are spending less and express discomfort with in-person dining.



## BAR & RESTAURANT SPENDING

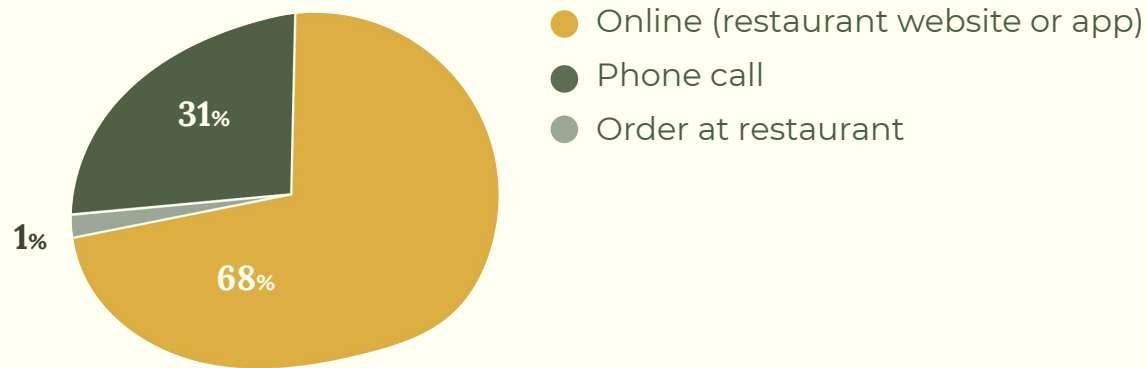


## COMFORTABLE WITH DINING SITUATIONS



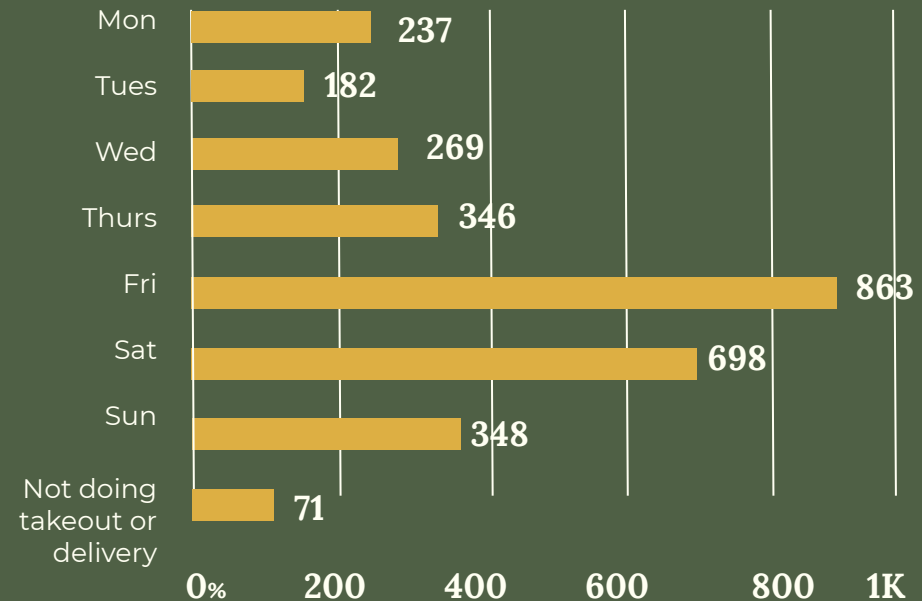
# Takeout is the most popular dining option with 57% ordering 1/week.

## HOW DO YOU PREFER TO ORDER TAKEOUT OR DELIVERY?



## WHAT DAYS ARE YOU MOST LIKELY TO ORDER TAKEOUT/DELIVERY? PICK UP TO 3.

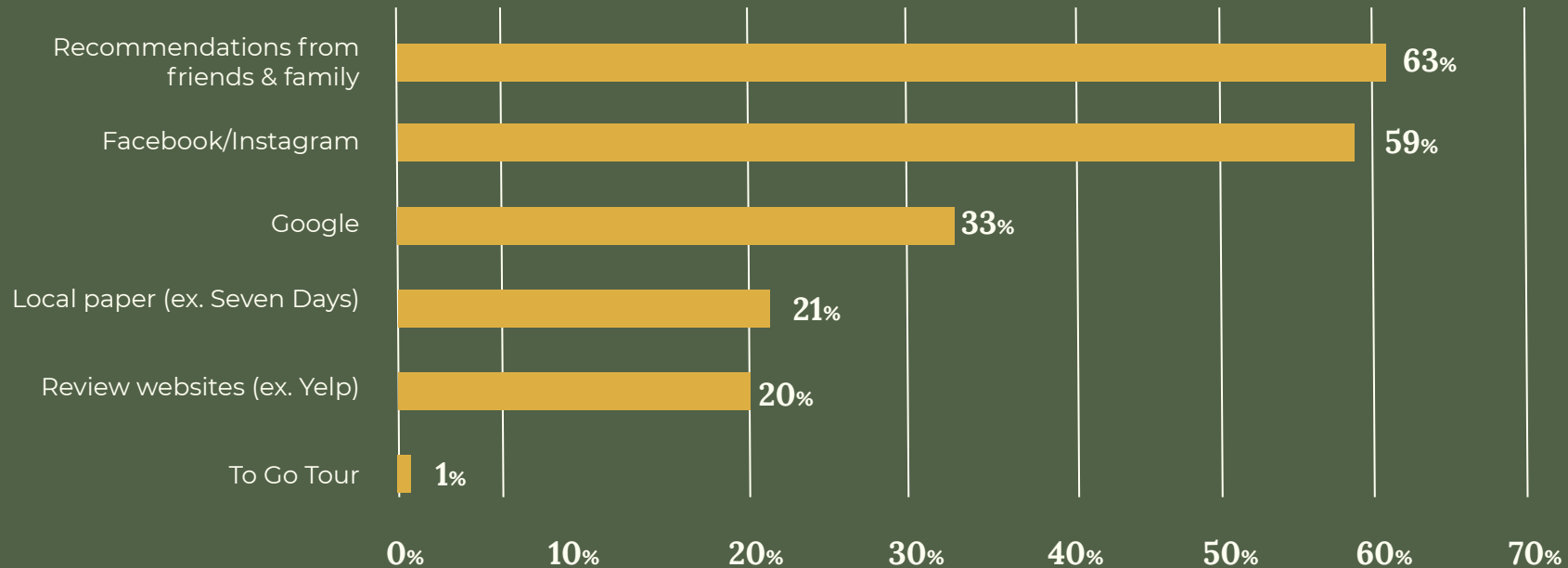
1,208 responses



- When it comes to ordering takeout, Thurs – Sun are the most popular days.
- **66.8%** prefer to order takeout online, vs. **30%** over the phone and just **1%** in person
- Dinner is the most popular meal for takeout (**72.4%**), with lunch a distant second (**17.2%**)

# Word of mouth and digital channels are critical to spreading the work about restaurants.

## RESTAURANT RECOMMENDATIONS



- **63%** of respondents seek out new restaurants based on word of mouth recommendations
- Social media is also a popular resource, with **59%** turning to Facebook and Instagram for recommendations, including the increasingly popular “To Go Tour” group
- “I drove to new places more in VT, and I got take out more often than dining in. We referred to Seven Days' Staytripper publication a lot.”

## In their words: restaurants & bars.

”

Since we are getting takeout less frequently, we are willing to pay more for it, add on extras (dessert or cocktails), and are ordering from places that provide things we can't or won't make at home...

“I love what Homestyle Hotel is doing for the winter - renting out their lodging rooms as private dining rooms. I also would eat outside - I've seen restaurants build private greenhouses. Love being able to get fancier takeout and cocktails...

“[We love] deals on food (i.e. Pizzeria Verita's BOGO pizza deal on Wednesdays), interesting food specials, nicely plated takeout.”

“Outdoor dining with lots of heat lamps. I'm not ready to eat inside.”

“Clear expectations as to what the table atmosphere will look like, precautions they're taking.

# Opportunity: Amp up that takeout game.



- Invest in online ordering for takeout and delivery (as feasible)
- Your online ordering needs to look and feel compelling; incorporate discovery into featured items
- Edit your menu to include only takeout items that travel or reheat well
- CHEERS! Thoughtfully add in alcohol options and up your guest average
- Up your prices to include the new costs of takeout packaging & service



## LEARNING:

Takeout > Dine-in.

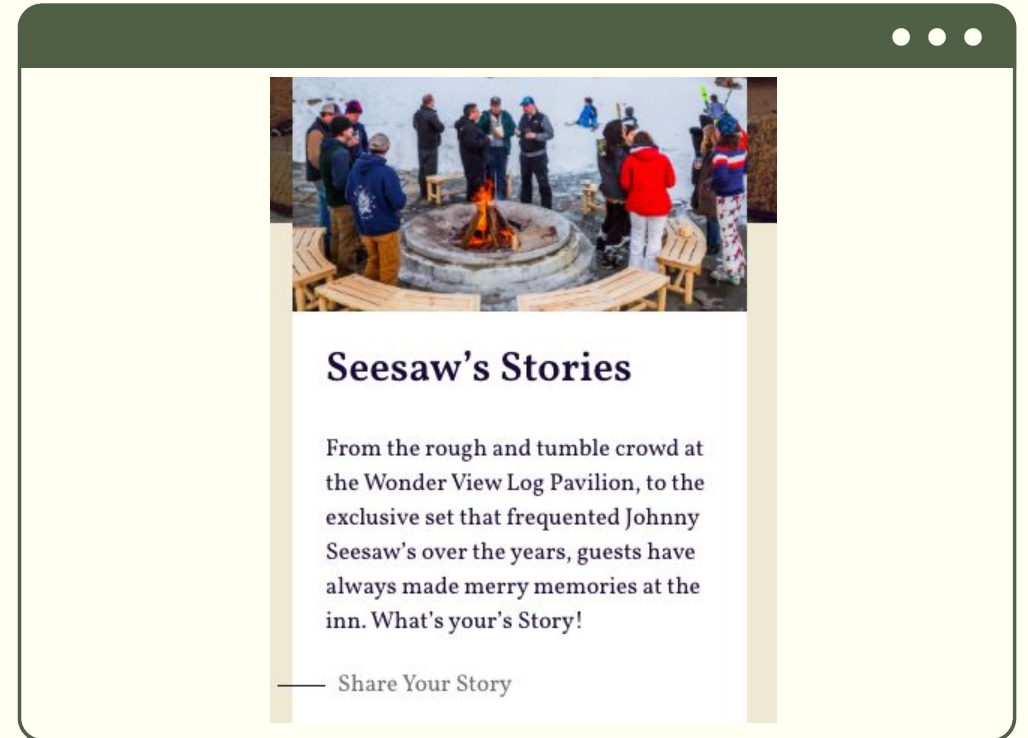
# Opportunity: Be the one everyone is talking about...because you asked them to.



- Happy customers are your best **referrals**--engage them to spread the word through their own storytelling on **social channels, Front Porch Forum, etc.**



- Ask for testimonials, then share them on your website and social
- Create a loyalty program that rewards your top customers, who are likely the ones who are keeping your lights on



## LEARNING:

Discovery is happening through friends and social media.

# Opportunity: Diversify your revenue streams and price points.



- Offer adjacent dining categories (breakfast, lunch, to go dinner) that you may have not previously
- Meals for 4 offer weeknight solutions for families (implement pre-order policy for anticipated income)
- Have clear visual and written communication around new offerings (people need to SEE it)

The Arcadian



## LEARNING:

Have a clear value proposition; speak to Vermonters with reduced incomes by offering competitively priced and differentiated options.



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# Parting Thoughts



# What do consumers need from us?

1.

CLEAR  
COMMUNICATION  
ABOUT SAFETY

2.

CARE & COMFORT  
IN UNCERTAIN  
TIMES

3.

A BREAK FROM  
THE PANDEMIC ROUTINE



**Thank you.**