



Chance Café is a bubble tea and coffee shop located in Vancouver's Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood. Since opening in 2017 Chance Café has been a hub of community activity and owner Corina Li is constantly working to increase community engagement and involvement. In the summers the cafe throws block parties, movie nights, and even has a selection of board games available at the shop for customers to play year-round. They also celebrate the community with a themed mural on the outside wall of the cafe. This year, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the theme was community strength and resilience, embodied in the phrase, "We Bloom Together". Corina emphasized the importance of community strength and togetherness "because every year we kind of give back since we've been open. We give back to the community in some shape or form and we have this. So, this [mural] is what we came up with, it's called We Bloom Together."

Running a Sustainable Café

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Chance Café used reusable 'for here' cups, straws, plates, and cutlery as the default option for customers who chose to eat or drink in the cafe. The homey atmosphere of the cafe encouraged customers to sit, play a board game, and eat and drink in the cafe all while reducing the use of single-use disposable packaging. For customers that wished to 'grab and go' the cafe encouraged customers to use reusable, refillable bubble tea cups and metal straws that can be purchased in store. When customers bring a reusable bubble tea cup, they save \$1 or get a free size upgrade. For food take-out items, they chose to use paper wraps instead of plastic. For customers that did not want a reusable take-out cup, the cafe opted for sturdy plastic cups for beverages that could be reused at home. The cafe also makes sure food scraps are not forgotten and collects them for composting. They also offer their coffee grounds to local community gardens or customers who want to use in their own gardens.

Adapting to COVID-19



DIY Bubble Tea

Chance Café was initially closed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but still wanted to offer bubble tea to their customers who are self-isolating at home. With motivation, encouragement, and help from Carrie Lai of Reusable Bubble Tea Cup, Chance Café started making do-it-yourself (DIY) bubble tea kits. It was a truly a team effort. Corina attributes the success of the kits to the support that she had from Carrie and the Chance Café staff team (Jessie Vo and Anna Hoang). Its simplicity was its biggest success. Chance Café offered their teas, syrups, flavour powders, and toppings to their customers with simple instructions on how to prepare bubble tea at home. The kits also enabled customers to customize their drinks, for example by varying the sugar or milk/milk substitute according to their taste, or trying new flavour combinations. "So, for us to kind of get a DIY kit to them and they can really learn and have fun with it at home, that's been a huge positive," Corina asserted.

The cafe also shared its recipes for various drinks available at the cafe that could be made with a DIY kit. This was important for the cafe to acknowledge people unable to come to the cafe should still be able to have the full bubble tea experience like everyone else. Corina added, "And we share our recipes, so people are not missing out when they can't go out!"

While there was some risk to giving away their "trade secrets", even with the increase in sales of the bubble tea kits, the cafe still had many customers electing to come in person to the cafe to pick up a quick drink. Some people still wanted to come into the cafe because it's easier than preparing drinks while others wanted to pop in to just say hello.

Going Online

One of the biggest challenges for the cafe was creating a website to keep up with online order requests. The idea started because community members were contacting Corina to order bubble tea to go to support the business when it had to close initially. At first the cafe only had ordering through Instagram and phone, but they wanted to create an easier to use platform for customers. Despite it being "really challenging for me because I'm not really tech friendly," Corina created an online ordering site and has benefited from using this platform to sell the DIY bubble tea kits, beverages, and food. Online ordering also minimized the time that each customer spent in the cafe by enabling a pick-up system.

Adaptations for a Small Space

In the small space of the café several changes were made to keep both customers and staff safe and satisfied. To ensure that proper social distancing took place and to reduce café crowding, only 6 people are now allowed in the café at one time. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, they had capacity for up to 16 people inside. The café no longer has tables set up inside and only offers takeout options. Guests can sit at the couple outside tables but may not congregate inside the café.

The café installed a custom plexiglass barrier at the ordering window to separate staff and customers for an extra level of protection. They also increased sanitization and started wearing gloves for all tasks. The café hours reduced from 9am-8pm every day to 11am-5pm due to a combination of lower in-person sales, enhanced cleaning protocols, and the loss of some staff who moved back home when the COVID-19 pandemic began.

While outside seating has worked well in the summer months, Corina worries that not having inside seating will decrease café visits as the weather gets cool and rainy.



"I'm a little bit nervous come wintertime and when the rain comes that would definitely affect things for sure."

Staying Sustainable



Continuing to work towards their sustainability goals was another big challenge for the café during the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased use of gloves, and cleaning supplies meant higher investment costs as well as more waste generated by single-wear items. The café has cut down on some of this waste by encouraging staff to wear reusable cloth masks. The café also sells locally-produced fabric masks in the store. Since the café is closed for inside dining, they are using more take-out packaging like plastic cups and paper bags. However, unlike other businesses that stopped serving beverages in reusable cups due to COVID-19, Chance Café decided to continue refilling reusable cups. To offer this service safely, the café asked that all cups be brought back clean and without the lid on so the staff can simply pour the drink in and minimize surface contact. Corina elaborates, "You know making sure that it's cleaned and sanitized, and we have to also make sure that we're wearing the proper gloves and using paper towels to accept it back and to handle their things safely as well."

"We have our mugs and for here cups and drinks and our food as well like plates and everything. But everything now like we kind of had to do like a takeout system because there's not much seating here."

The Importance of Community

Local businesses have a symbiotic relationship with the communities that they serve. Besides creating 4.6 times more economic impact in the local economy than multinationals¹, they are more likely to offer support to their community at times of need. Residents of the community are more connected to local businesses and can help keep them open in economic downturns.

Giving Back

When the café closed initially in March 2020, they had an excess stock of coffee beans that they didn't want to go to waste. They decided to donate their coffee supply to the Vancouver General Hospital and BC Children's Hospital as their contribution to the doctors, nurses, first responders, and other essential staff working tirelessly to help others. Since many restaurants and takeout food outlets were closed in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chance Café team worried that there was no place for tired first responders and hospital workers to get coffee or tea. Corina observed, "Like these doctors and nurses and you know paramedics are helping everybody and there's no coffee for them. Especially at night-time."

Once there was recognition of more groups of people doing donating goods and pitching in to help front-line workers the café noticed that there was a subsequent increase in these donations and good deeds. The donations also helped boost team morale at the cafe and kept the staff feeling positive through the situation. "[T]hey were like oh my god that was so worth just doing something like that and it was so meaningful for them," reflected Corina.

We Bloom Together

Closing the cafe in March when the COVID-19 pandemic started to peak in BC was a difficult decision for Corina. The cafe had seven staff employed at that time and many headed home when travel restrictions were put in place. Luckily, the cafe had an incredible support system in the surrounding community with concerned customers and other small businesses such as Reusable Bubble Tea Cup. Lots of people reached out to the cafe offering advice, help, or asked to purchase food or bubble tea to support the business while it was closed. This concern from the community was an important factor for the cafe being able to reopen and adapt to the necessary changes for COVID-19 such as online ordering and the bubble tea kits. "And I was so like I was so thankful and so appreciative that people still cared enough to reach out. Even though we were closed." Corina reinforced, "So, I think yeah I owe it to a lot of people who kind of gave me the strength."

The "We Bloom Together" mural painted outside the cafe was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is symbolic but also indicative of the real strength that community connection and collaboration create to achieve common goals. The cafe emphasizes that without the support of other businesses and the community they would have had a much harder time recovering during the pandemic. Corina also emphasizes that being strong together also means listening to the community and customers to understand what they need and be flexible to that. Businesses need to be able to try out different ideas, adjust when things don't work out, and celebrate when they do. Businesses should also reach out to others and ask for help when you need it. A good support system will be an important factor in success during the COVID-19 pandemic and future crises or emergencies.



"I think when COVID happened with everything happening we really stayed strong together and I'm just grateful for that."

Written by Jamie Varney, edited by Belinda Li and Tamara Shulman. Thank you to Corina Li for sharing insights and experiences from Chance Café.
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¹ The economic impact of local businesses. Dec 2019. <https://silkstart.s3.amazonaws.com/61c38e5e-0086-4492-93bb-10fd70e4f3fd.pdf>