

Most Popular

1. Houston restaurants brace for threats after sticking with masks
2. Mayor Sylvester Turner and other officials plead for cancellation of...
3. McClain: Here's an idea, trade Deshaun Watson for Kyler Murray
4. Opinion: My restaurant won't require masks and here's why
5. Galveston County expands sign-up for COVID vaccines to all adults
6. Solomon: Lies of Texas isn't about the song
7. Tomlinson: Arctic freezes aren't the worst threats to Texas
8. These Houston restaurants are sticking with masks, reduced capacity
9. In bid to shift oil w clean ener... pay gap

LIFESTYLE

'It was horrific': Houston restaurants brace for threats after sticking with masks



Emma Balter, Staff writer

March 5, 2021 | Updated: March 5, 2021 2:31 p.m.



1 of 10

Arnaldo Richard's Picos Restaurant bartender Daniel Vázquez sanitizes the countertop after customers left Thursday, March 4, 2021, in Houston. Following Gov. Greg Abbott's order lifting the statewide mask mandate and other COVID-19 restrictions, many Houston restaurants like Picos have vowed to keep those measures in place. Now they're getting threats.

Godofredo A. Vázquez, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

The past three days have been difficult for Monica Richards, a co-owner of Picos restaurant in Upper Kirby. After Gov. Greg Abbott announced he is reopening Texas on March 10, the restaurant told its customers its own COVID-19 restrictions will stay the same. Picos received many messages of support, but then it got ugly.

"It was horrific," said Richards. Picos received calls, private messages on social media and emails threatening to call U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on the restaurant's staff and saying their green cards and paperwork need to be checked. "I never imagined that they would go that far," she said, adding that Picos has "always been by the book."

Picos has been a staple in Houston for almost 40 years. Customers come for the food highlighting Mexico's distinct regions and the fan-favorite margaritas. The team will continue to operate at 75 percent capacity and require customers to wear face masks when not eating or drinking.

And Picos is not alone.

On March 2, Gov. Abbott said he is lifting the statewide mask mandate and allowing all Texas businesses to reopen at 100 percent capacity. Many Houston restaurants, bars and other businesses put out statements vowing to keep their current safety protocols in place. According to a survey conducted by the Texas Restaurant Association earlier this week, 72 percent of more than 700 members said they will keep the mask mandate.

On HoustonChronicle.com: [These Houston restaurants are sticking with masks, reduced capacity](#)

Overall, these restaurants have received an outpouring of support from Houstonians congratulating them on keeping masks and other restrictions. At Picos, Richards said the positive feedback she's received far outweighs the negative comments and threats. She's confident Picos will maintain its current level of business.

"If people don't want to comply, then they can either take their margaritas to go or come back at a different time," said Richards.

Isolated incidents

Besides the messages, Richards said she hasn't received any physical threats. Over the past few days, there have been reports of customers threatening to sue some

DIANE COWEN
Architecture and Home Design
Writer



Texas A&M garden experts answer readers' post-freeze questions

After the freeze brought by Winter Storm Uri, Houston-area readers have questions about what might live or die in their gardens.

AMBER ELLIOTT
Arts & Society Writer



Arts Picks: Elias String Quartet 'Anolla' are top

Over the past year, there have been reports of customers turning violent over coronavirus restrictions. In December, an employee at Grand Prize Bar in the Museum District was assaulted with a glass after asking a man to wear a mask who repeatedly refused to do so. He received 10 stitches for a head wound.

In a video posted to Twitter, Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo said private businesses have a legal right to mandate masks in their establishments. "Just remember that if you remain in the business after being asked to leave, you are subject to arrest for criminal trespass," he said.

On HoustonChronicle.com: [Houston brewery owners react to Abbott lifting mask order](#)

A few weeks ago in east downtown, a woman hit a manager in the face at Miss Carousel over a mask dispute. "And that was when it was still mandated," said Morgan Weber, co-owner of parent company Agricole Hospitality. His restaurants received negative comments on social media this week, but he doesn't yet know if that will be the extent of the backlash.

"This weekend will be telling," he said. "I imagine there will be a contingent of people that are going out specifically to prove a point and pick a fight about it."

Weber said he is having conversations with his staff on how to de-escalate potential situations.

Feges BBQ in Upper Kirby also received a slew of negative comments about maintaining its mask mandate. Co-owner Erin Smith said Abbott's decision puts the onus back on business owners, who are already dealing with a lot, especially during the pandemic.

"Nobody looks forward to walking up to a guest and having to ask to put their mask on because you never know what the reaction is going to be," Smith said. "We've been lucky we've always had good reactions, but one day we might not."

The general response to Feges' stance, however, has been overwhelmingly supportive, Smith said. Mask use at the barbecue joint has been good, and the staff has never had an issue with someone being aggressive in person.

Customers weigh options

As the mask issue has become controversial – and even political – over the past year, this latest development is prompting customers to take sides and decide where to patronize based on a restaurant's policies starting next week.

Sarah Weinstein, a Houston attorney, said she will not go anywhere that doesn't require masks, even though she is recently vaccinated.

"It's less about my safety and more about how I view these businesses simply not caring about their employees and the general public," she said. "Wage workers have been hit disproportionately hard throughout the pandemic, so restaurants and bars lifting all protocols, to me, says that they do not care if their employees get sick. Why would I give them my money?"

Weinstein has been sharing posts on Instagram of businesses that are keeping their restrictions, as a way to help her friends decide where to go. Even after the pandemic, she said, it will be difficult for her to return to places that are removing safety measures now, but she isn't sure yet what she'll do.

Ryan Bokros, a Galveston-based Realtor, was pleased to hear Abbott's announcement. He describes himself as a Libertarian and believes the decision over whether to enforce masks and other COVID-19 restrictions should be up to private business owners, not the government.

Bokros said he prefers not to wear a mask and favors establishments that give customers the choice. But if a restaurant he visits regularly is still requiring them, he'll respect its wishes.

"We'll patronize places that have put the responsibility in the hands of the people," he said. "We're not going to boycott anybody because they're still requiring a mask."

Weber said Agricole Hospitality is not making a political statement by keeping the mask mandate. He wants both his staff and customers to feel good about visiting his restaurants and bars, and for him, that meant following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. He hopes a vast majority of people will be respectful.

"You always hope that your community would rally around you for wanting to protect them," said Richards of Picos. "We'll see what happens."

Quizzes report the top choices

Here's what fine-arts and museum events our critics are excited about this week.

LISA GRAY
Senior Writer, Gray Matters
Founder



Peter Hotez's battle for science is a lifetime in the making

The Houston vaccine expert has spent his whole life preparing for a battle like the one he's found himself in since COVID-19 first came on the...

EMMA BALTER
Entertainment Reporter



Houston restaurants brace for threats after sticking with masks

After Texas Gov. Greg Abbott lifted COVID-19 restrictions, private businesses had to make a choice, prompting both angry and supportive customer...

JULIE GARCIA
Features Reporter



UTMB nurses deliver vaccines to patients in bitter-cold weather

Medicare defines homebound as individuals who require a "taxing effort" to leave their home to visit the doctor hospital.

LATEST LIFESTYLE NEWS

- Sewing: Trailblazing women inspire during Women's History Month
- Have recent events dented your Texas pride? If so, you're not...
- Head off masking and political disputes before guests arrive
- Truth of man's marital status is revealed after his death
- Chihuly glass works come alive in new rug collection




Written By
Emma Balter

Reach Emma on

Emma Balter grew up in Paris, France, where she got an early taste for good food and wine. She studied English Literature at Newcastle University in the U.K. and got her start in journalism as the lifestyle editor of the student newspaper. She moved to the U.S. in 2012, and spent six years on staff at Wine Spectator magazine, first as a tasting coordinator, then as an editor. She has also contributed to Condé Nast Traveler, Food & Wine, Eater, PureWow, Chowhound and VinePair, among others. Balter joined the Houston Chronicle in March 2020 as a reporter for Preview, where she covers entertainment, food and drink. She lives in Montrose with her cat, Chenin.

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

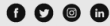


BUSINESS

Is ammo the new toilet paper? Shortage has Houston shelves bare.

The shortage spurred the creation of a Facebook group, so that gun owners could share information about where they're seeing ammo shipments coming in.

BY AMANDA DRANE



ABOUT

- [Our Company](#)
- [Newspaper Delivery Safety Procedures](#)
- [Privacy Notice](#)
- [Your California Privacy Rights](#)
- [Interest Based Ads](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Careers](#)

CONTACT

- [Subscribe](#)
- [e-Edition](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Customer Service](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Newsroom Contacts](#)