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Babalu, Brookhaven, and the road to reintroduction

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The Spell Restaurant Group has restaurants in Florida, Mississippi, and Memphis, including the Babalus and Brookhaven Pub.

On average, said Rick Spell, Babalu's alcohol sales were about 30% of business. During the pandemic, it's about the same — 29.2% — that they are doing through take-out orders.

The Babalus are located at 6450 Poplar Ave. in East Memphis and at 2115 Madison Ave. in Overton Square in Midtown. The chain, which was owned by Eat Here Brands, filed for bankruptcy last summer. The Spell Restaurant Group bought it in October, taking over five Babalu restaurants.



SUSAN ELLIS | MBJ

Babalu in East Memphis

Spell originally thought the alcohol sales at Babalu — during the pandemic — were at 50%, but he's thankful for any and all sales.

"We all went, 'God, it's amazing how much people are buying,'" Spell said of the alcohol sales.

Spell said that the ability to sell alcohol basically doubled Babalu's take-out sales.

"[In the beginning] at Babalu we were doing \$1,000 a day [in] take out," Spell said "[Now we are] averaging over \$2,000 a day and it is all because they allowed us to do alcohol. I can't thank the state enough for allowing it."

Spell plans to open all of his restaurants on Monday, May 4.

He said in Florida, there are few COVID-19 cases where his restaurants are located. But, the fear is that outsiders will bring the virus in.

In the Memphis Babalus, chairs will be removed and tables marked for seating.

His concerns with reopening are keeping his staff and customers safe, of course, and dealing with a compromised food supply chain.

"Do we make money at 50% [capacity]? We lose money," he said "But, we need to get people back working. We need to reintroduce ourselves back into the world."

Spell said that Brookhaven Pub did a brisk carry-out business, but he acknowledges that Brookhaven's draw is in its strong socializing aspect.

"We know that people will be there, but we will be doing it in the safe environment established by the government," he said. "We do not want to be the place where anyone is infected."

"We need to get back to a normal world. We've done a lot to make it as safe as possible," Spell added. "And, I applaud our government. Frankly, I think they've done a good job, particularly Mayor [Jim] Strickland. He has been very conservative and not wanting to open too soon. I applaud what he's done."

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