

eateries next door. Where is the choice for people who want to be served if the picnickers occupy all the tables? "I think it's a shame that we can't serve our customers," says Robbie Lam, Floor Manager of Red Bar and Restaurant. "We have a lot of tourists visiting our restaurant, recommended by many guides for the excellent skyline, sea breeze, harbor view, but often they can't find any available tables."

"I think that there should be more spaces that are able to qualify for outside seating, because it really does create that interactive atmosphere with the street," Zeman says. "Everybody loves to sit outside, there's just some magical thing about people watching. So Hong Kong would be a much better city if we had more seating areas whether on the street level or on a balcony."

As Squibb points out, "just imagine that in Gaia's case they employ a good number of people to serve customers outside, so it generates employment all the way to the fact that that entrepreneur who owns Gaia will generate money the Lands Department can use to invest in a real park, a real public space people can use like a Hyde Park in London, because we don't have enough usable public space."

So what needs to be done to facilitate alfresco dining? "That's a job for Planning Department and Lands Department to really look at it again, to see if there's a way we can make it simpler, to have more restaurants to be able to qualify," says Zeman. "The rules are pretty stringent because they were set up a long time ago and the mentality now is different. I think outside seating has been a success. Just look at Lan Kwai Fong: you can have drink, a meal, you can sit outside, watch people. It creates an atmosphere."

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Difficulties of F&B business

Outdoor dining is just the latest of the complications that can arise when operating in Hong Kong's F&B business. Notorious for its high rents and fickle clientele that lead a large number of enterprises to fail every year, Hong Kong is full of operators voicing out concerns of how difficult life can be.

"The F&B business is 101 ways to lose money," chuckles Zeman. Other than offering a unique product, at a fair price in a nicely decorated locale and surviving the very tough margins, an entrepreneur has to make sure his space is licensable, legal, suitable for unloading and conforms with fire and health codes. "What I always suggest is to hire professionals to look at what it is you want to apply for and go on the proper way."

"I've had a lot of calls from people who run into licensing problems because they don't understand the regulations, even though the regulations are quite detailed in the government website," says John Herbert, Director of Kelcroft, a built environment consultant that includes restaurant consulting. "But it's a lot better than it was. It used to be all individual departments who took their merry time, now they've got a one stop service."

A typical restaurant opening may take two to three months, but normally that is just rent-free

period because landlords understand that restaurants need time, says Herbert, pointing out though, that it's down to negotiation and newcomers may not understand and pay rent from day one.

With the rental contracts sorted out, licensing comes next. "The government has some basic things that it asks for, because restaurants have to be safe for the public. In fact, restaurant owners should be happy to have these licenses and know that their places are safe," says Herbert.

Being in a profession where he deals with buildings all the time, Herbert has a good understanding of government regulations, which the new restaurant owner generally is unaware of and many of them complain bitterly about. "The only reason why we have any safety today is based on past disasters. For example, the fire code is incredibly important. Sure, the system is expensive but there's also 200 years of reasons behind it."

Evidently there are many traps one can encounter when opening or operating in Hong Kong's F&B business. Even if tricky, everyday still hundreds of entrepreneurs dream of creating their own space. "People in this business don't do it for the money. It's really about passion," concludes Zeman. Just don't forget to hire a restaurant consultant. It can set you back about a fraction of the investment, which compared to the potential risks, is rather insignificant. 