



# COVID-19 PANDEMIC PRECAUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS For Reusable Food Service Ware

## TLDR? Here's the bottom line.



The CDC has confirmed no cases from surface contact and does not suggest that disposable items are safer than reusables.



Using sanitized reusable foodware for orders instead of disposables can save a restaurant on average \$3,000 – \$7,000 annually, while also preventing harm to the environment.



## Restaurant Reopening

This guide specifically addresses what you need to know regarding the safety of reusable foodware. The CDC, FDA, OSHA, and state and local authorities have issued guidelines for safety during the COVID-19 pandemic for re-opening restaurants following the end of Shelter in Place orders. These guidelines detail best practices for the following:

- Social distancing (staff and customers)
- Systems to reduce contact and cross contamination
- Hand washing
- Disinfecting surfaces
- Face coverings

The CDC's [guide](#) for how to incorporate these into your business practices should be followed, however, their considerations are meant to supplement — not replace — any state, local, territorial, or tribal health and safety regulations. **Practices should be implemented based on what is practical and acceptable to each community.**



*Your guests (even the illustrated ones) are excited to dine out again. Elevate their experience with safe, sanitary, and money-saving reusable service ware.*

## Safety of Reusables

According to the CDC, COVID-19 is mainly spread through respiratory droplets from talking, coughing, or sneezing when people are in close proximity. While surface contact is low risk, health experts still suggest that you should avoid touching your face after touching any potentially contaminated surface and that washing and sanitizing surfaces and hands reduces this risk further.

***The CDC has confirmed no cases from surface contact and does not suggest that disposable items are safer than reusables.***

The CDC has confirmed no cases from surface contact and does not suggest that disposable items are safer than reusables. It is important to note that just because single-use foodware items have not been previously used, they still may have been exposed to COVID-19, may not be sanitary, and cannot be washed and sanitized. The supply chain following disposable products is often harder to track than the path of a reusable from the sanitizing machine/dishwasher to the consumer. Properly cleaning, sanitizing, and handling reusable foodware items allows you to best control potential exposure.

## Standard Operating Regulations/Procedures

Restaurants are already required to follow strict health and safety regulations, including safety codes for washing and sanitizing food service items. The CDC's considerations for COVID-19 include additional resources for cleaning and sanitizing hands and surfaces — including reusable foodware items — with [EPA-approved disinfectant products](#). The FDA's [best practices](#) also state that hot water can be used in place of chemicals to sanitize equipment and utensils in manual ware-washing machines and recommend verifying that your ware-washing machines are operating at the required wash and rinse temperatures and with the appropriate detergents and sanitizers. **The FDA does not suggest that single-use disposables are safer than reusables.**

## To-Go & Pick-Up Orders

Social distancing is still the best way to stop the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, drive-through, delivery, curbside pick-up, and take-out are currently the best practices to prevent transmission of the novel coronavirus. This means that many restaurants will need to use a huge amount of take-out containers. Disposable foodware for take-out is not only harmful to the environment but also very costly to restaurant owners (see Appendix B). While a few pilot programs that supply, collect, and sanitize reusable take-out containers (see Appendix A) for restaurants have launched across the country, most take-out orders still rely on single-use disposable products.

For restaurants relying on to-go orders, you can save money and prevent waste by only providing accessory or additional single-use disposables **by request**, or by training your staff to ask before including accessory disposables with orders (i.e., plastic utensils, straws, napkins, condiment packages, etc.).



*To-Go drinks and drink mixes at Shakedown in Oakland, CA*

Use touchless payment options as much as possible. This is also an opportunity to ask before printing receipts to prevent contact and prevent unnecessary waste.

Some restaurants have implemented reusable systems for their take-out. Some systems expect the customer to either recycle the container or reuse in their own homes. Other systems include an additional deposit fee for the drink/meal in the reusable container. The guest receives the deposit back when the reusable container is returned. Although the upfront cost of purchasing reusable containers may be more expensive than a single-use item, it's beneficial in that it:

- Elevates the dining experience
- Reduces waste generation
- Encourages guests to return as loyal regulars or because they need to return the reusable item to the restaurant

*In some areas, grants are available for the purchase of reusable foodware through Clean Water Fund's ReThink Disposable Program. For inquiries or for technical assistance to transition to circular re-use food service ware, contact [rethinkdisposable@cleanwater.org](mailto:rethinkdisposable@cleanwater.org).*

## **Dine-In Customers**

**Using sanitized reusable foodware for orders instead of disposables can save a restaurant on average \$3,000 – \$7,000 annually**, while also preventing harm to the environment. As the CDC's guidelines demonstrate, there are completely safe practices for using reusable foodware. With small businesses struggling to stay open because of the COVID-19 pandemic, business owners can use these waste prevention practices to help their bottom line.

Replacing individually wrapped items like condiments, sweeteners, and seasonings with bulk items is also a great way to save money and prevent waste, but this also exposes these items to a lot of contact. For now, COVID-19 precautions prevent this from being an option. To avoid bulk self-serve stations, condiments can be given out upon request from a storage area of limited contact, or staff can add condiments to orders (such as pouring milk for customers) to avoid multiple people touching a container.

Shared items like menus may also be a concern. If possible, make sure they can be sanitized between uses. If this is not possible, instead of using disposable paper menus, you can encourage your customers to use digital menus or order ahead of time for contactless ordering.

- ▶ *Replace disposable foodware with reusable foodware for on-site dining (i.e., plates, bowls, trays, cups, mugs, cutlery, etc.)*
- ▶ *Eliminate accessory disposable items or make them available upon request only (i.e., straws, stirrers, food wrap, etc.)*
- ▶ *Always ask if a meal is “for here” or “to go”. If it’s “for here”, prioritize reusable foodware for the order*
- ▶ *Educate staff on the new reuse-centric policies and practices*
- ▶ *Display signage indicating changes made and customer options*

## Personal Bags and Cups

Charging for disposable cups or offering and advertising an incentive (such as a discount) for customers to bring their own (BYO) reusable cup, container, or bag is an effective way to save money and avoid single-use items. Based on a Clean Water Fund [survey](#) of 95 café owners in the eleven districts in San Francisco and 461 customers in the eleven districts of San Francisco, the most fair and appropriate charge that would motivate customers to BYO was between \$0.10 and \$0.25 per cup. These practices are still possible during the COVID-19 pandemic as long as businesses employ systems in which there is no contact between the reusable item and retail surface areas or employees. The CDC has confirmed no cases from surface contact, but this is a precautionary measure to protect workers.

## Sample COVID-19 Reuse Systems

### Sanitation Station:

A sanitation station pictured below is used at a zero-waste cafe in Oakland, CA: [MudLab](#). Customers are able to BYO Mudlab glass jars (*right*) that come with a lid and washable/reusable sleeve. The sanitation station is set up at the front entrance for customers to sanitize and rinse their BYO cup. Instead of folks bringing in their reusables for immediate use, they drop reusables in a collection station where MudLab employees or a third party dishwashing service (depending on the day) will then process/sanitize them for future use. Guests leave the cafe with a reusable jar that has already been sanitized.



### Third Party Dishwashing:

For some cities and states, third party dishwashing is necessary as the COVID-19 Pandemic continues. One way to coordinate this is to have a collection box/station outside of the establishment, and in this way, staff are protected from touching reusables until they have been professionally sanitized. Staff should always wear gloves and masks to touch reusables.

Some Third-Party Dishwashing services include:

Dispatch Goods: <https://dispatchgoods.com/home>

Dishcraft: <https://dishcraft.com/>

SudBusters: <https://sudbusters.com/>

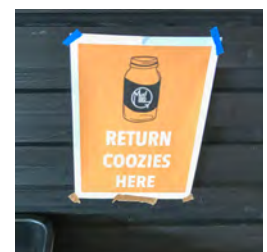
Vessel: <https://vesselworks.org/>

### In-Store Sanitation Model:

This system requires more logistics, however it keeps long-term costs down and helps create loyal regular (and returning) customers. Staff are protected from touching reusables until they have been professionally sanitized.



*In-store sanitation stations for those cities which allow customers to sanitize their own jars*



# Customer Training

## Signage:

- Signage at several locations in the store are necessary to help customers understand the new system
- Signage can be translated into several **languages**
- Signage should include **graphics** depicting the system
- Signage should seek to **gently remind** customers of the negative effects of single-use plastics on the environment
- Signage can remind customers of downstream impacts of single-use plastics

## Reminders:

- Reminders about returnable foodware systems (before ordering, during an order and before leaving) can help customers internalize the new system
- Reminders to bring back their jars should be friendly, patient, and kind

## Incentive Systems:

- Discount for bringing a reusable (staff trained to remember EVERY time)
- Small charge for using a single-use disposable cup
- “Pay it Forward System” rewards people who bring reusables with free drinks or other incentives — folks just buy drinks for the next person in line

## Collection and Reuse of Jars:

Cafes can benefit from the "return-a-jar systems" of companies such as [Straus Milk](#). They not only redeem value when they return jars, but they also position themselves as low-waste to their customers and community. Additional benefits include reduced cost of trash removal from the business. Trash hauling is expensive and milk containers are bulky!



*Straus Milk Jars ready for return (sanitized and returned to store for deposit) from MudLab.*

## APPENDIX A: Helpful Links

FoodWare Calculator: <http://www.rethinkdisposable.org/foodware-calculator>

Use this link to determine the cost of your disposables.

Cost Benefit Calculation of Disposable vs Reusable: <https://blog.get-melamine.com/reusable-vs-disposable-dinnerware-cost-benefits>

### Health Expert Statement Addressing Safety of Reusables and COVID-19:

<https://www.upstreamolutions.org/blogs/reuse-safety>

### CDC Guidance:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/php/CDC-Activities-Initiatives-for-COVID-19-Response.pdf#page=53>

### FDA Best Practices:

<https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/best-practices-retail-food-stores-restaurants-and-food-pick-up-delivery-services-during-covid-19>

### Grants For Transitioning To Reusables

Use Reusables: <http://usereusables.org/>

ReThink Disposable: <http://www.rethinkdisposable.org/>

### Helpful Websites For Plastic Reduction

How to Start a Jar Library: <http://iquitplastics.com/blog/how-to-start-a-mug-library>

How to Go Plastic Free: <https://myplasticfreelife.com/plasticfreeguide/>

Ocean Friendly Foodware Guide (Surfrider): <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1V14s9afy3M-9a8VT8EjCXypIClyjLOsj/view?ts=5f20b505>



*As you re-open, Clean Water Action/Fund is here to help you thrive. Feel free to reach out to our [ReThink Disposable Business and Zero Waste Specialists](mailto:rethinkdisposable@cleanwater.org) at [rethinkdisposable@cleanwater.org](mailto:rethinkdisposable@cleanwater.org) for sustainable foodware recommendations.*



## SOURCES:

Contra Costa County General Requirements for Restaurants during COVID-19: [https://813dcad3-2b07-4f3f-a25e-23c48c566922.filesusr.com/ugd/84606e\\_f81737a415c84225b565587aa22c8868.pdf](https://813dcad3-2b07-4f3f-a25e-23c48c566922.filesusr.com/ugd/84606e_f81737a415c84225b565587aa22c8868.pdf)

Best Practices for Retail Food Stores, Restaurants, and Food Pick-Up/Delivery Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

<https://beyondplastics.org/article/ask-your-store-to-bring-back-reusables-refillables-during-covid/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/php/CDC-Activities-Initiatives-for-COVID-19-Response.pdf#page=53>

<https://www.cleanwateraction.org/>

<https://coronavirus.marinhhs.org/appendix-c-1-additional-businesses-permitted-operate>

<https://www.countyofnapa.org/DocumentCenter/View/17688/Stage-2-Business-Ops-FAQs-ENGLISH?bidId=>

<https://deh.acgov.org/deh-assets/docs/Covid19%20Guidance%20for%20Food%20Facilities%20-%20English.pdf>

<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/Coronavirus/COVID-19-Infection-Prevention-in-Grocery-Stores.pdf>

<https://oceanic.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Oceanic-Global-COVID-19-Reopening-Guidelines.pdf>

<https://www.productstewardship.us/general/custom.asp?page=5-easy-steps-reduce-plastic-benefit-business>

<https://www.sccgov.org/sites/covid19/Pages/learn-what-to-do.aspx#outdoor-dining>

<https://sf.gov/resource/covidoutdoordining>

[https://www.smcgov.org/sites/smcgov.org/files/ho\\_c19-5f\\_appendix\\_c1\\_additional\\_businesses\\_permitted.pdf](https://www.smcgov.org/sites/smcgov.org/files/ho_c19-5f_appendix_c1_additional_businesses_permitted.pdf)

<http://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Health/Environmental-Health/Food-Program/Coronavirus-Guidance-for-Food-Facilities/>

<https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-international-stateless/2020/06/26618dd6-health-expert-statement-reusables-safety.pdf>

<https://www.surfrider.org/coastal-blog/entry/how-to-reopen-restaurants-while-safely-using-reusables>



*The “New Normal”: Outdoor, socially distanced seating with masks (and reusables!)*

# APPENDIX B: ReThink Disposable Resources

## CLEAN WATER ACTION FACT SHEET

# Business Cost Impacts from disposable food service items

The cost breakdown\* of disposable food service ware items used for typical to-go meals, based on case studies of *ReThink Disposable* certified food businesses

Café Coffee To-Go meal packaging:	
ITEM	COST
16 oz. Hot Cup	\$0.06
Hot Cup Lid	\$0.04
Sleeve	\$0.03
Lid plug/stirrer	\$0.03
3 Sugar Packets	\$0.03
2 Creamers	\$0.08
<b>TOTAL COST: \$0.27</b>	

Taqueria Meal To-Go meal packaging:	
ITEM	COST
Plastic Bag	\$0.01
Foil	\$0.02
Paper Bag for chips	\$0.02
3 Plastic Sauce Cups for salsa	\$0.06
3 Plastic Sauce Cup Lid	\$0.06
6 Napkins	\$0.01
16 oz. Cold Cup	\$0.05
Cold Cup Lid	\$0.01
Straw	\$0.01
<b>TOTAL COST: \$0.25</b>	

Chinese Food To-Go meal packaging:	
ITEM	COST
Plastic Bag	\$0.01
2 Paper Boxes	\$0.25
2 Large Plastic Clamshells	\$0.38
4 Condiment Packets	\$0.10
6 Napkins	\$0.01
Wooden Chopsticks	\$0.03
Plastic Fork, Knife, Spoon	\$0.03
Sauce Cup	\$0.02
Sauce Cup Lid	\$0.02
<b>TOTAL COST: \$0.85</b>	

Hamburger/Fries To-Go meal packaging:	
ITEM	COST
Plastic/Paper Bag	\$0.01
6 Napkins	\$0.01
5 Condiment Packets	\$0.13
8x8x3 Fiber Clamshell for Hamburger	\$0.23
6x6x3 Fiber Clamshell for Fries	\$0.13
16 oz. Cold Cup	\$0.05
Cold Cup Lid	\$0.01
Straws	\$0.01
<b>TOTAL COST: \$0.58</b>	

Greek Food Meal To-Go meal packaging:	
ITEM	COST
Plastic Bag	\$0.01
6x6x3 Fiber Clamshell	\$0.13
Large Plastic Clamshell	\$0.19
Small Plastic Clamshell	\$0.10
3 Sauce Cups	\$0.06
3 Sauce Cup Lids	\$0.06
6 Napkins	\$0.01
Foil	\$0.02
Food Wrap	\$0.01
16 oz. Cold Cup	\$0.05
Cold Cup Lid	\$0.01
Straw	\$0.01
Fork, Knife, Spoon Packet	\$0.03
<b>TOTAL COST: \$0.69</b>	



\*Costs of individual items rounded to the nearest whole cent.



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## CLEAN WATER ACTION FACT SHEET

# Net Cost Impact\* of switching from disposable to reusable food ware items for dine-in

Numbers are based on case studies of *ReThink Disposable* certified food businesses.

### J&J Hawaiian invested \$557 to replace:

- Disposable Paper Food Clamshells with Reusable Plates & Bowls
- Disposable Paper Food Trays with Reusable Baskets
- Disposable Plastic Utensils with Silverware
- Disposable Wooden Chopsticks with Reusable Plastic Chopsticks
- Disposable Plastic Water & Paper Soda Cups with Reusable Glasses
- Disposable Plastic Sauce Cups & Lids with Reusable Sauce Cups

**ANNUAL NET  
COST SAVINGS:  
\$20,517**



### Kirk's Steakburgers invested \$220 to replace:

- Disposable Paper Trays with Reusable Baskets
- Disposable Paper Soda Cups with Reusable Cups
- Disposable Plastic Water Cups with Reusable Cups

**ANNUAL NET  
COST SAVINGS:  
\$3,981**



### New York Pizza invested \$170 to replace:

- Disposable Paper Plates with Reusable Metal Pizza Trays
- Disposable Plastic Utensils with Reusable Silverware
- Disposable Plastic Water Cups with Reusable Glasses

**ANNUAL NET  
COST SAVINGS:  
\$3,043**

### Rene Rose invested \$636 to replace:

- Disposable Plastic Plates with Reusable Plates
- Disposable Plastic Bowls with Reusable Bowls
- Disposable Plastic Sauce Cups & Lids with Reusable Sauce Cups
- Disposable Plastic Water Cups with Reusable Glasses

**ANNUAL NET  
COST SAVINGS:  
\$22,122**



### Shish Grill invested \$80 to replace:

- Disposable Foam Cups for soda and water with Reusable Glasses
- Disposable Plastic Sauce Cups with Reusable Sauce Cups

**ANNUAL NET  
COST SAVINGS:  
\$974**

*\*Net Cost Impact takes into account any upfront and ongoing costs associated with the purchase and care of reusable items and capital improvements needed to carry out ReThink Disposable's recommendations. Net cost savings are based on avoided disposable foodware purchases.*

*NOTE: With the exception of Kirk's Steakburgers, the above restaurants had no mechanized dishwashing.*

*This guide was created through a collaboration  
between Clean Water Action/Clean Water Fund, Mudlab, and  
UC Berkeley Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management.*



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*ReThink Disposable* is a program of Clean Water Action and Clean Water Fund conducted in partnership with local businesses and government agencies. Generous support is provided by a changing list of public and private funders. To learn more about the program, its partners, and funders, visit: [www.rethinkdisposable.org](http://www.rethinkdisposable.org).