

# How the World's Beer-Drinking Capital Responds to a Shut Down

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Hospital staff and rescue workers in the Czech Republic's Liberec region got an unexpected token of appreciation for battling the COVID-19 crisis: bottles of non-alcoholic beer from the nearby Svijany brewery. This could be written off as a PR stunt, but it also reflects the expected integration of beer into every facet of local living. In the eyes of many Czechs—who claim the world's highest per-capita beer consumption rate—"pivo je lék" (loosely translated "beer is a cure") to ease the stress of daily life.

That stress undoubtedly increased when Czech Republic announced its first three cases of the COVID-19 virus on March 1, 2020, each one connected to time spent in neighboring Italy. The following days and weeks saw rapid escalation of containment measures, growing more restrictive each day. The government closed schools, banned all gatherings of more than 30 people, limited travel, closed borders, shut down non-essential businesses, required masks for anyone leaving the house, and threatened fines of up to 3 million CZK (roughly \$115,000) for anyone breaking self-quarantines.

Pubs and restaurants in the Czech Republic have also seen an increase of restrictive measures on their industry. Government resolutions first imposed limited hours—6am to 8pm—that began on March 13, but were scrapped by March 14, when only takeaway and delivery services were allowed. The escalation was likely fueled by the number of residents failing to take them seriously.

“People still look for ways to get together and drink outside,” says Martin Havlin, who runs Prague Craft Beer Tours with Jakub Neuzil. “People are grouping in front of bars and in parks, which is not what the government expected, especially the older people” Lifelong habits can be hard to break, even in the face of a global pandemic. “This has been their pub for 40 years,” says Havlin. “The police come by and tell them to leave, so they go home and then come right back again.”

The government responded again with a nationwide restriction of all non-essential movement on March 16. This left the streets of the Czech capital eerily quiet. “The city is a ghost town,” says Neuzil, with Havlin adding, “It looks exactly the same as it did under socialism.”

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Businesses on all sides of the beer industry had to act fast to keep up with the ever-changing conditions. “We thought we were really thinking ahead,” says Jakub Ambrozek, communications manager for the Skautsky Institut. “But then things started happening so quickly. No one saw that coming.” Skautsky Institut’s hybrid pub-café-event space in Prague’s Old Town Square is run by members of the Czech Scouts, and is one of the most affordable places for a cold glass of pivo in the area. “[Takeaway service] unfortunately wasn’t an option for us. It doesn’t really make sense to focus on just beer-to-go or coffee-to-go when there really aren’t that many people in the center of the town. It’s normally populated with tourists. Nowadays it’s a ghost town.” Skautsky Institut has decided to close from March 16 until the restrictions are lifted.



However, shutting their doors doesn’t mean abandoning their staff or customers. Without a steady stream of revenue coming in, they are relying on savings to continue paying staff. “The easy option would be to let a lot of people go,” Ambrozek says. “But that was never an option for us. We are hoping that it will be over in months because that’s what our reserves currently can handle.”

In the meantime, Skautsky Institut is using social media to stay connected to customers: Mondays include recommendations for books, movies, or lectures; Tuesdays follow an interview series that explores not being afraid; Wednesdays are for videos of people

experiencing the crisis from abroad; Thursdays are dedicated to stories of courageous scouts throughout history; and Fridays focus on DIY projects, like sewing protective masks at home.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Ambiente group of pubs and restaurants quickly adapted their services to stay open during the crisis. Their collection of Lokál beer halls, for example, are serving hot meals through pickup windows from around 11am through the late afternoon or early evening. They're also offering semi-prepared meals for people to cook at home and partnering with online delivery services, such as the local Dáme Jídlo service or Finnish Wolt app, to bring pub food directly to those who cannot or would prefer not to pick up in person.

The employees filling those orders are masked and gloved as they prepare these bits of culinary comfort to their customers. The kinds of goods people are buying under isolation once again illustrates the local pub-trained palate. Ambiente's most requested item is beer in a plastic bottle, followed by the popular bar snack smažený sýr (cheese breaded and fried) and schnitzel.

Tomáš Karpíšek, owner of the Ambiente group, is appreciative of these employee efforts to keep the doors open. "These days, it is our heroes working at all the Ambiente restaurants. We don't force [our employees] into anything. Those who are cooking, baking and selling the food have a personal motivation to be useful even under the current circumstances. These people are the core and hold the teams together, without which it would be very difficult to come back. Even in these difficult times, food makes people happy—our guests as well as us."

However, many industry leaders worry that these efforts won't keep most pubs in business if the crisis extends for months. Despite the Czech government's announcement to pay 80% of salaries for hospitality employees still working under the limitations, and offering low-interest loans, pub owners across the country have signed onto an open letter asking the Prime Minister for more relief. They cite concerns making payroll even with the 80% assistance, along with the added expense of premiums required by delivery partners and the slow returns seen in the Chinese hospitality industry after re-opening.





Left: Courtesy of Ambiente Group, Right: Courtesy of Jakub Neuzil

Havlin of Prague Craft Beer Tours shares these concerns, predicting that, “A lot of people are going to lose their jobs or change to something outside the gastronomy industry. No amount of money will be enough for these businesses. It’s going to damage us for a really long time.” Havlin and Neuzil have found diversification to be their saving grace when their beer tour cancellations started pouring in alongside tourism restrictions. Both work in the broader beer industry, and started their craft beer tours as a labor of love. Havlin also works as a certified beer sommelier at the Czech Beer Institute and in sales of an essential beer ingredient. “The hops business is still going well because home brewing is flourishing,” he says.

Neuzil’s other projects include Czech Brewmasters, a team of consultants focused on microbrewery construction, and Muflon, one of the largest Czech microbreweries. Muflon is currently focused on bringing unopened tanks of beer back to the brewery (free of charge) to keep them fresh until the taps start flowing again.

When asked to imagine the first day that people felt safe to come out again, a mix of reflection and anticipation entered the conversation. “It cannot come soon enough,” Ambrozek says. “We cannot wait, but it won’t ever be the same. There will be new ways to connect with people that will be discovered during this time, and those will stay with us.”

There is still hope among some beer professionals. Havlin and Neuzil envision a celebratory scene to come for the beer professionals who manage to weather the storm. “I can see beer flowing everywhere, a sea of beer,” Neuzil says. “I can picture a sunny day, maybe at the end

of summer or July,” Havlin adds, “with people barbequing everywhere. All of the pubs are going to have a huge party, and they will have a lot of beer because they can’t drink everything themselves!”