



A cautious approach

Avoiding the great deopening

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Back in August, I attended Bar Convent Brooklyn (BCB). If you're not familiar with this event, the breakdown goes a little something like this: it is Comic Con for the bar and cocktail industry, spun out to various cities and countries by Reed Exhibitions, whose main event is Bar Convent Berlin.

BCB is an annual trade-only event that draws in several thousand bar, restaurant, and spirit industry professionals, who all gather to attend product demonstrations, educational seminars, and parties. A whole lot of parties.

If you're wondering why I put myself and my pod at risk by going to such a large event during this time of crisis, you are not alone.

To put any fears out there to rest – myself, my partner, family, friends, and co-workers are all fully vaccinated.

I went to BCB to see how a large industry event could be put on with the current health and safety guidelines put in place by the Empire State. I also did it to see if whiskey and the wider spirits industry had learned anything from Covid-19. Finally, it was also a stress test for me, since I had not been out to a liquor event since March 11, 2020.

Each day of BCB, I was asked to show my vaccination status and government-issued ID. And for every day I went to the event, there were several emails containing vital information about Covid safety procedures and reminders to wear a mask while inside

the Expo Center. It was relentless, but it made me happy.

While at BCB, I stopped by every whiskey booth that I could find to say hello to dear friends and industry contacts that I had not seen in real life since 2020, and in some cases 2019. I asked permission to hug long-time friends, settling for fist bumps if they were not 100 per cent comfortable with close physical contact.

Reps and ambassadors from all the major whiskey brands were in attendance. There are far too many of them to name here, but

thing, wasn't doing enough to protect its patrons, and staff.

During our tour, everyone in our group wore a mask and kept their distance, which made me feel less frightened, but still I had some reservations.

I needed something to quench the fires of doubt that were building in my head. There needs to be some kind of line that is held fast to avoid something that I have called 'the great deopening'.

This term, the great deopening, refers to the one thing that the whiskey and

hospitality industries want to avoid: shutting their doors again because of a rise in Delta variant cases or an unacceptable number of breakthrough Covid patients. It would mean a return to quarantines,

Whiskey can raise the bar and do what others won't

there were more than enough memories to cherish.

If whiskey distilleries and their tasting rooms want to safely reopen to the public, they need to follow similar safety protocols to those that BCB put in place.

Fast forward to one month later. I attended a whiskey tasting in upstate New York where I was not asked to show proof of vaccination before entering the distillery and tasting room. Granted, we were all wearing masks, but there was an assumption that everything was fine, and that the Delta variant wasn't a threat.

It gave me pause to consider how seriously the wider whiskey industry is taking the threat of Covid-19. I wondered if the industry that I love wasn't doing the right

shutdowns, and reignited mask arguments that no one wants.

Avoiding the great deopening must be a defining and unifying cause for the whiskey industry. Each distillery, every brand and every beverage company must police itself and its peers with some kind of strict policy about entry requirements.

Whiskey can raise the bar and do what others won't.

This is not the time for the whiskey industry to hedge its bets and hope for the best when moving forward with the new reality we face. Whiskey must be better in order to survive and thrive, to be there in the future to help us all celebrate the day when we look at Covid with caution, but in the rear view mirror. ■