



BASKING IN THE ALPENGLOBE

Diners are having a ball eating inside the pandemic-safe bubbles at Cafe Galleria.

By **KATHY STEPHENSON**
The Salt Lake Tribune

Andy and Emily Jenkins, owners of Cafe Galleria in Midway, started searching months ago for an outdoor enclosure so diners could continue to sit on the patio in winter.

Andy mentioned this quest to his brother who, in turn, told his boss, Nate King — the owner of Insight Exhibits. The corporate event company also was looking for ways to keep its employees on the payroll after large gatherings were prohibited.

Together, the three entrepreneurs have not only solved their pandemic problems with the Alpenglobe, a dome-shaped outdoor shelter — they also have created an outdoor eating experience that could transcend the coronavirus and the era of socially distant dining, as diners are having a ball eating inside these bubbles.

Made of wood beams and Plexiglas, each igloo-like structure seats six to eight people and has built-in heating and ventilation, a sound system and lighting. Sliding doors allow guests and servers to enter and exit easily, but when shut tight the circular room offers an intimate gathering space.

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At top and above » Briana Payan serves lunch to John and Suzi Nielsen as they try out one of three Alpenglobes at Cafe Galleria in Midway on Thursday. The dome-shaped enclosures allow diners to eat inside a warm environment, while also being separated from others.

“
It's like being in an inside-out snow globe.”

EMILY JENKINS
Owner of Cafe Galleria, on the experience of being inside an Alpenglobe when it snows

Alpenglobes

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While they offer 360-degree views, King said, the transparent orbs are sturdy enough to withstand heavy snow and winds up to 115 miles per hour.

The first three Alpenglobes were installed on the Café Galleria patio in early October, and through social media and word of mouth, they quickly became the most popular place to enjoy the Italian pizzas and pastas served at the Main Street eatery.

Initially designed for those seeking a socially distant way to dine during the pandemic, the spheres quickly turned into a dining “experience,” said Emily Jenkins, especially after a recent snowstorm. Being warm and cozy inside while tiny flakes were falling outside “was magical,” she said. “It’s like being in an inside-out snow globe.”

The Jenkinsees purchased the cafe in December 2019, after being regular customers for a decade. Since then, they have remodeled the interior, which now has eight socially distant tables.

Even before the coronavirus forced them to close in mid-March, they were looking for ways to expand the patio and provide shelter in the off-season, Andy said. “We knew the patio was going to be a big thing for us.”

Just how big, though, has been a surprise.

With seating requests for the domes increasing, Cafe Galleria adopted an online reservation system, allowing guests to sign up for 90-minute slots in advance.

The system went live on the last Sunday in October and within 24 hours had amassed 1,500 reservations, keeping the domes filled every day from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. through December. Reservations for January and February also are filling quickly.

“Love these,” wrote a follower on Instagram. “Our dinner was amazing in it.”

“I’m dying to come sit in one of these. So cool,” added another.

It’s no surprise, then, that the cafe has ordered additional globes to help with demand. They’ll be built by the crew at Insight Exhibits. “Rather than producing trade show exhibits,” said King, “we are shifting our production over to this.”

The company spent the summer doing research and development, King said, modeling the product after something similar they saw in Europe.

They researched several names for the pods, ultimately settling on a riff on the word alpenglow — the term used when indirect sunlight reflects off clouds just before sunset or dawn, making mountains appear pink or red.

With outdoor dining at Cafe Galleria off to good start, the company is now

marketing the products to restaurants in Utah and other states that have had to remove inside tables to meet the 6-foot social distancing requirements.

King said buildings have the potential to be used year-round for private dining events — Cafe Galleria has already had one wedding dinner in the globes — meeting spaces or as warming huts at ski resorts.

The units are not cheap, though, starting at \$12,000 each.

At Cafe Galleria, the Jenkins expects the structures to pay for themselves within a few months.

Cafe Galleria was able to get the necessary cash by charging a \$20 fee with each online table reservation. Customers who spend \$100 or more on food get the money back, they said, but the infusion of capital helped get the ball rolling.

The company also is trying to drive down the cost, looking for alternatives to the Plexiglas, which has been in high demand during the coronavirus.

“We were both looking for a new product and a way to innovate,” King said, and “it fills a demand in the new world we live in.”

It’s also a much-needed pandemic success story — at a time when restaurants and event businesses are struggling.

“Two Utah companies hit hard by COVID,” King said, “are now kind of rising out of the flames.”