

"Done in by a F**king Corona": Caravan Officially Closes
By Tom Arnstein - theBeijinger - 27 February 2020
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/1uEUinTVk0h5eC8yOri9ZQ>

A mere two months after Badr Benjelloun, founder and proprietor of Caravan, announced that he was to start splitting his time between Beijing and Europe, the venue that he bid farewell to has closed for good.

Speaking to the Beijinger, Benjelloun detailed the difficult circumstances that led to him to make the decision to close the Moroccan bar, restaurant, and performance space that he had nurtured since 2015. That decision, he says, was as a direct result of the coronavirus and the effect that it's currently wreaking across the city.

"You got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them," says Benjelloun. "We stayed open through most of this ordeal and business was down 95% year-on-year with no visibility," adding, "Sad that after years of peddling strong liquor we got done in by a fucking corona. Joking aside, the landlords were not willing to help and asked for 100% rent and also planned for a rent increase in May. I couldn't sell the place, and couldn't operate with random requests to close and staff locked in their homes. I put the key under the door and left."

Although the current circumstances certainly crippled business, Benjelloun adds that troubles began last year, when huge swaths of the capital were closed off and many businesses were forced to limit opening hours on account of the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. "The real issue was that we didn't recover from the restrictions of late August to early October with the forced closures on weekends and all the cancellations. Six dead weekends and canceled events took away our safety blanket. I paid for it all."

Beijing's F&B, music, and performance venues, as well as businesses in general, are currently reeling from the effects that the coronavirus has had on staffing, restrictions on gatherings, and obstacles created in returning to work, which has so far effectively seen this year's Chinese New Year prolonged by three weeks. Though the situation is looking up in Beijing, with the number of new infections gradually falling, restrictions have only become stricter as the local government makes a determined effort to eradicate it in the capital. Meanwhile, the coronavirus continues to spread around the world, leaving countless similar examples of personal and fiscal damage in its wake.

Expounding on the daunting situation that currently faces small businesses here, Benjelloun states, "There are no real subsidies for small foreign-owned businesses that we found. Most of it is mainly talk with no real governance. Same for the rules limiting the scope of how many customers can be admitted. It's two per table according to some, three for others, four in some places. Without exact rules, doing any sort of business leaves us at the mercy of local neighborhood interpretations and random closures."

After his hurried visit to Beijing to try and see if there was a way for Caravan to push on, Benjelloun has since returned to Italy where he is under self-imposed quarantine and lots of time to digest the legacy he leaves behind in the capital. "If I have any sanity left after my quarantine, I'll try to process what happened. For now, I just hope Beijing history judges me kindly."

As one of the few characterful venues in the Guanghai Lu area, and the only place to tuck into a legitimate tagine (not to mention one of the best rum selections going), Caravan will certainly be missed. Sadly, it's also safe to assume that it will be just one of many coronavirus related business casualties in the months to come.