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CHEFS AND RESTAURANTS

# Setting the Bar Low at New York's Most Accessible Restaurant

by Jacqueline Raposo — AUGUST 12, 2021



George Gallego and Yannick Benjamin of NYC's Contento

**A**t **Contento** in East Harlem, wheelchair users dining at the low bar can watch the bustle of the restaurant's small open kitchen. A QR code on the menu means diners who are blind or have low vision can use their phones to read aloud Chef **Oscar Lorenzzi's** French-Peruvian offerings. Guests are invited to make use of adaptive flatware, making it easier for those with conditions like arthritis, MS, and Parkinson's to swipe a spear of juicy octopus through an inky black chimichurri.

Dining at the bar, reading the menu, and utilizing utensils should not be considered novelty offerings in the restaurant world. But they've already given Contento, which opened on June 10, a reputation for being New York's most accessible restaurant.

"We're not trying or claiming to be the first restaurant with this concept," says **Yannick Benjamin**, beverage director and one of Contento's managing partners (<https://www.contentonyc.com/team>). "Most importantly, we don't want to be the last."

Benjamin is a manual wheelchair user with spinal cord injury. So is **George Gallego**, another managing partner. "I've experienced so much discrimination on that front, where I just couldn't access certain places," Gallego says of how he estimates that half of the restaurant's friends and clients book for gatherings are not accessible to him.

As long-time hospitality professionals, entrepreneurs, and social activists, such inaccessibility frustrations fueled the Contento team to build an exceptional restaurant that also intentionally welcomes disabled diners regularly excluded from such spaces. "If folks don't see us, then our issues become nonissues," Gallego says, referencing a lack of understanding about disabled people's dining needs (<https://jacquelineraapos.com/select-stories/disabled-food-covid-pandemic-restaurants-disability-accessibility>) because of their physical exclusion from public spaces. "We wanted to make it easy for anyone to come in and enjoy everything we have to offer without having to fear they're on the verge of experiencing some sort of obstacle."

Their design team first had to confront an obvious 10-inch obstacle: the storefront's two-step entrance. Consultants from the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities proposed several outdoor ramps priced around \$20,000. They chose to invest twice the cost—over \$50,000—to demolish and rebuild the floor to street level, offering an even more easeful welcome for guests and saving outdoor dining space that would have been lost to a ramp. "In order to eradicate these sorts of civil rights issues, it does take money," says Gallego.

Inside, they also aim to blend access and attraction. "People often think because you have to make certain parts of your establishment ADA-[compliant] it might ruin the aesthetic of the restaurant," Benjamin says. "It's such a falsehood. If it's good, it's good. If it's beautiful, it's beautiful."



Contento's interior with higher tables, a low bar, and pocket door bathroom

The counter dining and small open kitchen create an atmosphere Benjamin finds warm and welcoming. Custom-built tables mean all wheelchair users can fit their legs underneath—standard table heights don't meet the ADA's 27- to 29-inch clearance requirement (<https://adata.org/factsheet/food-service>). They could add another three or four tables to their 40-seat room, but fewer tables allows Benjamin and Gallego to navigate the floor during service. Plus, guests don't have to awkwardly squeeze past other diners. The street level restroom's pocket doors and touchless appliances make for overall easier navigation, too.

The partners hold regular staff meetings to encourage an ethos of patience and compassion, and they emphasize communication that's equitable and inclusive. "Contento means happy," Gallego explains. "Once you come into our space, we want you to enter that state of mind—that state of happiness—and enjoy yourself and enjoy the people serving you. Because we're here to serve."

They invite guests to suggest ways Contento can be even more accessible, as well. "Recently, a couple came in who are part of the little people community," Benjamin says. "We were asking them, 'What could we do differently? How are the chairs?' Stuff of that nature. It's never-ending, in a good way. The possibilities of trying to improve are limitless."

Their investments are paying off. While operators could assume that reducing tables and encouraging a relaxed service pace might threaten the bottom line, Contento regularly hits three



turns per service with their 40 indoor and 22 outdoor seats. They've welcomed 15 wheelchair users in one reservation and hosted a wedding after-party where 20 of the 30 guests were in chairs—in other words, the types of seatings that are impossible for most restaurants. On an average evening, they estimate about 10 percent of guests are disabled, and they dine, drink, and run tabs just as enthusiastically as the non-disabled diners.

"I've heard other guests say, 'Wow, I didn't realize there were so many people with disabilities in New York!'" Gallego says of the communal response. In truth, more disabled people exist than restaurants able to host them—the CDC estimates

(<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>). 26 percent of adults in the United States live with some form of disability, while too many restaurants still miss the mark on accessibility.

### **Three Tips for Improving Accessibility at Your Restaurant**

Unsure of how to start increasing access at your established restaurant? "Reach out to community leaders," Benjamin urges. "No one expects someone to know everything about a certain community. Do your research." Ask local organizations to consult on where your company can make improvements. "No one would be more enthusiastic," he says.

If you're ready to get going, here are three adjustments restaurateurs can implement right now.

#### **Discuss Disability Equity with Your Staff**

"It's not like we're aliens, right?" jokes Gallego. "But there is a way that you talk to people and a way that you don't talk to people." They suggest regular staff meetings to discuss language, communication, and accommodations, emphasizing the obstacles many people with disabilities face to simply get to a restaurant. "We stress patience," says Benjamin. "Some may take a little time to get settled at their table. Don't make them feel rushed. That extra effort they've made to come to the restaurant, we should appreciate that."

#### **Offer Adaptive Flatware**

Adaptive utensils (<https://www.thewrightstuff.com/adaptive-eating-utensils.html>) come in a variety of options with elements like large-grip or bendable handles, heavier weights, and lipped edges. They're affordable and take little room to store. "You have no idea how many people look able-bodied, and when they see it written on the menu, they ask for it," Benjamin says. "They get excited and can actually enjoy their meal." Don't force guests to ask—state on your menu that you have adaptive utensils available.

#### **Upgrade Your Menu**

For guests who are blind or have low vision or neurological impairments, a QR code on your

printed menu goes a long way. “It’s not cheap to print a Braille menu,” Gallego says. “Use QR codes so they can scan down the menu and have their phone read it.” Several companies offer QR-coding for free. But go the distance and make sure your design works: jpegs, graphics, some PDFs, and websites that aren’t optimized for mobile use are often unreadable. Create a system your team can regularly update and one that offers true value for your guests.

*Jacqueline Raposo* (<https://jacquelineraoso.com/>) is a disabled food writer, podcast producer, and *interviewer* (<https://jacquelineraoso.com/stories-by-subject/chef-interviewer>) of hundreds of chefs nationwide.

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## COMMENTS

Share your thoughts, **Jacqueline R**

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**Anne S.** replied on August 15, 2021 [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/69830#COMMENT-69830\)](#).

Good story. Hope more restaurants take note.

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**Anne S.** replied on August 15, 2021 [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/69831#COMMENT-69831\)](#).

Oops. Wasn't quite finished. To "adaptive flatware," I'd add light-weight glassware (many water glasses are very heavy) or straws.

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