

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## OPINION: SEATTLE'S WAGE MANDATE KILLS RESTAURANTS

*The legal minimum is going to \$16.39 an hour, while my pay drops to zero.*

By Simone Barron  
December 12, 2019

*Seattle*

This city's minimum wage is rising to \$16.39 an hour on Jan. 1. Instead of receiving a bigger paycheck, I'm left without any pay at all due to the policy change. That's because the restaurant where I've worked for six years is closing as a consequence of the city's harmful minimum-wage experiment.

I work for Tom Douglas, one of the best-known restaurateurs in Seattle. Mr. Douglas is in many ways responsible for the city's reputation as a foodie paradise, and he recently celebrated his 30th anniversary in business. He's a great boss, and his employees tend to stay at the company for a long time.

But being an established chef and a good employer doesn't save you from the burden of a sharp minimum-wage increase, up 73 percent from \$9.47 in 2015. For large-scale employers like Mr. Douglas, there's no separate rate for workers who earn tips. In Washington and a handful of other states, tips aren't counted as income earned on the job. That means restaurateurs are expected to pay servers like me the full minimum wage in addition to our considerable tip income.

When rent is too high, labor costs too much, and customers don't want to pay \$40 for a roast-chicken entree, the only way for many operators to ease the pain is to close.

So now, after six years working at Mr. Douglas's restaurant Tanakasan, I need to find a new work home. My first thought was to go back to Sitka & Spruce, a restaurant where I had once worked. (I previously had to take on a second job there after the rising minimum wage forced Tanakasan to adopt a no-tipping payment model, drastically reducing my income.)

As it turns out, I can't return to Sitka & Spruce. Its James Beard Award-winning owner, Matt Dillon, is closing Sitka after 14 years, defeated by the one-two punch of rising rents and labor costs.

As a worker, you're attracted to restaurateurs like Messrs. Douglas and Dillon because they offer job security and you know you'll make money. That's no longer the case here with a high minimum wage that ignores tip income. I often hear people in Seattle lament that it's becoming "more corporate." The truth is that the city has made it nearly impossible for many small businesses to survive.

Mr. Douglas is trying to find a role for my co-workers and me at another restaurant in his group, but I've started applying for other open positions around town. I landed an interview at a restaurant called Super Bueno, owned by another established chef, Ethan Stowell. Before I could even confirm the interview, Mr. Stowell announced that he will close down Super Bueno at the end of the year. He's also closing or restructuring two other restaurants.

I've lived in this city for almost 20 years, supporting my family thanks to the full-service-restaurant industry. Today I'm struggling because of a policy meant to help me. I'm proudly progressive in my politics, but my experience shows that progressives should reconsider minimum-wage laws that hurt the very workers they're trying to protect.

*Ms. Barron is a restaurant worker and co-founder of the Full Service Workers Alliance.*