

ATLANTIC CITY — It was Saturday night at the Hard Rock Casino Hotel and all Joe Lupo could do was grimace. Last call had come and gone at the almost comic pandemic hour of 9:50 p.m., and the exodus had begun, as gamblers carrying their takeout noodles in brown bags headed for the escalator.

“It’s so discouraging,” said Lupo, president of Hard Rock, which two years ago took over the old Trump Taj Mahal, during the casino’s nightly governor-imposed shut down of food and beverage service. “We were doing really well. We were really gaining some ground.”

He flashed back a year ago, when 5,500 people would have been exiting the Etes Arena from a Mariah Carey show, flooding the casino floor, the nightclubs just opening, and ballrooms filled with holiday parties. Prime time in any self-respecting Atlantic City casino would be just starting, not ending.

But these days, with coronavirus cases soaring, New Jersey restrictions forbid late night dining or serving of alcohol inside the casinos, not to mention sitting at a bar. Atlantic City’s signature 24-hour industry, with assists from online gambling and revamped ventilation systems, is just trying to stay afloat.

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