

# At Abby Lane, restaurateur Jason Santos picks up the pieces

The ransacking of his Theater District restaurant stirred a complicated mix of grief and guilt.

By [Dugan Arnett](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 1, 2020, 6:10 p.m.



Owner and chef Jason Santos of Abby Lane. The restaurant was broken into in the aftermath of Sunday's protests, stirring complex

Around him, everything had been ransacked. Cash registers broken. Bottles strewn about. Tables and chairs toppled. At the height of the looting, security footage would show, there had been some 20 people behind the bar of his Theater District restaurant, Abby Lane.

As he surveyed the scene Monday morning, Jason Santos considered the slew of immediate issues the previous night's rioting had wrought: the windows that would need repair, the insurance company that would need to be dealt with.

But it was more than that. There was also the frustration that came with knowing all the good that had come from a day of peaceful protesting in Boston would now be overshadowed, hijacked by images of violence and looting.

"Someone lost their life," said Santos, referring to George Floyd, a Black man whose death at the hands of Minneapolis police has spawned protests in cities around the country. "And now, there's stories about people stealing Ugg boots."

Across the city Monday, business owners were trying to make sense of the destruction that had erupted on businesses and public sites throughout Boston. On Bromfield Street in Downtown Crossing, a woman sobbed alone inside a destroyed nail salon; on Boylston, a woman quietly swept up glass from a shattered liquor shop storefront.

And in the Theater District, Santos grappled with a pair of seemingly competing sentiments: His support for the protests, and the trouble it had wrought on his business.

"I almost feel guilty in a weird way — that I'm worried about my restaurant and my well-being," he said. "Truthfully, the first thing I thought about when I woke up was my restaurant, and that sucks, because there's a much bigger thing to be thinking about."

For Santos, it was all so sad.

Though he intentionally steers clear of politics on his restaurants' social media pages, he

has always supported the idea that everyone has a voice, and should use it. When he'd hear people say there's no point in voting, he'd point out that even something as small as a mosquito can have an effect, as indicated by the itchy red welt.

So as protesters took to the streets of Boston on Sunday for a number of demonstrations, Santos felt good that attention was being paid to such a vital issue.

On Sunday evening, as he watched news coverage of the Boston protests, his wife commented on how calm things had remained — a contrast to other large cities that had seen nights of burning police vehicles and police brutality against protesters and journalists.

But it was still light outside, Santos noted. Things could change.

Indeed, as night fell and the scene deteriorated, giving way to hours of rioting that would result in more than 50 arrests and injuries to dozens of police officers and protesters, it quickly became clear that the calm of the daylight hours would be short-lived.

At one point, as he watched news footage of the escalating situation in downtown Boston, someone told him to check Twitter. There, he found a video that appeared to have been taken right outside his Theater District restaurant, Abby Lane.

“All of a sudden, I see this guy take a brick and hum it through the window,” Santos said.

Abby Lane had been his first real restaurant. Opened eight years ago, it had come around the time he'd appeared as a contestant on “Hell's Kitchen,” and before the opening of his two Back Bay establishments, Buttermilk & Bourbon and Citrus & Salt

He'd chosen the restaurant's location — a two-story space in the bustling Theater District — carefully. Some restaurant folks didn't worry much about location: If the product was good, people would come. But if the product *and* the location were good, Santos figured, even better.

Now, though, as the footage continued to play out in front of him, he could do nothing but wait, unable to sleep, wondering how extensive the damage would be when he could see it for himself.

Early Monday morning, after just three hours of sleep, Santos woke quickly and set off for the city to assess the damage. He was in such a rush to get to the restaurant that he got pulled over on the way for speeding.

What he found wasn't pretty, and at one point after surveying the damage, he fell into a seat, dejected.

Aside from the damage, there would be other ripple effects, too. During the pandemic, the restaurant had been doing carry-out service as a way to ensure some employees could continue receiving a paycheck. Now, they'd be out of work until the restaurant re-opens. He'd heard rumblings, too, of another night of protest scheduled for Tuesday, which had the potential for more trouble.

There was little to do but push forward, however, and so, before long, he picked up a broom and got to work.

*Matt Rocheleau of the Globe staff contributed to this report.*

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