Customer Marine Deroo (right) speaks to a staff member as she dines with a companion in a room of The Qbic Hotel in Brussels.

Chef Joao Silva (center) as he works with a colleague in the kitchen of The Qbic Hotel in Brussels.

A general view of the bar area of The Qbic Hotel in Brussels.

Eat your heart out: COVID-safe Valentine's Day dining

It's a COVID-era conundrum for Valentine's Day: how to eat out with your beloved when you live in a country where all restaurants are closed? The answer hit upon by a handful of hotels in Belgium's capital is to convert empty rooms into private dining salons for two, where a four-course meal with champagne and wine can be enjoyed without breaking the household "bubble". "We're over the moon about being here tonight, just like in a restaurant," said Marine Deroo, a 34-year-old Frenchwoman living in Brussels who was trying out the concept just ahead of Valentine's Day.

"We've been cooped up at home for months. We've tried setting up pretend 'evenings out' at home-but to actually go out, like to a restaurant, it's a super opportunity that we just jumped on," she said. She and her boyfriend had just been greeted and shown to a candle-lit table set up where a bed used to be, as music travelled into their room in the Qbic Hotel, which says it pioneered the idea. A waitress hovered to take their choices from the menu, including a bottle of wine, which had to be ordered before a government coronavirus ban on serving alcohol past 8:00pm kicked in.

It's not just room service, the hotel

In this photograph Bert Vandewaetere manager at The Qbic Hotel in Brussels, speaks with AFP.

manager, Bert Vandewaetere pointed out. The 149-euro ($180) package covers a hotel room to sleep in, a separate room to dine in, the dinner-not including any drinks-and breakfast. "Basically, people dress themselves up for a really good night on a Saturday evening-children at home, only couples are coming here, just two people," he said.

'Finally we can go out'

He said he came up with the idea after Belgium closed restaurants and bars in November to slow the spread of the coronavirus, aggravating an already steep drop in hotel business because of cancelled trade fairs and other events. It was especially important that the Qbic prove itself, as it had opened in late 2019, just before the pandemic hit. Providing free rooms to frontline medical workers in the pandemic's first wave and a lobby co-working area for university students kept activity ticking over, providing at least some work for the hotel's staff, most of whom are furloughed.

But it was only two months ago, when some of the empty rooms were turned into two-person dining chambers, that business really took off on weekends. "The idea came because a lot of people were frustrated to stay at home," Vandewaetere said. "We have plenty of rooms-so why not combine them with a really nice offer, to offer them the time of their life on a Saturday when half of Belgium wants to go out?"

The reaction was swift. "The comments that we receive from people were really: 'Finally, I had some time alone with my partner. Finally, I had some other walls to look at, not just my living room at home. Finally, we can go out again'," he said. Other hotels in Brussels have followed suit, opening up the possibility to dine out while respecting social distancing rules. The Qbic Hotel usually has 23 such private dining rooms set up for a Saturday night service. That means it has 46 rooms that can be occupied by couples: 23 for dining and 23 for sleeping.

A chef prepares food in the kitchen of The Qbic Hotel in Brussels.

On Valentine's Day weekend, though, 60 dining rooms have been configured, for both Friday and Saturday nights. And all but a couple of the Friday night slots are sold out. In the hotel's bustling kitchen, chef Joao Silva said the idea has been invaluable in forging his new team and seeing what they could do. Initially, he thought cooking and catering to two dozen separate dining rooms could be "a little bit overwhelming, considering the numbers that we might reach". "But at the end of the day, we did our first month, and I have no regrets. It was just fluid, straight through and through. The staff are amazing," he said.

As he spoke, employees with facemasks darted between the kitchen and the rooms, carrying trays along hallways where music was punctuated by corks popping and intimate chatter. For that brief period, the hotel appeared almost normal, almost like in pre-pandemic times-with only the facemasks to remind patrons of the here and now. — AFP

Rapper's jail term prompts Spanish rethink on free speech

Spain's government said Tuesday that it would ease the penalties for what it called "excesses" in freedom of expression, following the conviction of a rapper whose case won backing from several top artists. The move would revise down the penalty for "crimes of expression" such as the glorification of terrorism, hate speech, insults to the crown and offences against religious sensibilities, in the context of artistic, cultural or intellectual activities.

The decision comes after rapper Pablo Hasel was controversially handed a nine-month jail term in 2018 for tweets attacking the monarchy and accusing police of torturing and killing demonstrators and migrants. He was convicted of glorifying terrorism, slander and libel against the Crown and State institutions. Hasel, whose real name is Pablo Rivadulla Duro, wrote the tweets between 2014 and 2016 and on January 28, Spain's National Court gave him 10 days to voluntarily enter prison. But he has said he won't go voluntarily-meaning he's likely to be arrested. His case has drawn widespread support including a manifesto signed by more than 200 artists, including leading lights of Spanish cinema such as director Pedro Almodovar and Hollywood actor Javier Bardem as well as iconic folk singer Joan Manuel Serrat.

"We have come together to show support for Pablo, to demand his release and that these types of crimes-which curtail rights, not only freedom of expression but also ideological and artistic freedom-be removed from the penal code," said the petition which was published on Monday. Amnesty International has also criticised the case, saying "nobody should be criminally prosecuted for tweeting or singing something unpleasant or shocking".

Hours after the petition was published, Spain's leftwing government said Monday evening that it was planning "to review offences linked to excesses in the exercise of freedom of expression". The review will be overseen by the justice ministry which will seek to establish "dissuasive" penalties rather than prison in cases of "conduct that clearly involves an element of risk to public order or which incites violent behavior", a government statement said. The aim was to decriminalize "verbal excesses committed in the context of artistic, cultural or intellectual expression", the government said, acknowledging that penalizing them was "discouraging freedom of expression".

The Valtonyc case

In its ruling, a copy of which was seen by AFP, the National Court pointed to the "widespread diffusion" of Hasel's messages among a collective of more than 50,000 "like-minded" followers, highlighting the "potential risk that one of them-emboldened by his words and their inherent justification of terrorism-could end up using violence". "Incitement to terrorist violence... cannot be protected as freedom of expression because it falls squarely within the ambit of 'hate speech'," the 2018 sentence read.

Pablo Hasel's case has echoes of the prosecution of another rapper who in 2017 was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in jail for praising the now-defunct Basque armed separatist group ETA, insulting the king and making threats in songs released in 2012 and 2013. Known as Valtonyc, he fled to Belgium in May 2018 before being arrested. Spain requested his extradition but it was rejected by a court which found his offences were not a crime in Belgium. The decision is being appealed. The prosecution of Valtonyc, Pablo Hasel and others who have been pursued for tweeting controversial statements has been resolutely condemned by the hardline leftist Podemos, which since January 2020 has been the junior partner in Spain's leftwing coalition led by Pedro Sanchez's Socialists. — AFP

Renowned director removed from top Moscow theatre

Acclaimed Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov, who was at the center of a fraud scandal last year, confirmed Tuesday that Moscow officials had ended his term leading a top theatre. The development comes months after the outspoken stage and film director was given a three-year suspended sentence following an embezzlement conviction his supporters denounced as politically motivated. Serebrennikov, 51, posted on his Instagram account a copy of a letter he received from the Moscow city cultural department notifying him that his contract at the Gogol Centre, which expires February 25, would not be renewed.

In this file photo Russian stage and screen director Kirill Serebrennikov waits for the start of a hearing at a court in Moscow. — AFP

"The Gogol Centre as a theatre and as an idea will live on," Serebrennikov wrote in an accompanying caption. "Do not be discouraged. In despondency there is neither life nor freedom," he added, nearly a week after reports of his departure first surfaced in Russian news agencies. One of Russia's most acclaimed directors, Serebrennikov rebranded the Gogol Centre in 2014 from a fading venue to a leading location on Moscow's cultural map, attracting the ire of traditionalists.

He was arrested in 2017 and charged with misappropriating the equivalent of two million dollars in state funds meant for a theatrical project. A judge found him guilty in June last year and ruled that his "rehabilitation" was possible with a fine, three-year probation and a ban on overseeing cultural organizations. Serebrennikov's case was criticized both in Russia and abroad as stifling artistic freedom, with figures including Cate Blanchett and Ian McKellen speaking out in his defense. On Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Kremlin had nothing to do with Serebrennikov's departure from the Gogol Centre. — AFP

US woman who glued hair receives internet's help

An American woman who used extra strong glue to style her hair, leaving it stuck in the same position for a month, has raised more than $15,000 for possible surgery. Louisiana resident Tessica Brown posted a video on TikTok last week explaining that she used "Gorilla Glue" industrial-strength spray adhesive after her regular product ran out. "Bad bad bad idea," said Brown, on the verge of tears. "My hair has been like this for about a month now. It's not my choice," she added.

Brown said she had tried various lotions and products, including shampoo and coconut oil, to break the glue but without success. Her story has gone viral, with internet users offering numerous solutions for her sticky situation. Even Beyonce's hair stylist Neal Farinah weighed in with advice. The chemical glue, which contains acetone and propane and is 100 percent waterproof, is good for mounting wood and laminates, according to Gorilla Glue's website. It can cause severe irritation if it comes into contact with skin.

On Saturday, Brown posted photos of herself at a hospital in Louisiana where she hoped to get help. The visit failed to solve the problem. "This is really about to be a long process," she wrote on Instagram. Gorilla Glue said in a statement posted on Twitter that it was "very sorry to hear about the unfortunate incident." "This is a unique situation because this product is not indicated for use in or on hair as it is considered permanent," the statement added. Brown started a fundraising campaign on GoFundMe to cover the medical costs of her treatment and had already raised more than $15,000 by Tuesday. Chance the Rapper is among celebrities to have offered their support online. TMZ reported Tuesday that Brown was finally able to cut off her ponytail but the hair on her scalp is still hardened. —AFP

KIM KARDASHIAN WEST HITS BACK AT NORTH'S CRITICS

Kim Kardashian West has warned her critics to stop "embarrassing" themselves. The 'Keeping Up With the Kardashians' star was unimpressed by the response to one of her Instagram posts, in which she had shared an elaborate oil painting by her seven-year-old daughter North, after fans questioned whether the youngster had created the artwork herself because it was so good. Kim insisted the art was all her eldest child's own work after "several weeks" of classes, and hit out at the "negativity" her post attracted.

She fumed on her Instagram Story: "DON'T PLAY WITH ME WHEN IT COMES TO MY CHILDREN!!! "My daughter and her best friend have been taking a serious oil painting class where their talents and creativity are being encouraged and nurtured. North worked incredibly hard on her painting, which took several weeks to complete. "As a proud mom, I wanted to share her work with everyone. I'm seeing op-ed pieces in the media and social media from grown adults breaking down whether or not my child actually painted this! How dare you see children doing awesome things and then try to accuse them of NOT being awesome!?!?! Please stop embarrassing yourselves with the negativity and allow every child to be GREAT!!!

"NORTH WEST PAINTED THAT PERIOTDDDDDDABCDEFGZFDT!!!!! !!!!!!!!!!!(sic)" She went on to share a string of supportive comments, as well as calling out newspaper reports which had cast doubt on her daughter's talent. Kim -

who, as well as North, also has Saint, five, Chicago, three, and Psalm, 20 months, with husband Kanye West - had originally shared the painting on her Instagram Story. She captioned the post: "My little artist North." The artwork depicts an outdoor scene featuring mountains, trees and a river and has North's name, along with a smiley face, signed in capital letters in the bottom corner of the painting.

—Bang Showbiz