

With their business evaporating, restaurants use their kitchens to feed those in need

By Emily Heil and Tim Carman, Washington Post on 03.24.20

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Image 1. Jaquan Bland, 9 years old, eats a slice of pizza from We the Pizza in Washington, D.C., where kids can get free pizza. Photo: Laura Chase de Formigny/Washington Post

Nancy Carretta and her two sons had spent part of the morning on March 16 picking up trash at Folger Park in Washington, D.C., and now she was holding her exhausted 3-year-old, Joseph, on her hip while swiping a credit card at the counter at nearby We the Pizza. She had heard about a promotion offered by Sunnyside Restaurant Group, the family run company led by celebrity chef Spike Mendelsohn, to feed kids free at their establishments, including We the Pizza, while schools are closed during the coronavirus outbreak.

A construction manager by profession, Carretta felt a little guilty about taking advantage of the free slices for her boys, but at the same time, the deal offered a secondary benefit to a family that now has to juggle working, parenting and preserving their sanity in a home where they must all share the same space, for who knows how long. Carretta took the kids out for errands and food so her husband could work.

"I'm trying to keep them busy so he can get his project done, so that tomorrow I can go into work for the day," Carretta said, as her older son, Frank, 9 years old, almost willed his pizza to arrive. "A 3-year-old definitely doesn't help working from home or hosting meetings."

Restaurants around the country are living up to their hospitality tag — providing free food for kids, seniors and hospital staffers, offering a place to stir-crazy parents to chill or just staying and providing paychecks to employees — despite suffering the effects of the pandemic themselves. Since the coronavirus outbreak, restaurants across the country have closed, been forced to shut down or watched their sales plummet. Micheline Mendelsohn, deputy chief executive for Sunnyside, said sales have dropped by 50 percent in the past two weeks.

Still, when she got the idea the week of March 9 to offer free lunches to children who needed them, it didn't take long to get her parents and brother, with whom she owns three of the group's restaurants, and their franchisees on board. At first she had hoped to limit the offer to kids who got free and reduced-price lunches at school, but she soon realized it wouldn't be possible to determine who was eligible.

In their haste to make the offer, she says, they circulated some materials saying the lunches were limited to kids with a paying adult and that there was a two-kid limit per family. But she says the meals don't come with any such conditions. "The bottom line is that if you come in and you're hungry, we're going to feed you," she says.

We the Pizza, along with sister operations Good Stuff Eatery and Santa Rosa Taqueria, are among many restaurants around the country stepping up to feed children, who often rely on the public school system for their daily nutrition and meals. Several establishments in the Asheville, North Carolina, community are offering tacos, bag lunches and biscuits to school-age kids. Restaurants in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and Arkansas are reportedly doing much the same. Little Sesame, a small chain of hummus shops in Washington, D.C., is going one step further: In partnership with the nonprofit organization Dreaming Out Loud, the Little Sesame team will deliver meals to residents of the most vulnerable D.C. communities. Its Meals for the City launched March 16 at Kelly Miller Middle School in Ward 7.



"We're adapting to this new reality every day. Two things have become really clear: We want to take care of our team and serve the community most in need," said Little Sesame co-founder Nick Wiseman in a statement to The Washington Post. "We quickly launched Meals for the City to do both. Using our kitchen spaces to produce food for underserved neighborhoods, while relying on the goodwill of our fans to help us get it done. It's a virtuous cycle, and it seems to be working."

Mendelsohn at Sunnyside says the role of social media as her company undertakes this effort has been mixed. Social media has led to donations, including from supplier U.S. Foods, which is

making sure each entree comes with a piece of fresh fruit. But others have accused her, she said, of doing this solely for publicity. "Social media, it's a double-edged sword," she says. "My mother always says that you have to look at your business and look at your principles and do what's right. This was the right move, and we'll do it until we can't or we aren't allowed to."

Brendan Sullivan, 41 years old, a lieutenant commander with the U.S. Coast Guard who stopped at Good Stuff Eatery for burgers with his two young daughters — Anna, 8 years old, and Mary, 4 years old — had nothing but praise for the effort. "It's great," he said. "It's such a hard time for restaurants and businesses generally."

For Mark Bucher, who owns steak frites mini-chain Medium Rare, the offer to help was a bit impulsive. He was scrolling through Twitter on March 12 and noticed the gloom-and-doom tone. "The glass was half empty, according to anyone who had an opinion," he said in an interview. "And I thought, Maybe there can be some good here, maybe people can come together."

Without really thinking through the logistics and without consulting with anyone, he typed out a tweet: Anyone over 70 who was holed up at home, whether because of a quarantine or simply because they were heeding the advice of public health experts to avoid crowds, could get a free meal delivered from one of the restaurants' three locations. "I thought, I've got food and I've got people, so I just put out a tweet not knowing how it was going to go," Bucher says.

He cobbled together a fleet of volunteer drivers: Some are college students whose campuses have shut down, others are professionals whose commute takes them by a Medium Rare location. On March 13, they delivered 60 meals. He estimated that on the night of March 16, they would send out about 180. Each afternoon, he gathers all the requests from social media and email and divvies up the orders among his locations and drivers. Orders go out at 5 p.m.

Later in the evening, a different kind of message starts rolling in: grateful seniors or their children and caregivers, writing in tweets and emails and Facebook messages about what the meal meant to them. *Photos of smiling faces.*

Bucher says he figures that donations, including from the National Football League Players Association, have covered about one-third of the cost. But then again, he says, he's not actually tallying up how much this is eating into his business. He's been lucky, he says. So far, his restaurants have stayed relatively busy, although the Maryland and D.C. locations will switch to takeout only now that dine-in service is suspended. "I think if we knew, we'd be scared," he says. "But I feel an obligation to do it."

In the Washington D.C. area, Po' Boy Jim, Rasa and Bayou Bakery are also offering free meals to kids. The chain &pizza is offering free pizza to hospital workers.

In Boston, Massachusetts, Pamela Carthy, owner of Penguin Pizza, was moved to action by a customer's order. On the night of March 13, a call came in: He wanted 10 pizzas delivered to the Brigham and Women's Hospital, just down the street. He paid by credit card and wanted the delivery to be anonymous. Carthy delivered the pizzas herself, and said she was struck by how grateful the nurses were.

She posted about the encounter on Facebook, thinking people would enjoy the story. They did — and more calls kept coming. One person wanted to send a pizza to an older neighbor they knew

was shut in. A woman whose daughter had heart surgery years ago ordered pizzas sent to the hospital that treated her.

Even without a customer to foot the bill, Carthy has started delivering pizzas herself. On March 16, she had just dropped off five to a local firehouse and five to the police department. She knows the elderly people who live near the pizzeria and leaves food for them outside their doors. She takes a few pizzas home for neighbors.

Her friend came up with a website, feedingthefrontline.com, to urge other restaurants and people who want to help to follow suit. Carthy, who moved to Boston from Ireland in 2002, isn't surprised by the outpouring. "It all comes down to being Boston strong," she says, using a phrase the city rallied around after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings.

She says her business is down, reliant on delivery and takeout. "But there's always someone who has it worse than you," she says. "Because of that, I'll pay it forward. We can feel sorry for ourselves, but what good is that?"

On the afternoon of March 16, Washington, D.C., became the latest jurisdiction to shut down restaurants for dine-in customers, limiting operations to takeout and delivery only. The restrictions won't stop the Sunnyside Restaurant Group, said Micheline Mendelsohn. It will continue the kids-eat-free promotion as takeout. Parents and kids "can come pick up or we can do curbside," she said.

Quiz

1 Read the following paragraph from the article.

Later in the evening, a different kind of message starts rolling in: grateful seniors or their children and caregivers, writing in tweets and emails and Facebook messages about what the meal meant to them. Photos of smiling faces.

Which idea is BEST supported by this paragraph?

- (A) The coronavirus is most dangerous for elderly people and least likely to hurt young children.
- (B) All restaurants are losing money because they have been forced to shut down.
- (C) The coronavirus has increased the number of people ordering takeout from restaurants.
- (D) People appreciate the support restaurants are providing during the coronavirus.

2 Read the following paragraph from the article.

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Which of the following can be inferred from this paragraph?

- (A) Restaurants are making more money than usual delivering meals.
- (B) Delivering free meals is likely costing restaurants money.
- (C) It is less expensive to deliver takeout food than to serve customers in the restaurant.
- (D) Many restaurants will go out of business because of the coronavirus.

3 Which of these are the reasons why restaurants are offering free food?

1. *to ensure no students go hungry while school is out*
2. *to show appreciation for medical professionals*
3. *to raise money for employees who are out of work because they are sick*
4. *to allow elderly people to stay home and stay healthy*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 1, 2 and 4
- (D) 2, 3 and 4

4 WHY did the author begin the article by describing Nancy Carretta's story?

- (A) to show how restaurants offering free food during the coronavirus outbreak are helping their communities
- (B) to describe why the coronavirus is especially dangerous for elderly people
- (C) to highlight the different restrictions placed on restaurants because of the coronavirus
- (D) to explain how the coronavirus has caused the restaurant industry to lose significant revenue