

## MADISON RESTAURATEURS JOIN FORCES TO COOK FOR THOSE IN NEED



According to a Brookings Institute survey in May, food insecurity is now higher than at any time in modern US history, with one in five young children in the US not regularly getting enough to eat, according to their mothers <sup>1</sup>. The economic toll continues to rise as unemployment is expected to climb to an unprecedented 20% by the end of May <sup>2</sup>. Lines outside food banks have stretched for miles prompting some of the overwhelmed charities to seek help from the National Guard. Feeding America, the nation's largest network of food banks, reported a 98% increase in demand <sup>3</sup>. Food prices in April 2020 rose at the fastest pace in 46 years. <sup>4</sup> Restaurants are the nation's second largest employer, sustaining 15.6 million American jobs with annual sales of \$889 billion. The restaurant industry is projecting job losses of between 5 and 7 million in the next three months as sales decline by an estimated \$225 billion. <sup>5</sup>

Here in Madison, the United Way's 211 service has seen triple the number of calls looking for food support and other services. <sup>6</sup> Local government agencies and NGOs are now working on longer-term plans to meet what will be an increasingly higher demand for food as the economic crisis unfolds, especially among communities of color who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. <sup>6</sup> There is an imperative to rethink how to increase access to food in response to the pandemic. <sup>7</sup>

Downtown Madison restaurant owners, Francesca Hong, (Chef/Co-Owner, Morris Ramen), Patrick Sweeney, and Joshua Berkson (Managing Partners of Rule No. 1 Hospitality Group, which owns Merchant and Lucille) are founding members of a campaign called 'Cook It Forward'.

Cook It Forward is a collaboration between local restaurants and local nonprofits to create an end-to-end distribution network to tackle food insecurity in Madison. We are partnering with Downtown Madison restaurants to produce healthy, fresh meals for insecure families, seniors, and people with disabilities. The meals will be safely created, individually packaged, and delivered to local food banks, pantries, and other sites, serving as an intermediary. Last-mile distribution partners will ensure that the growing number of individuals and families who need the food, and without recourse to access it, receive it.

"Cook It Forward represents a new community response strategy that relies on outside dollars, new partners, and different delivery systems," Joshua Berkson said. Patrick Sweeney continues, "Our kitchens currently have the capacity and the will to cook, to nourish, and serve our community. Collectively we can mobilize to put our catering programs to good use. Together we can make a difference."

In line with organizations such as World Central Kitchen and the #ChefsForAmerica campaign <sup>8</sup>, Cook It Forward believes that by working directly with restaurants and providing demand for the restaurant business, we can get meals to those who need them most in Madison, while also supporting the restaurants and their ecosystems including farmers, distributors, restaurant employees, and delivery drivers.

Cook It Forward's starting roster of independent and locally-owned restaurants includes, but is not limited to: **Ancora Coffee, Banzo, Casetta, Forge, Gates & Brovi, Graze, Harvest, Heritage Tavern, L'Etoile, La Kitchenette, La Taguara, Lucille, Madtown Food Services Marigold, Marie's Soul Food, Merchant, Morris Ramen, Pasture & Plenty, Sardine, The Old Fashioned, and Tapatios.**

Cook It Forward is partnering with nonprofit organizations **Collaboration For Good, Food Works, and the Center for Community Stewardship** who are supplying technology, legal, accounting, fiscal agency, and consulting assistance, specifically helping align us with direct response providers who represent and work with the unmet food demand. RE Golden Produce is providing refrigerated storage and transportation.

All in the Cook It Forward network have a shared mission, along with values of inclusivity, community, and humility. "Patrick, Josh and I are guided with new purpose during these challenging times. The coronavirus along with the disparities in our community now guides us, channeling our love of food and service into new areas of social entrepreneurship, social equity, and social justice," says Francesca Hong, Chef/Co-Owner, Morris Ramen.

Cook It Forward's initial goal is to raise enough money to deliver 50,000+ healthy meals to those in need, especially among communities of color who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Donations and additional campaign information can be found at [www.cookitforwardmadison.com/](http://www.cookitforwardmadison.com/).

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