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East Bay Culinary Heroes

Entrepreneurs associated with the local food and beverage scene rise to the occasion in challenging times.

By Emilie White
May 22, 2020

When the coronavirus crisis hit hard this spring, the East Bay's culinary world faced a wave of fear and uncertainty. Without visits from loyal clientele, beloved eateries and nightlife hot spots had to consider layoffs and potential business closures.

But it should come as no surprise that, in such an entrepreneurial industry, many found ways to adapt, keeping staff employed and doors open—while providing critical supplies for the most vulnerable members of our community. Here's a nod to some of the region's most noteworthy actors (among many others) who stepped up in this time of need.

Feeding the Front Lines

After an email from chef Tanya Holland about wanting more takeout orders, and a health-care friend's appreciation for a dinner from a generous benefactor, Berkeley author Ayelet Waldman donated 25 meals from Brown Sugar Kitchen to Oakland's Highland Hospital.

"I went on Twitter, and said, 'Hey Bay Area, if you can handle doing this, I'm going to buy dinner for the hospital once a week,'" says Waldman. After a month of donations and eager restaurant partners, Waldman's new enterprise, East Bay FeedER, was serving about 100 hospitals and clinics each day with 500 meals from a rotating list of more than 40 local eateries. "One order from us allows [the restaurants] to keep two people employed for a week," she says. "We have enough money that we will be able to keep this up through this stage of the pandemic, and if we keep going, we can do it again if there's another lockdown. This period of crisis is showing ... the best of our East Bay community in a way that's really remarkable." *eastbayfeeder.org*.

Honorable Mentions

—Fourteen restaurants in Orinda banded together to provide as many as 600 meals a day to workers at John Muir Hospital.

More info here.

—Sunrise Bistro and Catering, Walnut Creek: Over 3,500 healthy meals delivered to first responders in Concord, Oakland, and Walnut Creek.

More info here.

—Bakesale Betty, Oakland: Organized fundraiser to sponsor a cookie or pie to be delivered to front-line workers.

More info here.

Helping the Most Vulnerable

When schools closed, local school lunch company Choicelunch was suddenly cut

off from 17,000 East Bay students in need of meals. But CEO Justin Gagnon realized that the company could still provide East Bay residents with culinary staples otherwise unavailable due to shortages at stores and help keep his employees and supply chain in business.

The turnaround was swift—after developing the Choicelunch Pantry on a Friday, the program was launched the following Tuesday. Customers can pick up online orders in Danville, Lafayette, San Jose, and Hayward, with an exclusive location for Rossmoor residents. The company plans to diversify its offerings as the crisis continues. “The majority of our clientele is families with young children, but what works for a family of six may not work for a single person who’s 65 years old,” says COO Keith Cosby.



Ayelet Waldman and her team, East Bay FeedER, donate meals to East Bay hospitals.

Reenie Raschke

“I got an email from one of my friends on Easter Sunday, saying, ‘This is really a blessing, to have a nice dinner and a sense of normalcy,’” adds Gagnon. “It’s a great affirmation for what we’re doing.”
pantry.choicelunch.com.

Honorable Mentions

— Monster Pho, Oakland. Partnered with World Central Kitchen’s #ChefsForAmerica initiative to provide as many as 1,000 meals a week for homeless shelters, foster care kids, and nonprofit agencies that help families dealing with hunger.

More info here.

— Alameda County Community Food Bank. As demand skyrocketed, the food bank partnered with other agencies to organize countywide data to help connect residents with basic services like food distribution.

More info here.

— Double Helping Hands. The Downtown Berkeley Association recruited several restaurants to supply inexpensive gourmet meals to the city’s homeless.

More info here.

A Grocery Alternative



Ayelet Waldman
Reenie Raschke



Ryan Mariotti, Justin Gagnon, and Keith Cosbey—the cofounders of Choicelunch—offer food essentials.

Courtesy of Choicelunch

In addition to family packs of popular dine-in meals like chicken pot-pie, Pleasanton's Salt Craft restaurant began offering individual items for home cooking—such as house-made breads and dried pasta—for ^[SEP]hungry shelter-in-placers. Owner Matt Greco had long hoped to integrate take-home meals and staples into Salt Craft's business plan, so the structure was already established to offer ^[SEP]a grocery store alternative.

The Salt Craft team removed the seating from their front patio and installed stations for staff to leave orders for local residents to pick up.

Greco's no-quit attitude may stem from his experience as a chef in New York City during the September 11 terrorist attacks. "You've got to just keep going, good or bad, because it's going to get good again," he says. "I'm happy we get to supply people in such a necessary way." *saltcraftpleasanton.com*.

Honorable Mentions

— Bierhaus, Walnut Creek

More info here.

— Co Nam, Oakland

More info here.

— First Street Alehouse, Livermore



From left: Ryan Mariotti, Justin Gagnon, and Keith Cosbey
Lauren Feddersen



More info here.

Distilling Opportunity

The pandemic posed unique challenges for newly closed tasting rooms—but Sutherland Distilling Company in Livermore seized an FDA-sanctioned opportunity to help fill the nationwide shortage for hand sanitizer.

Co-owner and distiller Eric Larimer, who is also the COO for Norcal Ambulance, and his distillery partner and Norcal CEO, Barry Sutherland, had experienced the lack of personal protective equipment firsthand, and focused on providing supplies to frontline workers, as well as first responders.

Larimer estimates that the distillery is now producing 500 gallons of sanitizer a week.

“The hard thing has been having to turn people away ... [but] local residents were not only understanding, they were offering to help,” says Larimer, adding that the company has caught up on orders and is expanding their offerings. “We had one guy who wanted to donate a couple bottles of wine—that community outpouring of wanting to do something has been really cool.”
sutherlanddistilling.com.

Honorable Mentions

Salt Craft owner Matt Greco provides groceries for the community.

Courtesy of Salt Craft



Matt Greco

Courtesy of Salt Craft



Eric Larimer is involved with Sutherland Distilling Company’s production of hand sanitizer.

Sean Glaspy

— Bay Area Distilling Company,
Brentwood

More info here.

— Falcon Spirits Distillery, Richmond

More info here.

— St. George Spirits and Hangar One,
Alameda

More info here.



Eric Larimer
Sean Glaspy