

## 2,000 Free Meals a Night, Seasoned by Silicon Valley Chefs



With unemployment soaring in this region of haves and have-nots, a local Boys and Girls Club has transformed into a pop-up takeout operation to feed the most disadvantaged.

By Matt Richtel

PALO ALTO, Calif. — Andres Pantoja, an up-and-coming Silicon Valley sous chef, spent his pre-pandemic evenings delicately preparing the \$115 plate of lamb chops and deboning the \$42 Psari Plaki whole fish at a fashionable restaurant here. It is frantic work serving 200 upscale meals a night.

His new gig is proving way more chaotic, though — making thousands of free meals that seem priceless to those being served: the gardeners, janitors, construction workers, housekeepers and others who have seen their meager income dwindle further as the coronavirus ravages the economy. Mr. Pantoja has become part of a large-scale effort to help feed the poorest families in a region with one of the nation’s widest income gaps.

Call it tech-to-table, a Silicon Valley effort to feed the hungry engineered by a local Boys and Girls Clubs chapter. The organization’s chief executive, Peter Fortenbaugh, a Harvard M.B.A., employed his background working at McKinsey & Co. and lots of connections to turn what had been an education-centric program for underprivileged students into one of the busiest takeout operations in the Bay Area.

Two sites serve more than 2,000 free meals a night, one in East Palo Alto, and the other in Redwood City, where Mr. Pantoja runs the show with exuberance.

“Jambalaya tonight: Chicken, andouille sausage, some shrimp,” he said on a recent night, as one of his fellow chefs stirred in the rice. The seasonings? “So many things: paprika, cumin, chili powder. The rest is a secret blend.”

This week, the group served its 100,000th meal, spending now \$30,000 a week. A recent infusion of \$218,000 came in from a bike fund-raiser, 784 participants with a quarantine twist.

“Most of the riders were on a Peloton,” said Tina Syer, who as chief advancement officer heads up fund-raising for the organization. Eighty dollars per rider was given by, among other donors, Jeff Weiner, who recently stepped down as chief executive of LinkedIn, and Dr. Michelle Sandberg, sister of Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook.

Food insecurity — a mild term for terror of being hungry — has become central to the Covid-19 story as job losses grow chronic. So go the stories from the people lined up starting at 4 p.m. outside the two Boys and Girls Club sites: a house cleaner with four children whose income has dropped to \$110 a week from \$400; a 57-year-old janitor who lost his job when Macy’s shut and lives in a home with seven people, none now employed; a mother of three whose husband, a painter, gets only occasional jobs now.

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“The owners of the houses don’t want him to come near them,” said the woman, who is undocumented and gave only her first name, Josefina, to avoid trouble from immigration officials. She and others described the food as particularly helpful, given that rent has to come first.

At least half of those who visit are undocumented immigrants, according to local officials, including a member of the East Palo Alto City Council. The population faces a double threat from lost jobs and a particular vulnerability to the virus because of the dense living conditions and jobs that, when they aren’t lost, aren’t the kind that can be done over Zoom.

Mike Francois, a good Samaritan community member, uses his 1986 Silverado pickup to take 25 meals each night from the East Palo Alto clubhouse to give to families in the neighborhood, including a struggling family with six children, five of them teenage boys. “They always come to my truck smiling,” he said.

The operation elicits mixed emotions in the person in charge, Mr. Fortenbaugh, chief executive of the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Peninsula, which he took over 16 years ago after a brief tech career and a stint at McKinsey & Co.

“I have two emotions,” Mr. Fortenbaugh said. “I’m really sad. Most of America doesn’t realize how hard this is on the low-income immigrant community. But part of me is optimistic and proud we can do something.”

Ditto and bravo, said Russell Hancock, president and chief executive of Joint Venture Silicon Valley, a think-tank whose research shows the vastness of the region’s income gap: 75 percent of wealth in the region is now held by 13 percent of the residents, the largest ever such span measured here.

“Then this crisis sets in,” Mr. Hancock said, “and suddenly we’re no longer just lamenting that some people are well off and some people less well off. Now it’s a question of survival itself.”

Ever the technologist, Mr. Fortenbaugh loves the efficiency and energetic feel of a start-up at the free-food enterprise. Until Covid-19 hit, the club focused on tutoring, college preparedness and after-school events for families. It served 350 meals in-person to the students who stayed late at the clubs to study.

Kitchen capacity expanded, partly through donation or low-cost rental of convection ovens, a fryer, a new stovetop, and through partnerships and networking. Some nights, in addition to the meals, boxes of food are given out with supplies from a second nonprofit, called Second Harvest, that has chipped in from its stores of eggs, pasta, vegetables and fruit.

When this all unfolded in mid-March, Mr. Fortenbaugh visited the Palo Alto restaurant Taverna, where he knows the owner. There he saw a sous-chef who had grown up coming every day after school to the Redwood City Boys and Girls clubhouse: Mr. Pantoja, who had risen from the ranks of upscale restaurants.

Mr. Fortenbaugh lured him away from the restaurant, and now Mr. Pantoja, 29, despite being told he is wanted back at Taverna, has decided to become the chef full-time at the clubhouse, even after the pandemic ends.

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As the cars pulled up out front collecting his jambalaya creation — which came with bread roll, salad and corn — Mr. Pantoja stood out back in the yard where he once played and where he’s now planted lavender, rosemary, fennel, red lettuce and potatoes.

“I grew up here. I painted the mural on the wall,” he said. “This is the cycle of life.”