Restaurant community helps feed itself

With staffers laid off, local establishments work to fill the gaps

By Greg Morago
STAFF WRITER

With thousands of area bar and restaurant workers unemployed, the hospitality industry has been busy working to feed those who feed Houston.

Over the weekend Riel restaurant switched gears, turning itself into a drive-up spot for free take-away dinners for Houston restaurant workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

“It’s heartbreaking what’s going on,” said Riel chef/owner Ryan LaChaine. “The majority of them lost their jobs overnight. Things need to get done right now. Folks are in trouble now. We need to step up today and do something.”

On Saturday the Montrose restaurant launched the Houston arm of the Restaurant Workers Relief Program, a partnership between the Lee Initiative and Maker’s Mark to feed restaurant workers in need. Lee, based in Lexington, Ky, established the program in cities including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Seattle, New Orleans and Washington, DC.

Restaurants in participating cities prepare hundreds of to-go meals for restaurant workers who have been laid off or had their work hours reduced. Houston Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson made a financial contribution to the Lee Initiative to help feed Houston hospitality workers.

Service industry workers were able to pick up hot meals — spaghetti marinara with grilled chicken breast or vegetable fried rice with eggrolls — at Riel.

While Riel is obligated to 10 days with the project, LaChaine said he’s currently working to procure food to keep feeding restaurant workers beyond that.

“We’re going to do it until someone tells us to stop. Or until things get better,” he said.

Riel’s participation in the relief program is one of several local initiatives that organized quickly to help industry workers feed each other. Hugo’s, MAD and Killen’s Barbecue also have fed their own employees and/or others within the local restaurant community.

It’s a significant number affected. According to the Greater Houston Partnership, the local restaurant industry employs 265,300 workers at more than 12,000 restaurants.

Houston Shift Meal, an initiative that funds local restaurants to prepare meals for furloughed and unemployed restaurant workers, began its second week of operations Monday. To date, nearly 1,000 meals have been prepared for hospitality workers, who can check daily on the organization’s Facebook page for the participating restaurants offering meals.

Workers using the program cover the spectrum of the local dining scene — from employees of McDonald’s to Tony’s, said Jonathan Beiter, a media relations specialist who founded Houston Shift Meals with sommelier Cat Nguyen. Both were instrumental in the Midtown Kitchen Collective, a commissary mobilized to prepare tens of thousands of meals for Hurricane Harvey victims in Houston and across the South Texas region.

“It’s one of those running themes with coronavirus that it doesn’t discriminate,” Beiter said. “And it doesn’t discriminate within our industry either.”

Houston Shift Meals works like this: The organization accepts monetary sponsorships and donations from suppliers, businesses and individuals who wish to help. Each restaurant preparing meals that day gets $250 to make about 60 to 75 meals. Workers in need sign up through the Facebook page. In addition to single prepared meals, the group is now also preparing multi-meal packs of four that can tide workers for a few days instead of venturing out daily for a free meal. They also have produce and dry goods.

Hugo’s, El Big Bad, MKT Bar at Phoenicia Downtown, Goodnight Hospitality, The Phoenix on Westheimer, Backstreet Cafe, B.B. Italia and the Urban Harvest Farmers Market have joined the Houston Shift Meals project, and they are working to add more restaurant partners.

“All of our restaurant partners are so happy and so willing to be part of this,” Beiter said. “We’re not asking for them to do anything free. It’s an opportunity to help out their own.”

greg.morago@chron.com
instagram.com/gregmorago

HOW TO HELP

Houston Shift Meal: Established to create a network of restaurants to provide free meals to feed restaurant workers. Donations and sponsorships go to restaurant partners to offset their costs for providing meals to those in need within Houston’s hospitality community. Participating restaurants will prepare a minimum of 50-75 meals a day, available free to any hospitality worker, houstonshiftmeal.com.

Restaurant Workers Relief Program: Riel in Montrose has partnered with the Lee Initiative and Maker’s Mark to turn the restaurant into a relief kitchen for re-
taurant workers in need. Dinners to go will be handed out on a first-come, first-served basis, as well as essential household supplies. Pickup from 4 to 6 daily at Riel, 1927 Fairview. To support the program, donations are accepted at LEEInitiative.org.

**Texas Restaurant Relief Fund:** Established through the Texas Restaurant Association to provide immediate financial relief to the state’s independent restaurateurs with funds designed to save employee jobs.

**Southern Smoke Emergency Relief Fund:** The Houston-based Southern Smoke Foundation (southernsmoke.org) provides assistance in times of need for people working in the food and beverage industry. Examples of need include medical bills, family support assistance and mental health needs.

**Texas Hospitality COVID-19 Lockdown: Offerings & Support:** A Facebook page for Houston hospitality professionals to share information and offerings.

**United State Bartenders Guild National Charity Foundation:** A COVID-19 Relief Campaign has been set up to help bartenders and service industry professionals with grants.

**Keep Houston Fed:** The Greater Houston Restaurant Association and the Houston Food Bank have teamed up to support KeepHoustonFed.com, a directory of Houston-area restaurants offering delivery, takeout and gift cards for sale. Participating restaurants are offering customers the option of adding $1 or more to their order for the Houston Food Bank. Every $1 donated translates to three meals.
Ryan Lachaine, chef/owner of Riel, works in his kitchen to prepare food to give out to restaurant workers. “Folks are in trouble now. We need to step up today and do something,” he said.