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Crisis caring: chef foundations, branding, and responsibility in foodscapes

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ABSTRACT

Charitable foundations started by chefs and restaurant companies continue to grow and occupy space as prominent humanitarian leaders during times of crisis, and this paper utilizes research from New Orleans to examine these trends. Drawing on ethnographic data from chefs, donors, and community food activists, this paper examines: why some chefs have started foundations while others have not; the rationales of donors who give to chef foundations; the prevalence of 'cause'sumerism to raise philanthropic funds; how some restaurant owners attempt to address the precarious labor practices of the industry within their own businesses; and how all these various forms of caring are raced, classed, and gendered. This paper begins and ends with the COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic, highlighting how chefs and their philanthropic foundations reflect a precarious reliance on caring individuals and non-governmental entities to respond to on-going crises.

KEYWORDS

Foodscapes; caring; COVID-19; restaurants; food justice; humanitarianism; philanthropy; chefs; crisis

Introduction: caring in times of crisis – celebrity chefs feed the city

In the early days of the COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic, a small organization operating out of a house in New Orleans' Gentilly neighborhood became an unlikely yet bustling food distribution site for the large, regional food bank. The organization had formed after Katrina to replant trees destroyed by the flooding, and normally hosts service events with volunteers from corporate, church, and school groups. Procedures changed rapidly week to week as the small staff team adapted to providing food aid and to meet emerging safety protocols. Volunteers were recruited to deliver meals in their personal vehicles to elders across the city. The City of New Orleans featured the organization in their emergency text communications about and on the city's website about COVID-19 response, requesting that New Orleanians offer their assistance to help feed hungry neighbors. I received one of these texts, and became a volunteer contributing to the efforts, part of my ongoing entanglements as both a feminist ethnographer and a local resident personally engaged in caring about food and inequity.

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Within a few weeks of operation, a large World Central Kitchen banner appeared across the garage of the organization's modest headquarters. World Central Kitchen (WCK) is an NGO founded in 2010 by Spanish-born chef José Andrés[1] of the ThinkFoodGroup, LLC, in response to Hurricane María in Puerto Rico. Over the coming months, colorful WCK stickers sometimes appeared on the film topping trays of hot food that volunteers loaded into their car trunks, instead of labels from the local food bank. In the same time period, TIME magazine ran a special double issue with Andrés on the cover wearing a traditional white chef's coat and holding a giant metal pot and wooden spoon, the article entitled "A Chef's Pandemic Relief Mission" (Gregory 2020).

While I was surprised at this evidence of how quickly WCK's presence had expanded across the United States, emergency food aid was consistent with their work in Puerto Rico. However, I was unprepared to see Andrés' NGO in another context entirely: assisting with early voting for the 2020 Presidential Election at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome, home of the Saints football team. Volunteers in bright WCK t-shirts directed the long lines of masked voters, sharing information on how to navigate their way through the massive stadium. I heard several people in line thank the volunteers for all the help they were extending to New Orleans.

How is it that a celebrity chef's organization first becomes a part of a city's emergency food aid response, and next a part of a city's voting infrastructure, a cornerstone of democratic practice? This question emerged in other forms during the pandemic, as actor Sean Penn's organization, Community Organized Relief Effort, coordinated COVID testing efforts in various sites across the U.S., and at the mass vaccination site Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles (Lau and Nelson 2021). In this article, I position these queries within scholarship analyzing upwards trends in philanthropic and humanitarian engagement led by celebrities, both in New Orleans post-Katrina (Firth and Passidomo 2022) and internationally (Richey 2016). This increase in private and third sector involvement correlates with long-term decreases in federal and municipal funding streams, reflecting changing notions of what governmental systems should do, and who is responsible for a wide variety of essential services. Philanthropists, celebrities, corporations, and the public (through charitable giving and ethical consumption) are increasingly mobilized as prominent humanitarian actors, representing shifts away from state-based responsibility at a global scale (Brockington 2014; Chouliaraki 2013; Johnson 2011; Kapoor 2012; LaFleur and Brainard 2009; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence 2007; Moeller 2018; Richey and Ponte 2011). While all nonprofit organizations with 501c3 status in the United States have to comply with Internal Revenue Service (IRS) requirements regarding their tax-exempt status, these organizations operate largely without external oversight, raising questions about governance and accountability (Gilmore 2007) – concerns that this paper attempts to address in the sections that follow by detailing several practices and procedures of chef foundations that have been unstudied.

In the introduction to this special issue, the editors establish how "as the state rolls back welfare programs, the burden for care increasingly falls on individuals and non-state interventions." This reliance on caring individuals and non-governmental entities (such as chefs and their philanthropic foundations) is not only a response to uneven – and thus precarious – social conditions, but also contributes to and entrenches further precarity. Clyde Woods' work highlights this unevenness in rebuilding post-Katrina, noting historical precedents for oppression and disinvestment that proceeded the flooding, "the

disaster before the disaster." Woods argues that the federal government rescued white, elite systems and infrastructure (what he terms "dominant power blocs" and specifically the "Bourbon Bloc"), while systematically working against the success of the "Blues agenda" – alternate visions of development for the city and the region led by Black, African American, and other People of Color (2017:256). Thus, the state is present and active in preserving the interests of elites, while eroding supports and protections for People of Color, women, the poor and working classes, and others. It is in this context that chef foundations intervene.

Rebuilding after the flood: chefs and the NGO surge

Chef Andrés and his restaurants have no documented connection to the city, which is notable in the context of New Orleans, a city celebrated for its food, restaurants and chefs. Chefs symbolically and materially became leaders of rebuilding efforts post-Katrina (see Firth forthcoming). As just one example, chef John Besh cooked red beans and rice in a Walmart parking lot and "fed New Orleans until it could learn to feed itself again" (Morago 2015).[2] Besh's relief efforts, at least in part operating under the name Besh Disaster Solutions, secured government food aid contracts that propelled the rapid expansion of his company, the Besh Restaurant Group (Severson 2007). In 2017 the #MeToo movement and Brett Anderson's reporting for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* brought sexual harassment at the Besh company into the public view, and my own research has found that the "culture of sexual harassment" permeated Besh's philanthropic efforts as well. I spotted John Besh helping unload boxes of food at the site that begins this article; beyond that, he has been largely absent from the emergency response to the pandemic, a stark contrast to his strong media presence during coverage of Katrina. Meanwhile Besh's philanthropic initiative, the John Besh Foundation rebranded as the Made in New Orleans Foundation and responded to the pandemic with the Bounce Back Fund to "provide immediate emergency financial aid to hospitality professionals of color to meet basic needs" (https://minofoundation.org/whatwedo).

While the relief efforts that emerge during disasters may seem sudden, new, and ephemeral, I argue that there are components of third sector/non-governmental relief infrastructure which may morph but persist across crises. The introduction highlights several examples: entities that formed during Katrina showed up again to respond to the pandemic, including the continued presence of John Besh's company through his rebranded foundation. When the city flooded due to levee failure fifteen years earlier, there was an unprecedented surge of NGOs in the city and their attendant volunteers, what Adams documents as the "affect economy" which mobilized the United States' largest domestic volunteer effort (Adams 2013). More than 900 local nonprofits participated in GiveNOLA in 2021, an annual fundraising event started in 2014 by the Greater New Orleans Foundation. Before Katrina however, the city had few nonprofit organizations and limited philanthropic activity overall (Woods 2017, 280–1). One of the consistent elements of ongoing crises in New Orleans is NGO involvement and a reliance on volunteer labor, a trend facilitated by "starve the beast" politics which dismantles governmental systems and social supports (Woods 2017, 261–71). The number of philanthropic foundations started by chefs increased in the post-Katrina context, part of the rapid growth of nonprofit organizations more generally. Some of the informal

emergency responses led by chefs that were celebrated after Katrina (such as Besh serving red beans in a parking lot) formalized and professionalized over time, as at least six local chefs had formed nonprofit foundations before the fifteenth anniversary of Katrina. Restaurants and chefs have become not only essential to branding the city for tourism promotion (Firth forthcoming), but their charitable efforts on a variety of scales – ranging from federal food aid contracts to giving gift certificates to community groups – have become a normalized and perhaps essential (?) part of how the city responds to crisis.

Methodology and structure

In this paper, I draw on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork and 110 semi-structured interviews with chefs, cooks, community food organizations, eaters, and donors to chef foundations. Including how community cooks and food justice activists navigate "doing good" and "caring" in foodscapes[3] is important in contextualizing chefs' philanthropic interventions. Responding to the need to have longer-term studies to more adequately gage recovery (Browne 2015; Burns and Thomas 2015, 24), this data collection occurred a decade after Katrina, creating the opportunity to interrogate how the groups participating in this research have responded to *ongoing crises* beyond Katrina (Gotham and Greenberg 2014). A white woman who grew up in Kansas, I am on the founding staff team of a youth food justice organization called Grow Dat Youth Farm that was started in New Orleans in 2011 (see Brown et al. 2020 for more on Grow Dat), and thus have been intimately involved in many of the processes I study as a feminist ethnographer.

In my examination of how chefs, donors, and others are mobilized through demands to care in times of disaster, I follow Johnston and Cairns in their interest in exploring demands that we "care more" about food (Cairns and Johnston 2015). Specific to this special issue, I consider precarious caring and precarious labor, and how these forms of caring are raced, classed and gendered. In one sense, this analysis tracks how individuals and collectives attempt to provide basic services as a response to material need and the government's failure to do so. While that means that engagement could be viewed as at least necessary if not altruistic, further dynamics are at play: marketing and branding are also key motives for chef philanthropy.

In the first two sections below, I outline the proliferation of chef foundations in New Orleans and consider why some chefs have started foundations while others have not. I next share interviews from donors to chef foundations to understand why individuals engage in this sort of philanthropy. In "Gender: Leaving Professional Kitchens for Community Food Work," I discuss the restaurant as an exploitative workplace and speak with women who have given up the title of "chef" for that of cook, teacher, activist, or otherwise. I then consider how strict, normative gender roles in restaurants relate to the dominance of white male chefs in philanthropy. I conclude by highlighting how some restaurants attempt to address precarious labor their business, making up their own rules in the absence of ethical leadership in the industry and a lack of regulation and oversight. Throughout. I attend to how "caring about food" shows up differently for each constituency.

Formalizing doing good: chef foundations

Philanthropic organizations launched by chefs or their companies post-Katrina include: a local branch of Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard (2006); the Link-Stryjewski Foundation (2015); the Edgar "Dooky" Jr and Leah Chase Family Foundation (2013); and John Besh Foundation (2011). By the end of 2018, three additional chef foundations affiliated with the Besh Restaurant Group had launched: the Arón Sánchez Scholarship Fund; Kelly Fields' Yes Ma'am Foundation; and Alon Shaya's Shaya-Barnett Foundation. The Emeril Lagasse Foundation (2002) was one of the few chef foundations formed before Katrina, and Lagasse personally won the James Beard Foundation's Humanitarian of the Year award in 2013 largely for his work in New Orleans. Most of these organizations focus their efforts on food education for children or on restaurant workforce development. While the term "foundation" has become commonplace in New Orleans, most of the newest institutions offer programming and provide services, and do little to no grant-making – thus, they operate more as nonprofit organizations than charitable foundations.

Organizers of the James Beard Foundation's "Chefs Boot Camp"[4] report that the average restaurant in their national network distributes about $50,000 USD in donations each year. Restaurants and chefs are asked to donate gift cards, to cook for fundraising events, to champion various causes, or to become board members for NGOs. A white woman who owns two restaurants in New Orleans estimates that she receives ten requests a week for donations, amounting to more than five hundred requests each year. A larger company with four restaurants in the French Quarter reports similar numbers and sometimes more. Donations for food comprise one-third of the requests received, usually for fundraising galas or special events, in amounts ranging anywhere from 200 meals to 1,500 meals. Two-thirds ask for gift cards or in-kind donations, primarily for auctions. National organizations and companies, both nonprofit and for-profit, also approach chefs to request donations for New Orleans-themed trip packages.

Most restaurants do not have formal systems to process the stream of requests: they lack dedicated and trained staff who have been assigned the responsibility of overseeing donations, and they do not have rubrics or strategies in place for making decisions about which organizations they should support. In light of these constraints and to manage the constant requests for donations, starting a formal foundation can be understood as chefs attempting to exercise more control over the process – a rationale first introduced to me by a leader of the Southern Foodways Alliance who has been on the Board of several chef foundations.

Several small restaurants and chefs expressed their desire to give more away, but said they are economically limited in what they can do due to tight profit margins. Nikki, a white woman who owns a small Cajun restaurant, described her excitement about being asked to be the guest chef at one of Grow Dat's fundraisers, "Dinner on the Farm." However, once she learned the anticipated cost for sponsoring the event, she could not afford it: "I don't have any money. I don't know how most of these people [other chefs] can come in and donate the money and everything else, and write it off in some way. But I'm like [whispering] 'this could tank me.'" A chef like Nikki cannot operate in the same philanthropic spaces as formalized foundations do, even though she would like to. The

dominance of foundations led by chefs who are white men reflects their privileged access to capital and resources, linking the success of their businesses to prominent spaces they occupy as philanthropists. Within this model of giving, only certain chefs can participate.

Luis is a Latino chef who owns several upscale restaurants, and he explained his decision not to start a foundation: "You know what, I don't want the tail wagging the dog . . . I don't want an office. I don't want bureaucracy. I don't want to have somebody calling me and I have to show up. I don't know, that really doesn't motivate me. I love the freedom that I have." Luis said he learned hard lessons when he had six restaurants open at the same time, and that he knows now he doesn't want to have to manage that much again. Starting and running a foundation of the kind that is prevalent in New Orleans – one which is not endowed, has considerable fundraising responsibilities and runs programing – is a considerable logistical endeavor which requires skill and on-going labor. A leader of the Chefs Boot Camp program at the James Beard Foundation told me that she has been asked by a "remarkable" number of chefs if the JBF would be willing to take over or absorb their foundation as chefs realize they are unable to manage the institution they have created. Most chefs lack the adequate experience and infrastructure to run a nonprofit, and their organizations risk being unsustainable and having to shut their doors. Rather than creating a new organization which will compete with other organizations to raise money, the Chef Boot Camp leader said she advises chefs to donate to an established organization or find ways to partner with them.

Mandy, a Black woman who runs a Food As Medicine program connected with a POC-led community growing project in the Lower 9th Ward, also expressed frustration with the trend of chefs and other philanthropists starting new projects rather than supporting organizations that are already active:

> Everybody talks about philanthropy and how they want to give back. "Yeah, if ya'll become famous and make a whole bunch of money and ya'll want to give back, hey that's wonderful". But my community never sees it. You want to give back? We have a great program. Support our program. Cause we're already doing what you want to do. Don't take what you're doing and do it yourself and then you get all the funding for it. No! Partner with us. And we can show you how to do it right. That's big thinking. We've been doing this for three years now. We're already doing what you're just jumping into.

Others expressed similar critiques at the way in which charitable efforts can increase precarity by putting resources into new initiatives, rather than supporting efforts that are already active. Recounting the proliferation of farms and community gardening initiatives in the Lower 9th Ward, Black activist and community health practitioner Roseline stressed how nonprofits directed resources away from people who were trying to rebuild their homes and would have had their own gardens: "so rather than giving the people the money that could have been used to rebuild their own personal farms and their own personal gardens and their homes then you have all these people come with the charity farm, and the charity this, and the charity that." A white leader of a museum dedicated to Southern foodways said that although chefs are a focus of their work, chefs don't support the museum because they prioritize their own foundations and programs: "It's my own frustration, no one supports us . . . more and more we [even] have people refusing to give us product, like if we have a party . . . I think they've been over asked."

While the Emeril Lagasse Foundation has typically focused on grant-making, a white male leader said that the foundation's Board of Directors has recently pushed the organization to undertake more programming to create "signature projects":

> A couple of years ago the Board says, "Well wait a minute, we just keep raising money and we just give it away." And yes our name is on a lot of things and that's lovely: Cafe Reconcile, Liberty's Kitchen, St Michael's, Edible Schoolyard New Orleans, NOCCA [New Orleans Centre for Creative Arts high school] . . . But the Board's like "well wait a minute, we don't run anything, we don't own anything. We need something."

This expressed need to "own something" can push philanthropists into launching interventions where they likely lack experience and expertise. In my research, community organizers like Mandy and those advising chefs such as the James Beard Foundation said grants were the best way chefs could support food movements and social change. However, from the business perspective, giving out grants has less branding potential than a "signature project," which is "owned" by the corporation or celebrity brand.

Branding: launching a foundation and social media

This idea of a signature project connects to a core reason chefs and restaurants engage in philanthropy: marketing. Lindsay, a white co-chef at an upscale restaurant Uptown stresses a theme that came up in many interviews with local chefs: that charitable events serve as marketing opportunities for restaurants. She explains her conflicted feelings of participating in charitable events: "Am I being philanthropic? Sure. Am I also hustling my ass off trying to get more diners in my door? YES. It's a room full of a bunch of rich white people! 'Come, spend your money at my restaurant!'" When she serves food at a charitable event, Lindsay is being philanthropic *and* she is simultaneously advertising her restaurant. This dynamic can become complicated for chefs with foundations when doing charitable events: guest chefs are not only advertising their restaurants, but they were also hoping to cultivate donors for their foundations. This can set up a dynamic of direct competition between the host nonprofit and the guest chef's foundation.

Debbie, a white woman who used to own a restaurant and now works full time for a food bank (see section on gender and leaving professional kitchen below), described cooking red beans and rice[5] for five thousand people at a time during the flooding in Baton Rouge and surrounding areas in July 2016. She never left the food bank's kitchen, but many celebrity chefs went to Baton Rouge and some served the food she had cooked. Debbie said chefs are interested in these kinds of visible aid responses: "because it is a good picture, it is a really good Instagram. And since I'm not selling anything anymore, I don't really need that. So I'm happy to let them take that glamour shot and I'll just work." Debbie transitioned from running a restaurant to cooking for food insecure people at an anti-hunger organization: she says, paradoxically, that this change made her activism *less* visible to the public. Thus, a restaurant's marketing may position a chef as caring or charitable, but that doesn't necessarily correlate to how they spend the majority of their time or the impact that their caring does or does not have.

Chef Luis similarly said he can be more selective regarding his charitable engagement now that he is more established: "When I first started out as a business owner we would kind of go for the high profile stuff – oh, because we want to try to get our name out there,

obviously we're trying to promote the restaurant." Debbie, who is in her 60s, framed the origins of her food activism as the Cesar Chavez grape boycotts in the mid-1960s. Taking this longer view, Debbie traced the recent growth in chef activism to the rise of social media: "With the advent of social media and how everybody is a lot more visible, I think that chefs and entrepreneurs and corporations and pretty much everybody has understood that this is a cause-related marketing thing. That you look good when you give back. And it might not be the closest thing to your heart, but it sure is good for business." For both Luis and Debbie, there is no debate here about the purpose of visible charitable engagement for chefs: it is "good for business." In this sense, chefs engage in a form of precarious caring: precarious in that their engagement is less about feelings and action, and instead serves as a social media performative spectacle that works as much as a marketing tool as a charitable endeavor.

Personal relationships, particularly with customers, can limit or direct philanthropic engagement. Luis said, "One of the things I learned as I got older, I want to support things that I believe in, not so much 'Well, you know so-and-so comes in here and they're on the Board of . . . ' And that's kind of a big consideration because you want to keep everybody happy and help everybody that you can." Chefs can feel a sense of obligation to their important or frequent customers, and want to reciprocate the gift of their patronage. Here, Luis describes how that obligation can impact charitable work and can even direct chefs to engage with issues or organizations they are otherwise uninterested in.

Donors "vote with their forks"

At a Besh Restaurant Group-owned bakery, Willa Jean, customers could purchase a $6.00 USD "Milk Money" latte. The latte was advertised as an opportunity to "support local farmers" as a portion of sales from each latte went to the Besh Foundation's micro-lending program for farmers and food producers. One such customer was Juan, a former winner of the Besh Foundation's Chefs Move program in which aspiring chefs of color were sent to culinary school. Juan ordered a steaming Milk Money latte in a tall white cup at the Willa Jean counter before sitting down for our interview. Juan explained his motivation for buying it, comparing it to his practice of buying red noses at Walgreens for "Red Nose Day" to benefit Comic Relief. Juan explained: "The milk that they use for this latte, they actually get from one of the farms that got a microloan from Besh, and part of the proceeds that they get from selling it, they give it back to them. So, they're getting something from me buying it which is why I always get it. And it tastes delicious." Juan misunderstood how the loan process works, believing that his money, at least in part, goes directly to the dairy farmer who supplied the milk. Instead, farmers take out loans from a credit union that they repay over time; the Besh Foundation's funds – raised in part by the Milk Money latte – would likely only be used for overhead or if the farmer defaulted on the loan.

In interviews, one vegetable farmer who received a micoloan thought that misunderstandings about how the Milk Money program worked were widespread:

> There was something in the paper about how we got this "award" or something. And we had a couple of customers congratulate us and refer to it as a grant. I remember in one instance I was like, "well, we got a loan" and they were surprised that it wasn't free money. I went to a bank and got a loan and I pay it back on a timeframe with interest . . . He [John Besh] didn't just give me the money. It's a loan.

Due to the way the latte was marketed, the difference between "free money" (a grant) and a loan is a distinction that shoppers like Juan may not understand. That lack of clarity meant that some buyers erroneously believed they were donating directly to a local farmer, or that the Besh Foundation was giving away grant money. In the latter situation, the confusion becomes a marketing and branding benefit for the Besh Restaurant Group.

In reflecting on her decision to attend a culinary-themed fundraiser for the John Besh Foundation, Rhonda shared:

> [Food is] what we're about and it's what we like and it goes to a good cause. So when you think about that—it's perfect. So you think, 'okay I'm spending this much money on this ticket' but then if it's going to such a great cause you feel so much better about it. You know? Because it's going to do something else, other than just line their pockets.

A white woman in her 60s who grew up in New Orleans, Rhonda explained that she loves fine dining and that in her family "everything we do is about food." Rhonda insisted that culinary-themed events are the perfect way to raise money in the local context: "In this city, what do you do for fun? You go out. So a venue [event] like that is going to be a good winner." She said that when she knows there is a fundraising element tied to the meal or food-related event she feels "so much better about it."

For most chef foundations, the majority of financial support does not come from the company or the individual's private wealth; instead, it is fundraised. Causumerism (as in consumerism for charitable causes) is key to the fundraising strategies they employ, and I find that it takes two primary forms: consumer goods/commodities and experiences. Causumerist practices, or ethical consumption, contend that consumer spending can be directed toward humanitarian concerns and can be used to solve social problems (see Lewis and Potter, 2011). Calls to "vote with your fork" through buying sustainable, organic and/or local food are a form of causumerism. Food is often positioned as a commodity or consumer good in advanced capitalist societies and accordingly is available for causumer mobilization. Research on causumerism has primarily studied material commodities, but my field research shows the need to expand our understanding of causumerism to include experience. In this form, the causumer good is an event in which donors like Rhonda buy a charitable experience such as special events that chefs use to fundraise.

Koffman, Orgad, and Gill (2015, 158) propose that the focus of the humanitarian gaze is changing with an emergent "'selfie humanitarianism' in which helping others is intimately connected to entrepreneurial projects of the self." In tracking how humanitarian communication has changed over time, Chouliaraki (2013, 3) notes "the emergence of a self-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about 'how I feel' and must, therefore, be rewarded by minor gratifications to the self." Who counts as a beneficiary? Is the person who attends a chef's private fundraising party or purchases a causumer product a beneficiary of an intervention? This aligns with the change noted by Richey and

Ponte (2011, 2060): celebrity-led casumerism has moved from "conscious consumption" which is based on product-related information, to "compassionate consumption" which focuses on managing consumer affect.

Gender: leaving professional kitchens for community food work

According to Harris and Giuffre (2015), women enter culinary school at same rate as men, but men are more likely to work as professional chefs and hold the most prestigious positions. There is bias toward men in hiring and promotion, and the prevalence of sexual harassment creates discriminatory work environments in which women are systematically de-valued. In interviews, Nikki (the chef who owns a Cajun restaurant) referred to restaurants as "the old boys club" in which white male chefs consolidate power by partnering with and supporting other white men in their industry. Analyzing food media, Harris and Giuffre find that media representation favors and rewards male chefs. In media coverage they note a gendered differentiation between "good chefs" who are women, and "great chefs" who are men. They find that men are represented "as creators who master the kitchen, innovate cuisine, and build empires, while women chefs are depicted as being food producers who re-create traditional or homey dishes and are not highly invested in their careers unless guided by a man" (ibid: 47–48). This is important because media includes restaurant reviews and competitive awards which are key determinants of a chef's career trajectory.

Of the women who do make it into professional chef jobs, Harris and Giuffre (2015) find that many women leave, often citing the incompatibility of restaurants and personal responsibilities. The respondents in their study cite nonstandard long hours, inflexible and difficult work structures, and lack of benefits – particularly in childcare and healthcare – as reasons they left chef jobs. Many said they were not able to fit the definition of the "ideal worker" and the "ideal mother" simultaneously (ibid:169–70).

Women who leave chef positions take jobs that are still within food systems, including working as culinary instructors, running small food businesses, and buying or cooking for grocery stores. Several participants in my research left chef positions to take up food and cooking roles with nonprofit organizations. After more than twenty years of working as a chef and owning two restaurants in Chicago, Debbie (above) started directing a food bank's kitchen. Debbie expressed a lifelong commitment to supporting social change, and saw cooking at the food bank as a way to blend her desire to help others through her love of cooking.

Sarah, a white, queer woman in her mid-30s, described a cycle of "burning out": first at a nonprofit where she organized cooking classes at a farmer's market, and then in the restaurant industry:

> I was just working at festivals and having fun, but also—I feel like the way a lot of chefs come around to "doing good" is you get kind of burnt out by just like feeding the masses in this way that doesn't feel that satisfying or that worthwhile. It's just like a bunch of drunk people partying at festivals and you're like feeding them tacos. So I hit a little cynical phase and I was like, "What can I do?" And that's how I came around to teaching.

Sarah describes becoming cynical about the everyday realities of "feeding the masses" which was exhausting and not personally meaningful or fulfilling. After her most recent cycle of burn out, Sarah began using the title "chef teacher," and she has taken on roles as a cooking educator for several organizations over the past eight years. Sarah said that she focuses less now on teaching technical and artistic cooking skills, and increasingly teaches about labor organizing and racial justice movements in foodscapes.

Masculinity, restaurant culture and acceptable care

In the context of hyper-masculinized restaurant environments, chefs are expected to act "macho" and are discouraged from being "too emotional" – a sexist charge often leveled at women working in kitchens (Harris and Giuffre 2015). Like most people, I posit that elite chefs desire meaningful connection and want opportunities to show care for others. As the space of the restaurant is largely unsupportive in nourishing these kinds of connections, I argue that philanthropy becomes an outlet in which male chefs can express care and find meaning – a form of "acceptable care." The forms of philanthropic engagement documented in New Orleans creates an outlet for men to care that is accepted within the gender confines of the industry as it largely occurs "outside" of restaurants. For example, chefs and restaurant workers from a chef foundation expressed disappointment that they had to dig an irrigation ditch at Grow Dat Youth Farm, rather than interact with young people who work at the farm. While this reflects a specific imaginary of what charitable work "is" and who it is for (imaginaries that are heavily coded along race and class lines), it also shows that chefs seek to meaningfully engage with others and want to feel that they are helping out or giving back. As common critiques of philanthropy highlight, this form of caring is non-threatening for chefs as it still keeps hierarchies in place, maintaining racialized and gendered dynamics in the construction of "givers" and "receivers." Philanthropy allows chefs to maintain their dominant positions in the culinary world without having to challenge the root sources of inequality or oppression within their businesses.

Addressing precarious labor in restaurants

In this section, I show how failure to adequately regulate protections for precarious restaurant workers results in responsibility falling to individual restaurant owners. For some of the restaurant owners I interviewed, considerations of labor conditions and an emphasis on ethical operations are built into the structures of their businesses. Rather than operating primarily as a for-profit venue and then "giving back" later on by starting a foundation, the restaurants are concerned with day to day operations and the labor conditions surrounding how money is made.

Alexa and Tucker are a couple who own two small, bustling restaurants. When I asked them about where they go for information about their charitable work they stressed a lack of information, primarily in terms of best practices and research regarding human resources and policies that benefit employees. Alexa lamented that there are "no resources, no restaurant organizations that are actually supportive and helpful." They do not use

information from the National Restaurant Association (NRA) or the Louisiana Restaurant Association (LRA, the state-based affiliate organization), and refuse to join either organization because of the NRA's "horrible labor practices." One of the NRA's signature policy platforms has been keeping the federal minimum wage for tipped employees at the rate established in 1991 of $2.13 USD per hour. The NRA and LRA have a large footprint in New Orleans as the industry standard: for example, the popular Brennan Family Restaurants are strongly affiliated, as Richard "Dickie" Brennan Sr was on the Board of the National NRA, and Dickie Brennan Jr was the Chair of the 2018 NRA Convention.

After expressing disdain for the official venues they are supposed to turn to for best practices, Alexa and Tucker continued with the following exchange:

Alexa: There should be a thing written about that I can steal and take for our organization and apply.

Tucker: Word!

Alexa: Instead I'm trying to make decisions about something that I don't have any background in or know how it's going to work. There's not enough out there for people who are looking. All there is is the occasional news story that someone will write about: "oh this restaurant in California did this and had a really good outcome" but it's very scattered. Nothing comprehensive. They never even know – research wise – what would be the biggest benefit to employees.

Tucker: Is it more money or health care?

Alexa: You never know. We have x amount of money that we're just giving back to our employees in cash. But would be better if we gave everyone five days of paid vacation? I've read articles that paid vacation is so important. But it's the same amount of money regardless. There are so many things that there's just no digestible research on or best practices.

In the absence of ethical guidance from official entities and little regulation or oversight, restaurant owners are left to come up with their own standards. A Restaurant Opportunities Center United (2010, 2017) study stresses that the industry, as such a significant employer, could become a real driver of social progress in the city, a possibility that Alexa and Tucker seem aware of in this exchange.

Alexa and Tucker look to what other peers in their industry are doing for guidance. They cite news coverage in the quotation above, say that they are inspired by Zingerman's Deli in Michigan, and find Ari Weinzweig's writing helpful (2010). Following many of Weinzweig's practices but with questions still remaining, Alexa and Tucker have pieced together human resource policies that they hope align with their ethics and values. They developed a nine-page working document for their older restaurant outlining their mission and vision. Their vision establishes how community is understood both internally and externally:

> We believe you cannot do your best work if you aren't happy in your workplace . . . One of the main ways that we engage with and support our New Orleans and Gulf South communities is through our relationships with local farms and businesses . . . another way we contribute to our community is by modeling responsible and sustainable business practices in the service industry.

Their mission ends with: "By bringing people together around food, we use our business to foster a strong community while we constantly learn and grow." Alexa and Tucker developed the document on their own, piecemeal. Throughout the interview they stressed that they wish there was more research and information to guide their practices and policies.

Ray is an African American chef related to esteemed Chef Leah Chase (1923–19) and is involved with the Edgar "Dook" Jr. and Leah Chase Family Foundation. An interview with Chef Ray was largely about how he ties equity, labor and community together. Ray has read Danny Meyer's book *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business* (2006) multiple times, and says that one of key lessons he takes from Meyer is that the right people to hire are "the people who understand where their restaurant fits in the community. They understand their restaurant is bigger than just a restaurant and you making money off of food. I have to sustain this community because this is why my location, my restaurant, is working."

Ray's timescale is different from the timescale of most of the restaurants and chefs I interviewed, the majority of which had emerged within the last decade. Ray explained: "When you talk about the ones that have been here for long periods of time, 75 years – Commander's getting ready to celebrate 125 years, Antoine's, Galatoire's – they understand where they fit in this community, they understand that they need to reach out and give back and sustain the community that sustains them. The first thing is the community. Without that, nothing will happen."

Initially, I thought Ray was defining community in terms of the patrons eating at his restaurants, so I asked, "What is the dynamic of being a restaurant that welcomes the tourist economy but is also fundamentally concerned with sustaining community?" As he responded to this question, it became clear to me that while diners might be a part of the equation, he was primarily speaking about restaurant workers. Ray said he believes that the low wages earned by most workers in the restaurant industry are unjust compared to the wealth being created by restaurants – wealth which goes to only a few people. He stressed his belief in a living wage, and is campaigning in the city for all restaurants to adopt one (it's unclear if his restaurants have or have not adopted it).

Conclusion

Tracking the number of restaurants that had re-opened in New Orleans after the flooding gained national attention (Fitzmorris 2010), and the number of operating restaurants – about 1,400 by 2013 according to the *New York Times* – was celebrated as it was well beyond the pre-Katrina number of 809 (Dewan 2013). In what has been referred to as a "Restaurant Renaissance," the restaurant industry's recovery became a form of shorthand for New Orleans' recovery writ large: the city had not only survived, but was thriving (Firth and Passidomo 2022). Similarly, restaurants have been used as a barometer for evaluating how New Orleans has fared throughout the pandemic. The post-Katrina economy is built upon tourism and the service industry, part of the City of New Orleans' strategic investment in the "cultural economy" (Mt Auburn and Associates, 2005). The $1 billion dollar Louis Armstrong International Airport had only been open for several months when lockdowns for the pandemic began: in April of 2020, passenger traffic was down 97% compared to the same month the year before; by

June, it was 85% lower (Williams 2020). Stephen Perry, the head of New Orleans & Co, the city's tax-funded tourism marketing organization, advocated for ending stay-at-home -orders during the height of death rates in the city (Stole 2020). Perry publicly lashed out at Mayor Latoya Cantrell's response, saying the city was "taking an approach that is so restrictive that it has the possibility of destroying the fabric of the city, culturally and economically" (ibid). Mixed messages emerged from the Mayor's office over time as 2021′s Mardi Gras parades were canceled, while, simultaneously, tourists were encouraged to come and celebrate the holiday, somehow.

With few tourists visiting the city, locals were encouraged to support local restaurants as a cultural – and economic – imperative. Again, the feeling of "mixed messages" pervaded the early months of the pandemic, as locals debated on social media whether to heed calls to eat out at struggling bars and restaurants, or to follow CDC guidance to stay home. The situation was extreme for the New Orleanians who work in the service industry, as their workplaces closed or stayed open, either with COVID-19 protocols in place – or not. Some small restaurants and chefs weighed the need for their employees to make money against the question if it was safe for anyone to be at work. While this research specifically considers New Orleans, chefs have been progressively involved with social issues across the United States. Mobilizing unique forms of "culinary capital" as developed by Naccarato and Lebesco (2012), celebrity chefs continue to move into charitable, philanthropic, and policy work nationally and to some extent internationally. Food service workers earn low wages, white men comprise the majority of well-paid positions as managers (Yen Liu and Apollon, 2011:11), and sexual harassment is pervasive and accepted in restaurant workplace culture (Sinclair 2006). Thus, chef philanthropy serves as a form of aid to the restaurant industry, working to re-brand the precarious restaurant industry as ethical.

Notes

1. Celebrities and public figures are named; other research participants have been given pseudonyms.
2. While chefs are uniquely positioned to be leaders in New Orleans, there are also international trends in which chefs have mobilized forms of "culinary capital" to become prominent public figures. According to Naccarato and Lebesco (2012:3), culinary capital establishes "how and why certain foods and food-related practices connote, and by extension, confer status and power on those who know about and enjoy them".
3. Panelli and Tipa (2009, 456) define foodscapes as "the socio-spatial manifestation of human–food activities, foodstuffs and subsequent social or health implications".
4. "Chefs Boot Camps for Policy and Change" were founded in 2012. The goal of the Boot Camps is to train chefs on how to become active on food policy issues. Trainings occur several times a year, and there had been eighteen sessions by summer 2019.
5. Red beans and rice is a traditional New Orleans dish as described by Beriss, 2012.

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