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Giving Back

Charitable and philanthropic events are a win-win for restaurants.



By Rob Benes

Celebrity chefs and must-visit restaurants are now part of our national conversation on a daily basis. All that attention presents a unique opportunity.

“Chefs have been elevated in their social status, who can influence the way people eat and the way they think,” says Gregory Gourdet (pictured opposite center), culinary director for the Departure restaurants in Portland, Oregon, and Denver. “Chefs can use that influence for good and give back.”

Here are five examples of chefs and restaurants doing just that.

Working Class Outlaws

Metro Detroit-based Working Class Outlaws restaurant group donates between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year to local charities. Most of the philanthropic work is done through art-based fundraising and through its four operations — Imperial, Imperial Taco Truck, Public House and Antihero. “It’s essential to include philanthropic events in your business plan, the restaurant’s mission and staff core values,” says Sagen Isham, marketing and events coordinator. “You also have to do a lot of planning to have a successful event that’s enjoyed by everyone attending, including staff.”

For the past six years, Imperial has held a charity skateboard auction (pictured top left) during the week of Cinco de Mayo, raising approximately

\$3,000 each year. The restaurant provides local artists blank skateboard decks to decorate, which are then displayed in-house and auctioned on eBay. All proceeds go to a different organization each year, such as Detroit Hives, which establishes bee hives, and Haven, which helps women affected by domestic violence. This year, Imperial donated to Community Push, a non-profit that builds skateboard parks across Detroit.

The Keep

Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud or coercion to obtain some type of labor or sexual exploitation. A study from the University of Cincinnati identified 1,032 victims between 2014 and 2016 and another 4,209 individuals at risk of being trafficked during the same period in Ohio’s urban centers, according to The Columbus Dispatch. The Keep, in Columbus, Ohio, takes the issue seriously.

On March 9, The Keep participated in Eat Up! Columbus, organized by Freedom a la Cart, which helps survivors of human trafficking. The event involved nine chefs, five mixologists and sponsors from around the city. Jonathan Olsen (pictured bottom left), executive chef, and Courtney Nielsen, chef de cuisine, represented The Keep and prepared one course of a six-course menu with drink pairings for 320 guests, held at St. Charles Preparatory School. With ticket sales and an auction, \$40,000 was raised.

Olsen believes there are three benefits achieved from doing philanthropic work: “First, working in restaurants is a high stress job, so to be able to step away for a short period of time and use our culinary skills to make a difference in people’s lives is rewarding and a short break from the daily grind. Next, when the kitchen staff works together on a charitable event it strengthens our bond as a team. Finally, without asking for recognition, the name of the restaurant gets noticed and we may see an increase in foot traffic.”

Tony Gemignani

For the past four years, San Francisco restaurateur Tony Gemignani has teamed up with San Francisco Giants players Joe Panik and Brandon Belt (pictured top right) to benefit the George Mark Children's House by selling limited-edition pies created by each player.

The event starts at the beginning of the baseball season and finishes when the Giants' season comes to an end. The Panik Parm Pie is topped with breaded chicken cutlets, sliced mozzarella, tomato sauce, garlic, grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, oregano and olive oil. Belt's Monster Meat Pizza features pepperoni, sausage, bacon, red and green onion, bell pepper, shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano and Romano cheeses, and a side of chili oil.

One dollar from each player's custom slice and \$6 from each pie sold are donated to the charity. Having raised more than \$30,000 since 2016, Gemignani continues to set higher fundraising goals with new locations where the custom pies are offered. The players quietly match what is raised, too.

"When I opened my first pizzeria, I sponsored youth baseball teams and donated \$25 gift certificates," says Gemignani. "I'm fortunate now to give back to larger organizations, as well as continuing to support smaller groups."

Sundry and Vice

Doing philanthropic projects was not part of Stuart King's initial business plan, but after his Cincinnati cocktail establishment, Sundry and Vice, gained a following he decided it was time. "Our approach to the success of Sundry and Vice is predicated upon the community, so it only made sense we support the community and give back," he explains.

Sundry and Vice (pictured bottom right) maintains a long-term partnership with the non-profit organization Living with Change. The partnership has taken shape in the form of fundraiser nights and community engagement throughout the year to support the group's mission of providing education and advocacy for the LGBTQ+ and transgender community. In 2019, the bar is hosting recurring guest speaker events that foster the education of trans rights and visibility. Money raised from these events will be donated to Living with Change.

Non-profit organizations often offer a guide to putting on charitable events, which can take pressure off of an operator who's never done it before. "It's a tremendous amount of work to plan and have a successful event," King explains. "Working with a group that has a history of hosting charitable events helps in planning a successful event."



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