

Launching websites, loan applications: How FoodLab Chicago helps South Side restaurants weather pandemic

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For many restaurants, swapping the white tablecloth aesthetics for dining tables lined with takeout boxes has been essential to survival during the pandemic.

Servers used to buzz around the 10-seat dining room at vegan restaurant Mijori in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, which co-owner and chef Tadeusz Emswaul opened in 2017. But Emswaul, known to many as Chef T., is contemplating a permanent transition to a takeout-only model against a backdrop of worker shortages and shifting mandates, which further complicate operations.

It's one of many reflections the restaurateur has implemented to make it through the pandemic.

Takeout orders were about half Mijori's business before COVID-19 arrived while indoor dining was on pause. That's when Emswaul decided to refine his takeout process.

"It's easy to say, 'Well, we're just going to do takeout,'" Emswaul said. "But if we're just going to do takeout, then how can we be better at takeout?"

Being better meant a refreshed website with online ordering capabilities, and QR code menus for his South Shore and Pullman locations. Emswaul also sourced sustainable packaging made of sugar cane fiber and bamboo for dishes to eco-consciously transport items such as Mijori's decadent fried spiced mushroom burger and its signature spicy jerk tofu and bowl — a cornucopia complete with the holy trinity food: celery, cucumber and onions, collard greens, and candied sweet potatoes.



Spiced mushroom buns by Mijori on May 28, 2020 at One Eleven Food Hall in the Pullman neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. (Angela Burke / Chicago Tribune)