

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

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

Servers used to buzz around the 30-seat dining room at vegan restaurant Majani in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, which co-owner and chef Tsadakeeyah Emmanuel opened in 2017. But Emmanuel, 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 refashions the restaurateur has implemented to make it through the pandemic.

Takeout orders were about half Majani's business before COVID-19 and grew while indoor dining was on pause. That's when Emmanuel decided to refine his takeout process.

"It's easy to say, 'Well, we're just going to do takeout,'" Emmanuel 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. Emmanuel also sourced sustainable packaging made of sugar-cane fiber and bamboo for diners to eco-consciously transport items such as Majani's decadent fried oyster mushroom burger and its signature spicy jerk tofu soul bowl — a cornucopia complete with the holy soul food trinity: macaroni and cheese, collard greens, and candied sweet potatoes.



Oyster mushroom tacos by Majani on May 28, 2019 at One Eleven Food Hall in the Pullman neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. (Louisa Chu / Chicago Tribune)

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The 30-year restaurant industry veteran called on South Side nonprofit FoodLab Chicago — where Emmanuel and his wife, pastry chef and Majani co-owner Nasya Emmanuel, have been inaugural members since 2019 — for support in building a more efficient system that could handle the increased demand for carryout and delivery.

In its first few years, FoodLab Chicago has become an indispensable resource for its 32 restaurant and food business members operating in Greater Chatham, South Shore and Bronzeville. The initiative is a collaborative effort run by FoodLab Detroit, the Greater Chatham Initiative, South Shore Chamber of Commerce and the Association for Enterprise Opportunity.

“There was a lot of general business support, but there wasn’t sector-specific support,” said Nedra Sims Fears, executive director of the Greater Chatham Initiative, who serves as the head of FoodLab Chicago.

A sister program to the highly esteemed nonprofit FoodLab Detroit, FoodLab Chicago launched with grants from the Chicago Community Foundation and Wells Fargo. At its core, FoodLab Chicago operates with the belief that a cross-pollination of efforts and resources from a constellation of trusted South Side organizations — groups that typically function in silos — helps cultivate a healthier business community.

It’s a targeted response for an area often hardest hit by economic downturns, where recovery can take much longer — a result of longstanding systems of inequity — and where many businesses are food-based. “That’s why we decided that we would focus on the food industry, because it was the biggest industry on the South Side,” Fears said.

Most FoodLab participants have been operating for seven to 15 years — many are staples in their respective neighborhoods. Members Lem’s Bar-B-Q and Soul Veg City have been in business for several decades.

“Food is the absolute nurturing commodity that keeps us, literally, alive — body and soul. If they’re doing that for us, then we need to really cherish and support them,” Fears said. In order to keep these economic engines moving, FoodLab bridges ideation with technical assistance and critical funding. When the pandemic struck shortly after FoodLab Chicago’s launch, guiding members through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) application process became an urgent priority. Early reports show that Black small business owners were **five times more likely to not receive PPP funding** for which they applied, according to a Federal Reserve Banks survey of small business owners.

Through FoodLab, Fears brought in representatives from community banks — the South Holland-based Providence Bank and Trust and Seaway Bank — to work with members.

“They treated our folks like they were their one and only customers,” she said. “They put them at the front of the pile and they processed their loans within 48 hours.” It was a crucial turning point for several FoodLab members, who’d initially been turned down for the first round of PPP funding. In total, FoodLab has helped members receive more than \$1.2 million in grants and loans.

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Owner Constance Simms-Kincaid stands prepares to-go food orders at her restaurant 5 Loaves Eatery Sunday, Feb. 14, 2021, in the Chatham neighborhood of Chicago. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

Constance Simms-Kincaid, owner of the celebrated 5 Loaves Eatery in Chatham, joined FoodLab months before the pandemic began. Simms-Kincaid relied on her relationship with the organization to help her implement technological improvements similar to Emmanuel and to streamline the menu of her popular breakfast and lunch restaurant. “They were working with us on menu pricing, menu breakdowns, getting off some menu items that might not be selling,” she said.

Simms-Kincaid said she felt the tight squeeze of the pandemic when sales sank by 85% and food costs skyrocketed. “We were really, really struggling so much,” she said. She reluctantly raised her prices, mirroring a nationwide hike in menu prices, which have grown by about 4%, [according to the National Restaurant Association](#) — the greatest increase in 13 years.

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Owner Constance Simms-Kincaid stands prepares to-go food orders at her restaurant 5 Loaves Eatery Sunday, Feb. 14, 2021, in the Chatham neighborhood of Chicago. The tiny restaurant, which during regular times only fit about 30 diners, is temporarily closed after it was unable to pay state taxes. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

“If you weren’t firmly in the 21st century, you certainly needed to be during the pandemic,” Fears said, noting that some FoodLab members didn’t initially have websites. “I think this pandemic created an opportunity where you could either move forward and change with the times, or stand still and die with the times. And for these operators, they decided to go forward.”

Emmanuel calls FoodLab an anchor for the South Side restaurant community.

“As a business, you can often feel isolated. You can often feel like these problems are exclusive to me,” he said. “And so, to have a chance to network with other businesses and they’re like, ‘No, we’re having this struggle too,’ it was good to hear other people’s stories, and it was good to share ideas in a way that can help have a positive impact on your business.”

The cohort met virtually every Monday, commonly a day off for restaurant workers, for several months. As the pandemic unfolded, those meetings became a sacred space for the community of entrepreneurs, giving them a place of fellowship and a safe space to be vulnerable.

Simms-Kincaid recalls one session when Fears took a step back from the group’s to-do list and instead simply asked, “How are you feeling today?” It was a cleansing breath that Simms-Kincaid needed. “I’m telling you, that call was one of the best ones,” she said. “It makes me kind of tear up now because I’m just like —,” she said, pausing. “We’ve come a long way, you know?”

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But the pandemic has not yet ended.

Last fall, 5 Loaves was forced to close due to unpaid state taxes, and remains temporarily closed as Simms-Kincaid navigates a wave of operational challenges, she said.

It's a sobering reminder that a cure-all for the often multifold crisis impacting restaurant operators does not yet exist. Yet, Simms-Kincaid said she remains hopeful. "We're going to be OK, and we are going to come back." A [GoFundMe campaign](#) has been launched to help the restaurant to reopen.

"We're in a transition period," Emmanuel said of Majani. He continues to weigh closing his dining room for good, making more room for takeout amid another surge in COVID-19 cases and new indoor dining mandates.

Doing the dance of continually retooling is necessary and mentally daunting, but he's focused on keeping his business as nimble as possible — and he feels supported in that work.

"Majani fought really hard to win and to come out on top of the challenges that we've been faced with over the last year," he said. "But we couldn't have done it without the support of FoodLab."

Angela Burke is a freelance writer.