

HOW CREATIVE CHEFS SUSTAINED COOP WORKERS

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Above: Chefs Kate Zuckerman (R) and Kim Pistone (L) cooked amazing lunches for up to 90 Coop staffers right through the pandemic.

By Hayley Gorenberg

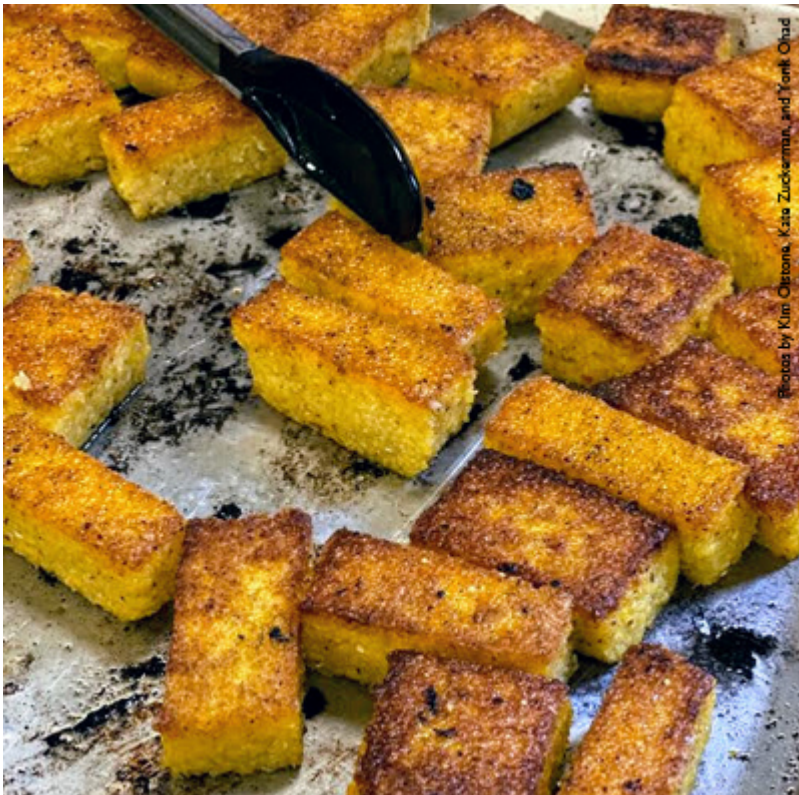
Chef and Coop member Kate Zuckerman surveyed banana boxes full of food that the Coop would, pre-pandemic, have donated to CHiPS soup kitchen. But it was April 2020; COVID had shuttered the kitchen, and with member labor suspended for the first time ever, the Coop was operating with temporary help and staff. And the staff was hungry.

Familiar with Zuckerman's professional culinary talents after years of her FTOP work creating festive meals celebrating staff milestones, Coop staff members hired her to help sort through the food and figure out how to whip up tasty lunches on a

shoestring budget. The assignment lasted through the middle of July.

FLOUR, EGGS AND DENTED CANS

“It was like a puzzle,” Zuckerman said. She sorted through boxes that included dented cans, slashed bags of flour and post-dated eggs. There might be a case of something mistakenly delivered that a distributor didn’t pick up, or boxes of berries with a berry or two molding in each—not salable, but certainly salvageable.



JAMS AND CAKES

The inspiration flowed. “I made so many jams—blackberry, fig, raspberry. And endless cakes!” Not having a mixer, she poured olive oil from dented cans into a blender and frothed it with sugar, a process that began from necessity that she now uses intentionally—the whipping lightens the resulting dessert. Zuckerman rhapsodized about the fancy herb-infused brown butters on an endcap, and used them with bags of cocoa that were past their date to create a luscious dessert.

Word of sumptuous lunches got around. “When it started, it was, ‘Can you cook a meal for 30 people?’ And then it was 60. And then it was 90, every day.” The job couldn’t be handled alone for long. With numbers growing and emerging COVID regulations for food handling, the lunch squad grew to include another chef, Kim Pistone, as well as a helper, to assist with prep for a few hours and wash dishes afterward.

Pistone, a self-taught chef, had ended her own catering business with a well-timed event before joining the Coop lunch squad. “I did a beautiful wedding March 13. It was like a great send-off: ‘OK, I’m done now!’ Every single thing on my resume ended in March 2020.” She rang up the Coop office and said, “Do you guys need any help, or what?” Her home situation also motivated her to reach out. With her husband and child at home, she said, “I thought somebody’s got to *not* be here. Too many people under one roof 24 hours a day!”

“I threw myself into being at the Coop,” Pistone said. “Physically it was really exhausting. But I think it kept me sane. I didn’t feel stuff other people felt—depressed—because I was working.”



MANY DRESSINGS

“Every day I would do a different vinaigrette. Sriracha lime toasted sesame! Raspberry red wine! I would mix it up so it would complement whatever we were serving,” Pistone said. “I tried to make as much comfort food as I could. It was a lot of sanity for a lot of people, the stability of having a place to go and having lunch and a community of people you could talk to.” For safety, the Coop had socially distant meals and also built plexiglass carrels. “A lot of people are by themselves,” Pistone remarked. “I think it was a touchpoint for a lot of people to just have a meal with somebody once a day.”

“It was really fun for me,” said Zuckerman. “It was a race to make the best meal I could in an efficient way with whatever ingredients they were getting rid of, spending as little as I could.” No-knead focaccia with long fermentation, “allowing gluten to form and stretch and hold” was a new skill for her. Zuckerman and Pistone used new

flours, learned to make egg substitute, baked gluten-free tahini cookies, and made their own cashew milk. They created vegan butter and “tons of things with chickpea flour and polenta,” Zuckerman said. A box of peppers yielded roasted pepper soup. “I made so many vegan soups—because I had to.” The chefs made stock from fennel tops, deteriorated onions and carrots—all boiled for six hours.

LOTS OF COUSCOUS

The food available was a daily surprise, including, at one point, two 50-pound bags of Israeli couscous! “I didn’t spend too much time at home thinking or stressing about it,” said Zuckerman. “I would just come in and see what was there and make something. It was always tasty and delicious. It was nice to be governed by what was there and what equipment we had, and just show up and know you were going to cook for eight or ten hours.”

INSPIRATION FROM MEXICO AND INDIA

They made custards with past-dated cream; Mexican lasagna with tortillas; curry and other Indian-inspired recipes, including a variation of saag paneer that substituted braised escarole and chard. There were lots of pasta, pesto, dips and sauces; along with fruit, fennel and lots of mushroom barley soup.



CURRIES AND COBBLERS

“Kate and Kim were the most amazing chefs ever,” said 23-year Coop veteran Alexandra Hodgson MacDonnell, who came to work as a temp, and is now a Membership Coordinator on staff. “I saw them cooking with food that was maybe not salable but perfectly good for cooking, and turning it into curries, an absolute delight. When I came to lunch I would see something I hadn’t used. In particular, they loved watermelon radish. I found everything to be so inspiring; it was amazing. Some days they would go the whole nine yards and make dessert. We’d come up and there would be a blueberry cobbler.”

UP ON THE ROOF

MacDonnell observed that many temporary Coop workers came to work because they lived alone and felt isolated, especially the case for artists and restaurateurs “completely out of work.” In contrast, MacDonnell shares her home with her husband and four sons, all of whom were working online. Working twenty-seven hours per week doing check-out at the Coop was “a little bit of an outlet.” (Though she hastens to add, “Don’t get me wrong! It was a lovely, great time to regroup with my teens and young adults!”) At the same time, she enjoyed taking an occasional rooftop break with a Coop member she thinks she’d never have met otherwise—over an excellent lunch.



Photos by Kim Otstona, Kate Zuckerman, and Yonk Ohadi

THE LUNCH BILL

The Coop staff went up to 205 employees at one point during the pandemic hiring period, and there wasn’t enough space to even store the staff lunches, let alone have

each person use the kitchen. Hiring a chef was the solution. According to Coordinators, it cost \$4,000 a week to feed the staff and that expense lasted for 65 weeks—and included ordering from restaurants occasionally. Coordinators also say it was important to have a plan like this for safety reasons: The staff members could easily grab a boxed lunch, then go off and eat on their own, since during the pandemic, staff members were encouraged not to eat together.

Check out the recipes: <http://www.sweetcyclebrooklyn.com/recipes-1>