

MEET MATTHEW CABAN, THE CHEF WHO SPRINKLES COOP PRODUCE INTO THE 400 MEALS HE PREPARES ON AN AVERAGE DAY AT CHIPS

March 19, 2024

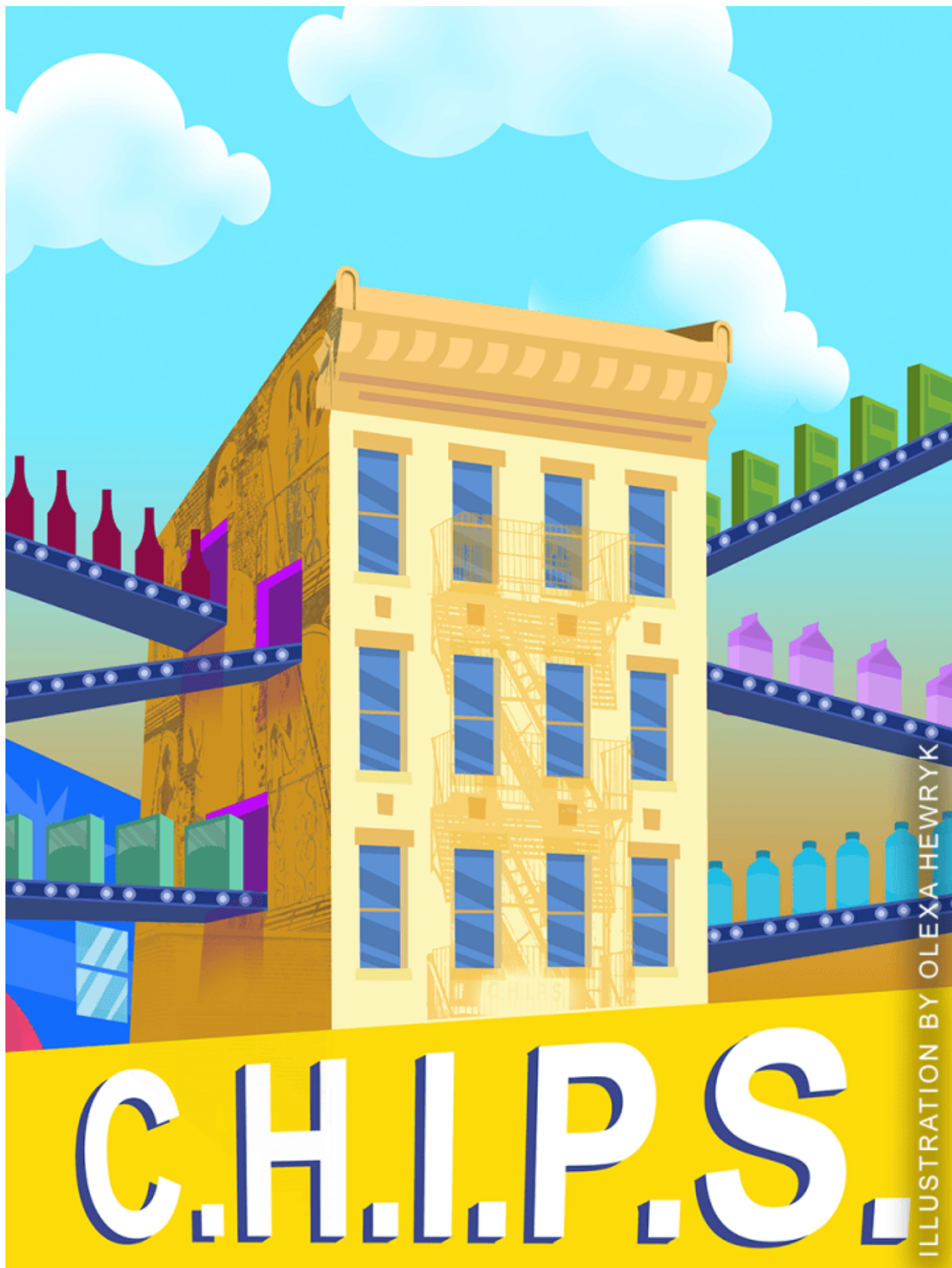


ILLUSTRATION BY OLEXA HEWRYK

By Liz Welch

Anyone who has ever worked the produce shift at the Coop has likely placed a slightly bruised piece of fruit or deformed but otherwise fine vegetable in one of the “soup kitchen” boxes. These receptacles are then delivered to CHiPS on 4th Avenue, the soup kitchen with whom the Coop has had a 50-plus year relationship.

But what happens after the produce is delivered a few blocks west?

Chef Matthew Caban, who has been running the kitchen at CHiPS since November 2022, might take those apples and turn them into apple sauce, possibly flavored with berries depending on what else was donated that week. Or he might make a cucumber and tomato salad to serve alongside baked chicken and rice, which was on the menu the Monday in February when I stopped by to interview him.

Curious to understand what it means to be a chef at a soup kitchen that serves upwards of 36,000 meals a year, according to the CHiPS website, I asked Chef Caban if I could help him with lunch service. His enthusiastic response was an indicator of what was in store: “I’d really appreciate an extra pair of hands!” he replied via email. “To really catch us in action, aim for 10:30 a.m. as we begin plating lunch. Wear a hat (unless you want to use a stylish hairnet) and clothes you can get dirty. Kitchen work gets real messy, real fast.”

When I showed up at the designated time, a line had already begun to form outside the mural-covered building. The ground floor houses a food pantry and there is a residency for single mothers one flight up. Once I was buzzed in, I walked down a hallway that led to the first kitchen prep room where a long stainless-steel countertop was lined with a dozen volunteers, six on either side. Some were slicing apples and placing them in Ziploc bags, others were making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Beyoncé was blasting on the stereo and everyone seemed happy to be spending their Monday morning helping prepare lunch kits (sandwich, fruit, snacks, and a hot entrée) for people in need. The number of recipients has significantly increased within

the last few months.



“When I first began, a little over a year ago, we would serve 150 to 200 hot lunches daily,” Caban said. “These days, we average 400 plates on any given day.”

Those numbers track with a City Harvest report that since 2019, there has been a 60% increase in people relying on soup kitchens in a city that already struggles with food insecurity. The NYC Mayor’s Office of Food Policy estimated that 1.2 million NYC residents were food insecure in 2022.

“THIS FELT DIFFERENT. I LIKE THAT IT HAS REASONABLE HOURS DURING WHICH I ONLY HAD TO MAKE ONE MEAL, FOR LOTS OF PEOPLE WHO ALL DESERVE DELICIOUS FOOD.”

A big teddy bear of a man, Caban had just taken a large tray of baked chicken thighs and legs out of the oven when I arrived in the back kitchen where he prepares all the hot meals for CHiPS clients.

“Perfect timing!” he said with a big smile. “We’re about to start plating.”

Hall and Oates was blaring on his radio—part of a playlist he’s been curating for years that includes The Rolling Stones, The Eagles, Elvis, and Queen. His Monday crew of eight volunteers, all regulars, were stationed at a smaller stainless steel table that runs parallel to the stoves and ovens that line the back wall.

Caban asked me to peel apart the aluminum pie plates to ready them for the production line: the two men scooping rice were both Coop members, though neither was doing this as their shift. They come every Monday because they enjoy the work, they told me.

“I hear that a lot,” Caban said. “That’s the point.”

He then announced: “Okay people, it’s go time!” The plating began at 10:30 a.m. and continued until 400 meals were made.

“Two scoops of rice, one chicken leg, and a vegetable,” Caban said as the plates were passed down the line, ending with a ladle full of pan juices, and then finally covered with a plastic see through top before being loaded onto a trolley that, once filled to capacity, was rolled out to the front of the building where lunches are packed into plastic bags: hot plate, sandwich, and snacks.

“That looks and smells delicious,” I said, my mouth watering as the plates were being assembled.

“I’d never serve any meal that I would not eat myself,” Chef Caban replied with a big smile.

FOR HIS JOB INTERVIEW AT CHIPS, CABAN TRAILED THE INTERIM CHEF FOR A DAY. BY THE END OF IT, HE KNEW THAT HE HAD FOUND HIS DREAM JOB. "I WILL BE HERE FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE," HE SAID.

On this particular day, the vegetable side was a medley of sautéed yellow squash and zucchini for the first 200 plates. When that ran out, a tomato and cucumber salad emerged from the cooler.

"That was made with Coop produce," Caban said. "Last week I made a really nice salad with radishes, red peppers, and shredded carrots. My volunteers were like, 'can I get some of that?' I was like, 'if there's any left.'"

A Sunset Park Native, Caban has worked in kitchens all over New York City. "I ran a brunch service in Crown Heights, a sports bar at Union Square, and a fine dining coffee shop there, too," he says. "I also worked at a vegan restaurant in Williamsburg. But this is the best place I've ever worked."



When I asked why, he said he got burned out (and literally scarred from burns) by working grueling hours, where he had to make upwards of 15 dishes on any given day, six days a week with head chefs who would “walk around angry all day,” he says. “They’d be furious and that seeps into their work and doesn’t make for a pleasant work experience. Their bad day becomes my bad day.”

For all these reasons, he was ready to leave the food industry—and then Covid hit: he was laid off and spent the next 18 months at home, teaching himself how to make wine in his kitchen. When the world opened back up, and he was ready to go back to work, he considered a job at FedEx.

“I love making food, but restaurant cooking is thankless,” he explained. “It’s also dangerous: we’re playing with knives and fire for a living. I have scars and calluses. I didn’t want to go back to it. Plus, my wife and I were talking about starting a family and the restaurant schedule is not conducive to that.”

But then, as he was looking for employment opportunities, he saw that CHiPS was looking for someone to run their kitchen. “This felt different,” he said. “I liked that it had reasonable hours during which I only had to make one meal, for lots of people who all deserve delicious food.”

For his job interview at CHiPS, Caban trailed the interim chef for a day. By the end of it, he knew that he had found his dream job. “I will be here for the rest of my life,” he said.

His work day begins at 8 a.m., with breakfast for 100 to 150 people. “Usually, we do cereal, a pastry or sometimes hot oatmeal,” he explained. “And always a boiled egg, for protein.”

Lunch is the main attraction, and Caban has become well known for his ability to get as much as he can out of his ingredients. “Last week, three cases of catfish were donated,” he said. “You can’t go wrong with lemon pepper or Old Bay seasoning.”

One of his favorite chef tricks is to confit garlic. “I slice the tops and bottoms off of the garlic head and roast them in a pan at 350 in olive oil for one hour,” he explained. “I use that with rice, or rub it over chicken. It makes killer garlic bread, which is another in-house favorite.

Rice is the most often requested starch—which Caban often seasons with sautéed onions and herbs. On the Monday I was there, he made 15 trays, or 60 pounds, a personal record. He also prepares potatoes, and pasta, staple items that are stored downstairs in the basement alongside rows of ramen, peanut butter, and tuna fish.

Caban’s chili is another crowd pleaser. “I try to stretch our proteins as much as possible,” he said. “It would be great to do burgers for 400 but I could do so much more with half of the amount of meat—so I add corn, potatoes, or mushroom, as healthy fillers.”

Not all food donations are welcome, however. “People mean well, but this morning, someone donated three trays of smoked fish,” he explained. “It was left over from a banquet, and everyone was excited because it was an expensive delicacy. I threw it out.”

Some people were upset as they thought it was wasteful, but food safety is Caban’s main concern. “I don’t know where that fish has been stored, how old it is, or whether it was refrigerated properly,” he said. “And it’s just not worth a food poisoning lawsuit, or worse, we kill someone by accident.”

He added that while he appreciates the generosity of the people who donate, it is surprising how few people truly understand food safety. Even the produce donations from the Coop give Caban pause as he has to sort through all of it. On average, out of every twelve boxes donated, he composts three.

“‘Fresh’ is the operative word for produce donations,” he said. “It’s just not as fresh as it could be.”

When I asked what could make it better, he said, “Refrigeration. My concern is, where are these boxes being stored and for how long before they make it to my kitchen?”

Still, these are small complaints versus the overall joy he has running this kitchen.

My workday starts at 8 a.m. and ends at 2 p.m.—six hours compared to ten to twelve hour days I was working,” he said. “And my son, Caleb, was just born on January 5th, so that means I get to spend time with him. Plus, this kitchen has a skylight. I get excited every time I look up.”

He’s not the only person who finds joy working at CHiPS. “My volunteers love to come back,” he says. “It doesn’t feel like a day at work and yet we’ve pushed out over 400 plates. You can have fun while helping people all at the same time.”

In the end, this is what it is all about: making delicious and nutritious food for people in need. On that point, Caban days that the absolute best part of his job is a grateful clientele.

After he finishes the lunch rush, Caban likes to go outside and talk to the people being served.



"I get a genuine deep satisfaction out of feeding someone who's hungry," he said. "It's such a simple thing. I'm not a religious person, but people often say I'm doing God's work. I'm so happy that I get to do it."

Liz Welch re-joined the Gazette as a reporter in August 2023 after a hiatus. She is a longtime journalist and author/collaborator whose work can be seen at <http://www.lizwelch.com>.