THE NEW MEMBER WHO JUST OPENED A STANDOUT NEIGHBORHOOD PIZZERIA

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PHOTO BY AZIKIWE ABOAGYE

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By Zach Schiffman

Ben Wexler didn't grow up in Park Slope, but he might as well have. A born-and-raised New Yorker, he spent the pandemic years running a seasonal pizza business on Peaks Island, off the coast of Maine—all while his girlfriend held down an apartment here and a Coop membership going on 10 years.

But the city kept pulling him back. So this past November, after a long hunt for the right space, he opened Il Leone just around the corner from the Coop on Seventh Avenue: a sit-down wine bar built around long-fermented sourdough Neapolitan pizza, with the produce treated as the main event.

That obsession traces back to a stint on a small organic vegetable farm, where picking what he'd cook each morning rewired how Wexler thinks about food. It's a philosophy that lines up neatly with the Coop's, which makes his timing perfect: after years of circling, he's finally an official member. We caught up with him just as his first New York tomato season comes into view, to talk Maine, Naples, the heirloom seeds in his backyard and how to shop the Coop like a chef.

How did Il Leone come to be on Seventh Avenue?


PHOTO BY AZIKIWE ABOAGYE

Ben standing in front of Il leone.

I started the business on Peaks Island, off Portland, Maine, during the pandemic. I'm a born-and-raised New Yorker but went to college in Maine, then moved back and was mostly working on political campaigns. In between campaigns, I did various things in the food business, including working on a small organic vegetable farm.

Right before the pandemic, in about 2019, I was burnt out from living in the city and wanted to move to Maine and start this business. At first I was looking to start it on a farm up there, partnering with a farm, and then when the pandemic hit, that fell through. So I started it on the island instead and lived up there for a few years, running it as a seasonal business, and I just really started to miss the city. The native New Yorker in me was pulling me back.

My girlfriend was living here in Park Slope, so I'd spend some of my off-season time down here in the winter, exploring what the business might look like in the city. After a few years of looking at spaces, I found the one we're in now. Having spent that off-season time in Park Slope, it just felt like a really great fit. There was a dearth of restaurants in the neighborhood, and not a lot of people doing conceptually what I was trying to do. So that's how this all came about.

How much of your business is local repeat neighbors versus people from all over the city?

I'd say we're about 75 percent Park Slope right now. I started this to first and foremost be a place for the neighborhood, and the reception's been really positive. People are just looking for another restaurant to go to, whether it's with their kids or without. They love that we emphasize sourcing as locally and organically as possible, and that we offer a sit-down wine bar experience alongside the pizza and the food. They love that we're doing the sourdough with a really long fermentation, putting a lot of love, care, and intention into the food. It's been a really positive first six months.

Have you been aware of customers who are Coop members?

I haven’t asked, so that’s hard to say. But a lot of the Park Slope community are members. My girlfriend has been a Coop member for 10 years, so I’m very familiar with it, and there have definitely been customers who’ve mentioned they work there. I’m sure many members have come through our doors.

Living in Maine, with your girlfriend being a member—what was your awareness of the Coop as you were going back and forth?

I’ve known about the Coop for years, just from being a New Yorker. Right out of college I had a sublet in Park Slope and I was on the verge of joining about 10 years ago, but didn’t, because I ended up moving out of the neighborhood. Growing up here, I’ve always respected what it does—both as a community model for increasing access to affordable, quality fresh produce, and just as a great grocery store. The foodie in me loves a grocery store that has a lot to offer, and the Coop clearly stands out as one of the better ones in the city.

How does your experience working on farms change you as a restaurant owner?

The most fulfilling part of working on that small organic vegetable farm was getting to pick what I’m cooking with that day. It really drew me back to the roots of not just Italian cuisine, but Neapolitan-style pizza making—because in Naples, where pizza was invented, there’s such a profound emphasis on simplicity, the quality of ingredients, and sourcing everything as locally as possible.


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Ben in his restaurant backyard planting basil, which he uses for his dishes.

I came to realize more and more that what makes the best food, particularly the best Italian food, is not overdoing it—using just a few really great ingredients. That's how you make the best tomato sauce: just tomatoes, olive oil, and sea salt. You don't need oregano, you don't need garlic, you don't need all these add-ons. The best pasta in the world, arguably, is just a simple spaghetti pomodoro with in-season tomatoes and some fresh basil. That's what Neapolitan pizza has always been about.

So as a pizza maker, I was really excited to bring that philosophy to my pizza. There are some people doing Neapolitan-style pizza, and some doing sourdough Neapolitan specifically, like Anthony Mangieri of Una Pizza Napoletana, who I've always looked up to. But I feel like there aren't that many people in the city really offering a "farm--to-pizza" experience, focused on the quality of the produce. That's an area I've focused on since working on that farm.

How are you feeling about your first tomato season in the city?

We opened in November, so we haven't had a tomato season yet. This'll be my first one open in New York. I'm so excited. For the last five years in Maine, I've done a pizza I call the "l'estate," which means summer in Italian. It's literally just peak in-season heirloom cherry tomatoes from a small organic farm, ripened right on the vine. When you harvest cherry tomatoes at peak ripeness, there's just nothing like it—they carry so much flavor, unlike any tomato you'd find in a grocery store. I'm so excited to get that pizza back on the menu.

There's another we do in summer called the "Fiore," with squash blossoms and local organic zucchini—also really special. And there's one we'll be doing shortly with in--season garlic scapes from the farmers market.

In Maine I got all my produce from one or two small organic farms, and those partnerships let me develop a lot of these pizzas. They rest on traditional Italian ingredient combinations, but they also work because we're able to get such great produce. We're just getting into farmers market season here, and I'm so excited to start putting some of these seasonal pizzas on the menu—that's part of the challenge of launching in late fall and early winter, not being able to do quite as much with in-season produce as we traditionally have.

Is there anything you're considering trying here that you never did in Maine?

Of course. We love to try new things. We've got a few things in the works with some really special heirloom tomato seeds that I'm actually growing in my backyard at the restaurant right now. I won't announce it just yet, until the tomatoes are ready, but there's some fun stuff coming.

I'm a big believer in walking through the farmers market, talking to farmers, and seeing what looks exciting and what's going to work on a pizza. One we're doing right

now that’s been a big hit is organic asparagus with fresh lemon spritzed on top, fresh mozzarella, pecorino, and black pepper. As we transition out of asparagus season, we’ll start doing the garlic scape pie I mentioned, and some others as the summer heats up.

As we head into summer-produce season, do you have any advice for people shopping at the Coop?

I always like to shop as much as possible day-of when I’m cooking. You generally get the freshest stuff that way. I keep an eye out for what looks really perky and fresh, what was truly just harvested that day or the day before. That always makes for the best meals in my experience. So use your eyes and follow your heart, and see what’s truly poppin’ on those shelves. That’s going to lead to a lovely dining experience.

Zach Schiffman is a social editor and writer at New York *magazine, comedian, and Park Slope local.*

HELPING COMMUNITIES BEYOND THE COOP’S WALLS

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By Emmett Lindner

For decades, Lewanika Senghor worked at the Coop in different roles, pitching in with membership coordination, tech support and aiding members. But he and his family were also working tirelessly to help the communities beyond the Coop's walls.

Mr. Senghor, his wife, their daughter and others run the Village House Pantry, which distributes food donations from restaurants, bakeries—and, yes, the Coop—to people in need. They stock fridges around the city for people who need to focus on rent or childcare and can then think less about where to get a meal.

The work can be grueling: Mr. Senghor and his family finance the program but are hoping for funding to strengthen their efforts. At times, they pull 17-hour days, driving to Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, Eataly, movie sets and restaurants to pick up left-

over food and stock fridges so that New York residents dealing with disabilities, lapses in employment or other challenges can have a stocked kitchen.

Mr. Senghor and his family make sure that the food is quality and the fridges are clean and neatly organized. Residents who go to the Pantry's main location, on Midwood and Rogers, come so often that the food is often gone within the hour it's set out.

In an interview, Mr. Senghor discussed how he developed his passion for helping his neighbors, what goes into the wide network of food distribution and how he hopes to make an impact. This interview has been edited and condensed.

> "I ALWAYS WONDERED: WHY ARE THINGS THE WAY THEY ARE? IF WE HAVE MORE VACANT APARTMENTS, WHY IS ANYBODY HOMELESS? AND IF WE HAD MORE FOOD IN ONE STATE, WHY WAS THERE ANYBODY HUNGRY IN THE WORLD?"

How did all this start for you?

As we speak, I'm recalling all sorts of things—watching civil rights on television with Dr. King, and just wondering why the world wasn't the way it could have been.

I remember in the '70s and '80s finding out that the state of Wisconsin alone produced enough food to feed the world four times over, and New York City in the '70s and '80s had more vacant apartments and homes than it had homeless people.

I always wondered: Why are things the way they are? If we have more vacant apartments, why is anybody homeless? And if we had more food in one state in a big country, why was there anybody hungry in the world? To me, those are contradictions that don't make any sense.

You realize that if there was a desire and a will to do it, nobody should be hungry, nobody should be homeless.

What happened after that realization?

You start to look at the inequities or the things that were happening in this country. You juxtapose it against history: The great potato famine, when food was being exported out of Ireland to serve the British Empire and Americas, but people are starving inside of the country that the food is being taken from. That's happening all over the world.

At the Brooklyn Borough Hall greenmarket on Saturday, November 1.

At the Brooklyn Borough Hall greenmarket on Saturday, November 1.
Back in the ’80s, I was very involved in the student movement and community movements. You figure, if you input yourself, you could actually help to make change, and you put yourself out there hoping that your input would help.

You have a sense that an individual can make an impact.

Yes. Back then we thought that our involvement would help make changes, and yes, I still think that people can make changes. I think that is definitely shown in the Coop.

You can have people come together and work for food, keep the overhead low, because using member labor is great. That’s something that can happen throughout the country. And at times it did.

What do you focus on now?

Most of my time is spent doing food rescue and reallocation with my family, but we’ve been doing that for quite some time. Since COVID, it took on a whole different thing. For a while, we were dealing with about 100 families. In the past, we’ve taken food to people who were finding themselves going through difficult time periods. It expanded, and we moved into picking up food and taking it to community fridges.

The Senghors’ car trunk full of vegetables.

The fridges are all over. We have some people in Seattle and down in Baltimore. We have other friends that are involved in it as well. They call them to help start up fridges in different areas. It’s all Brooklyn, Manhattan and some places in Queens and the Bronx. There are fridges that are open to the public for people to come and take food.

We can put food in the fridge now and sometimes within five minutes, but usually within half an hour, a full fridge full of food is gone.

> “A LOT OF THIS HAS BEEN DONE ON OUR OWN DIME—PAYING THE TOLLS, THE GAS, THE REPAIRS TO THE VEHICLE THAT WASN’T INTENDED FOR THIS.”

How much of your time was that taking?

We were doing this probably about 17 hours a day. We were running around picking up food, because earlier on in the pandemic, we were getting calls for businesses that either their freezers were failing, their refrigeration was failing, or they were going out of business.

We were picking up a lot of food from places that knew about people who were rescuing food and reallocating it. And we would be filling the fridges up. We'd be picking up at 11 at night, filling the fridges up to 2 in the morning.

What does your work look like now?

We serve between 800 and 1,200 people a week. Combined, probably closer to 2,000 or more. We do a distribution every Thursday on the street, and about six to eight other groups pick up from us. They also do their distributions.

Sometimes we have people who take food to Prospect Park, and they'll give it out to the homeless there. And sometimes we'll have people who make the food, because we try to build out the organization as opposed to us doing everything ourselves.

What kinds of food do you distribute?

It varies from day to day. At one time we were getting so many bananas, and bananas are the type of fruit that you can't put in the fridge. But we've gotten all sorts of things—you name it. We've gotten fresh fruit and vegetables, we've gotten eggs, we've gotten milk, canned goods as well as frozen. We've got ice creams and cakes.

Community Fridge located at Union St. and Bond St. in Brooklyn.


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through
and
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Stocking the community fridge.
We also do clothing. My wife gives out winter coats and shoes and gloves and hats and scarves. We've done medical supplies, like walkers and wheelchairs. We've been doing these types of things for years. This is just another phase of what we've been doing.

What's the reaction from the community?

The overall response has been: "Thank you." There are people who are working who still are not making enough to live comfortably. Some people have been able to utilize us to allow them to save so they can actually put a down payment on their home. Some people have been going through things where they didn't have clothes for their children or food for their children, and it helped them keep things going.

Sometimes people have been released from work and they find that this has been beneficial. Some people are living in their cars. Some people have health problems, cancers and other issues, and they find that being able to come and pick up food has been helpful.

What do you see as the next step for this work?

We're looking to get funding. A lot of this has been done on our own dime—paying the tolls, the gas, the repairs to the vehicle that wasn't intended for this. We want to expand, get a vehicle specifically for this, get a place where we can continue doing distribution even during the harshest weather.

> "I THINK THERE ARE BASIC LIFE REQUIREMENTS THAT PEOPLE NEED IN ORDER TO SURVIVE. WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING AS A FAMILY IS WORKING TOWARD BUILDING COMMUNITY."

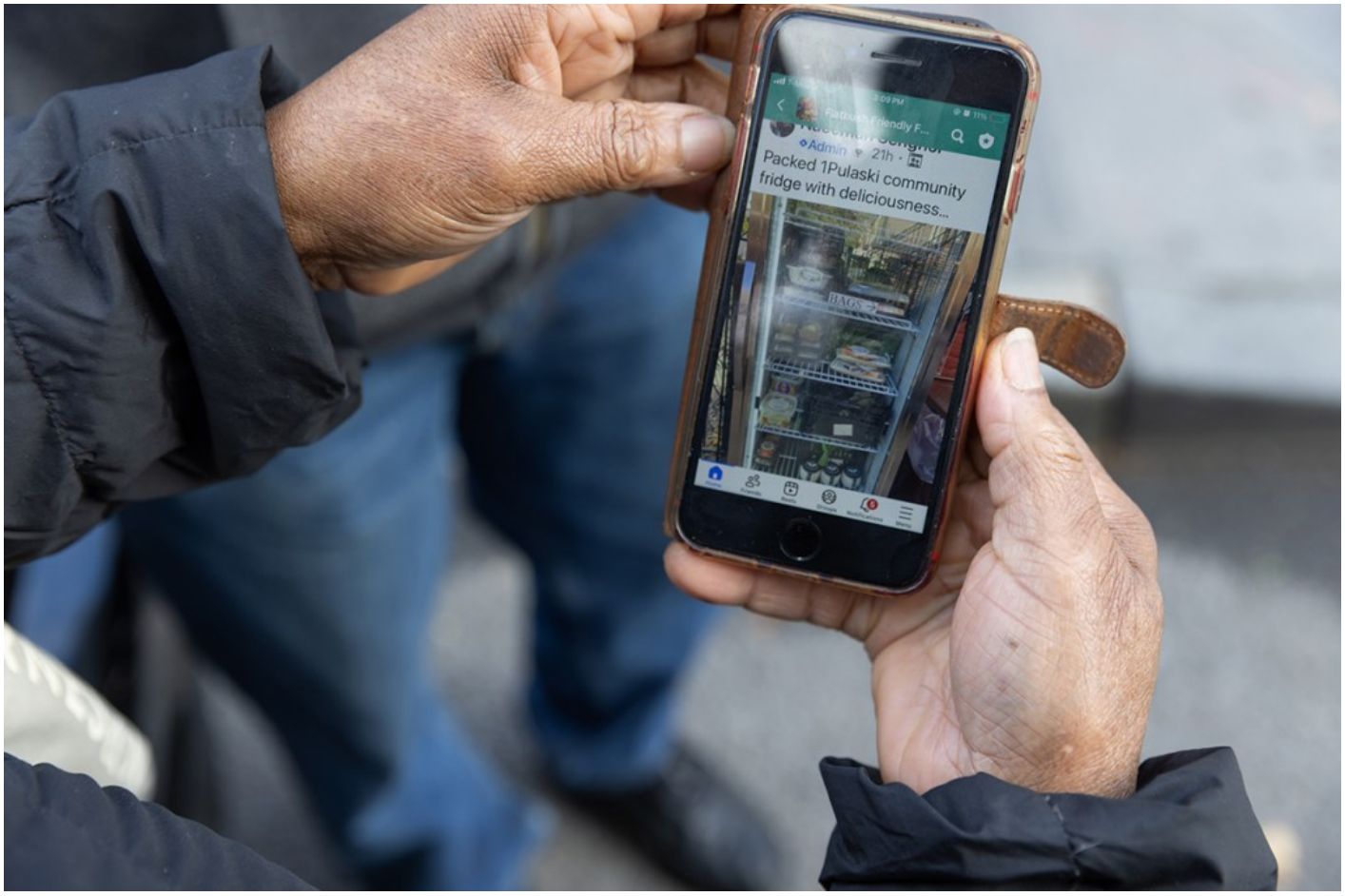
Right now we're doing distribution from the street, other than what we do from the home. We'd like some place where we can have people actually come through. We have visions where we could get food and have people who can prepare it, maybe a $5 meal or $10 meal, something low-cost.

We've had chefs bring food to give out. I have the vision that we can get a storefront and do something like that.

Have you discussed the SNAP cancellation with anyone who uses the fridges?

People who use the fridges aren't as concerned. What I find is people who have not been using the fridges have been contacting us. How do we set up a fridge? How do we get it stocked? I think people who use the fridges and who come to the distribution already understand that there are some resources out there. The question is, how do people change over from being used to going to a market and buying this stuff to now going to the various pantries that are out there?

One of the things that people would often say to us when we offer them food is, "I'm going to leave it for the people who are more in need," and now, when they find themselves being those people, many times people have a social consciousness as to whether or not it's right for them to take food, or whether or not it seems appropriate, or whether or not they want to be seen doing this.



Dropoffs are posted to social media to let neighbors know.

When I hear people say that, I often tell them, we don't necessarily provide food for the people who are "in need." We provide food for people who eat, because we find that a lot of people may be just a few dollars above what they consider the cut off level for receiving benefits, and they find themselves struggling to just make it, or they may be a little behind. Something like this will throw a person, and they find that unless they're far ahead, they can quickly be behind.

The fridges already run out of food quickly—do you expect that to increase?

Yes, and this is a challenge for people who do this type of work. Sometimes if we're there, people take a small amount, and they'll let the next people get a small amount. But we've gone to places where maybe 10 or 20 mangoes are in the fridge, and you'll have somebody who will come and take 15 of them. When we're there, we don't allow that, but it's not really something you want to do, policing how people receive food. We have found it necessary because some people are not necessarily con-

siderate of other people, but at the same time you have to weigh it — this person came first, this person came second. This person is an older person. It varies.

The government has emergency funds to deal with these things. Hopefully, the bill that's in Congress now will pass to provide people more services. But there's more than enough food to feed everybody. It's just that there has to be a mandate and an understanding that there is enough food, and it has to be made available.

What's the larger goal for you in all of this?

I think there are basic life requirements that people need in order to survive. What we've been doing as a family is working toward building community. Community, I think, is what we need. We have neighborhoods, but we have very few communities.

The difference is that in a neighborhood, you'll see people you recognize, but you don't have any real common supportive mechanism in place. I think that's what we need to build, not just here but all over the world.

That's why we call it the Village House Pantry. We have gatherings with friends and family to build what I call personal communities.

We need to build communities that are thinking of our common goals and objectives in which everybody can benefit. If we can do that—not just here, but every-where—we're in a better position. We achieve more.

Emmett Lindner works on the breaking and trending news desk at The New York Times*.*