

# Nourishing souls

Chefs and celebrities are using their star power to fight food insecurity

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO

Chef José Andrés built up an impressive empire of restaurants – two-Michelin-starred minibar in Washington, D.C., and The Bazaar in Miami’s South Beach to name just two – but it’s his huge humanitarian heart and philanthropic endeavors that are making the most impact right now.

He is the vocal frontman of World Central Kitchen (WCK), a nonprofit organization that feeds people at the front lines of crises and natural disasters. Named Humanitarian of the Year by the James Beard Foundation in 2018 and twice named among *TIME*’s 100 Most Influential People, Andrés uses his public platform to fight against food insecurity, a plight that affects an estimated 700+ million people around the world.



SCOTT SUCHMAN

Clockwise from above: Chef José Andrés; Jon Bon Jovi and his wife Dorothea Bongiovi; Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Andrés distributing food at the WCK during the COVID-19 pandemic

Founded in 2010 after the devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti, WCK’s main principle is to use food to fortify communities and strengthen local economies through sustainable and locally led solutions. In locations around the world, WCK has implemented programs on clean cooking techniques, food safety and sanitation, and culinary education, including École des Chefs, a professional culinary school in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, that graduates 40 skilled students per year for Haiti’s hospitality sector.

In the more than a decade since its inception, WCK has responded to hurricanes, wildfires, erupting volcanoes, floods, and conflicts, and has served more than 50 million meals. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, hit WCK with a force far greater than any storm they’d experienced.

“We watched in vivid detail the challenges families faced during the pandemic, the long food lines, and farmers unable to sell their crops,” said WCK CEO Nate Mook. “But what also happened is that there was a bit of a reckoning and shift on the understanding of hunger in America. This was not a problem caused by COVID-19. Even in the best of times, families face hunger here and abroad.

“It was unlike any disaster we’ve encountered, and we couldn’t be everywhere. We had to come up with a way to reach as many people as possible in big cities all the way to small towns,” he added.

What they conceived was Restaurants for the People, a program that pays restaurants and kitchens across the U.S. to feed vulnerable communities, as well as the medical professionals on the front lines of the pandemic. To date, WCK has directly disbursed \$160M to 2,500 small and independent restaurants in 35 states so they can create and serve fresh meals to communities in immediate need while keeping their lights on and employees working.

“The restaurant community in America and around the world is very large, very deep. You will always find a restaurant, staff, chefs – and that means connection

to farmers and food companies and distributors, with access to gas, with access to refrigeration. That’s no matter where we are in the world. In an emergency, this is something very powerful,” said Andrés in *The New York Times* in June 2020.

The pandemic hasn’t slowed him down. He and WCK continue to show up where they are needed most. WCK’s relief team has served more than 400,000 hot, nourishing meals to hospital workers in India. They’ve also partnered with relief organizations and restaurants in Gaza to prepare thousands of fresh, nourishing meals for people displaced and unable to access food.

“Our mission has always been not just to feed people, but to work alongside communities to build their own resilience against food insecurity. Andrés wakes up every day thinking about how he can use his experience and platform to do this,” said Mook.

## SOUL POWER

Another high-profile celebrity quietly working to eliminate chronic food insecurity is Jon Bon Jovi. The rock star and his wife, Dorothea Bongiovi, founded the JBJ Soul Foundation in 2006 to support programs that help fund community organizations and break the cycles of poverty and homelessness in the U.S.

As part of an effort to alleviate the food insecurity in their home state of New Jersey, the couple created the JBJ Soul Kitchen in 2011, a community kitchen in Red Bank that offers three-course, home-cooked meals in a restaurant atmosphere. A second location soon followed in Toms River. Patrons are asked to make a monetary donation or pay through volunteering. More than 137,000 meals have been served, with 47% paid with donations and 53% with volunteerism.

When the pandemic struck, Bongiovi said they kept their staff on full pay and adopted a to-go model, handing out food to their in-need population. JBJ Soul Kitchen then partnered with Rutgers University’s food service provider Gourmet Dining and opened its third location on the school’s Newark campus in early 2020. Although temporarily closed because of the pandemic, it is slated to reopen this fall.

“Food insecurity is one of the most critical issues college students face today,” said Bon Jovi, when announcing the initiative. “We truly believe that when students are supported with basic needs and backed by their community, they can and will go on to do amazing things.”

At the height of the pandemic, the Foundation received reports of 500% increases in requests for food on the East End of Long Island. It quickly mobilized, opening the JBJ Soul Kitchen Food Bank, which delivered more than 200 tons of food to seven pantries during the summer of 2020.

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## CONTINUING THE WORK

From easy and equal access to nutritious and affordable food to paying people a living wage, systemic changes are needed. Recently, there was a very public recognition of the vital importance of Andrés’ work when WCK received a \$100M donation from Jeff Bezos following his Blue Origin space flight in July.

“World Central Kitchen was born from the simple idea that food has the power to create a better world,” said an emotional Andrés at the press conference after the announcement. “A plate of food is a plate of hope.” He later said, “We’re not going to end hunger overnight, but this is a way to start making bold decisions.”

Celebrities and chefs lending their names to the cause is a huge boon, but Bongiovi suggests one thing that we can all do every day. “The biggest thing people can do is realize that very few people choose to be food insecure. Most of the people we see are hardworking, underpaid folks with families that they love, just like everyone else.”

→ World Central Kitchen / Restaurants for the People  
wck.org/restaurantsforthepeople

→ JBJ Soul Foundation/ JBJ Soul Kitchen  
jbjsf.org, jbjssoulkitchen.org



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