

How the Chefs with Compassion alliance is producing sustainable meals for vulnerable communities in SA

Chefs with Compassion - an alliance led by five local and global organisations and supported by over 300 chefs, restaurant owners and volunteers - has been producing sustainable meals for vulnerable communities in South Africa during the Covid-19 lockdown. In the process, it has sparked a surplus-driven movement - which it intends on extending beyond the pandemic.

Chefs with Compassion was born in early April, shortly after the declaration of a state of disaster by President Cyril Ramaphosa, when Nosh Food Rescue's Hanneke van Linge, in collaboration with Thava Indian Restaurant in Norwood, began turning surplus rescued produce that would otherwise have gone to waste into flavoursome, nutritious curries and stews. According to Food Loss and Waste: Facts and Futures, South Africa produces around 31 million tonnes of food every year. Of that, 10 million tonnes is wasted, 44% of which is vegetables and fruits.



Starting small

In its first week, what was to become known as Chefs with Compassion, consisting of three 'kitchens', produced 2,355 meals for nine beneficiary organisations.

Hanneke van Linge comments: "In our six years of operation, we've come to understand the vital role that the restaurant industry plays in our food systems. In a country like South Africa that is marked by both a high-calibre hospitality sector and extreme hunger, we have to find innovative ways to work together and find real solutions to our social plights. A project like Chefs with Compassion has long been part of our bigger picture and the current lockdown situation realised and scaled our pilot project with Chef Philippe Frydman and Thava Restaurant faster than we could ever have anticipated. We now have solid proof of concept: it is a powerful and efficient way to distribute delicious, nourishing food to where it is needed most."

As word spread via social media and the media, the concept of providing rescued produce to compassionate chefs and kitchens to cook up for Joburg's vulnerable communities took root. The opportunity to expand the movement into a national initiative was realised with the formation of an alliance between Nosh Food Rescue NPC, Slow Food International, the South African Chefs Association, Slow Food Chefs Alliance SA, and Strategic PR. Subsequently, Chefs with Compassion, a new not-for-profit company, was formed.



By the first week of May, the number of beneficiary organisations had grown to 28, receiving 11,749 meals from nine kitchens. With the potential to increase the volume of rescued produce as a result of the hospitality industry being shut down, the opportunity for expansion was limited only by human resources – also in plentiful supply due to the lockdown – and a suitable facility to receive the incoming produce.

“It was at this point that the call went out for volunteers and a warehouse from which we could expand the operation. The response was overwhelming. Chefs all over the country extended their hands and their hearts to assisting, and the HTA School of Culinary Art provided the space for Chefs with Compassion to grow. Generous funding was allocated by the South African Chefs Association to provide the boost needed, and in its fifth week, Chefs with Compassion grew production by 212,2%, from nine kitchens to 22, and from 11,749 meals to 36,681 meals in a single week. The restaurant pioneer who began the wave, Thava Indian Restaurant, is today producing 1,500 meals a day.

“ The concept behind Chefs with Compassion is a simple one – to rescue produce, provide it to compassionate chefs and kitchens, and connect them with beneficiary organisations. The logistics behind it are more complex and, with the need growing daily, requires the intervention of an expanding network of volunteers. ”

The journey starts with a team of passionate food waste warriors from Nosh Food Rescue, through their relationship with farmers, retailers and produce agents at the market, rescuing a portion of the produce – which would otherwise have been discarded and destroyed at the market. From there it is transported to the warehouse, where another team of volunteers sorts the true waste from what can be used to feed people who would otherwise go hungry. Says Van Linge: “The supply of rescued produce is, by nature, unpredictable and subject to demand by buyers and the discretion of the agents who provide us with the surplus. This means that, for example, last week we received close to 1,700 tonnes of lettuce. You’d be surprised what creative chefs can concoct out of a few lettuces.”



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Expanding across SA

In week seven of Chefs with Compassion, between 18 and 24 May, 24,112 tonnes of rescued produce was sent to 30 kitchen hubs run by compassionate owners, where volunteer chefs produced 42,220 meals.

Nothing goes to waste as any produce that can’t be salvaged is given to pig farmers. And stories of compassion and success abound – in week six, Chefs Carol Osuigwe and Jeanette Maseko began cooking for beneficiaries in the East Rand, anticipating that they would prepare 300 meals per day each. Through their network of community kitchens and their own catering operations, they have collectively managed to serve over 12,000 meals in the last two weeks.

In Johannesburg, the chefs, kitchens and restaurants preparing meals as hubs in the Chefs with Compassion initiative are Alra Park Community Forum, Bizza’s Lifestyle, Bun’s Out, Busisiwe – B TwalaB, Carol Osuigwe, Chef Mahlamola Thamae, Chef Pinky Maruping and Tebogo Ramatsui of Unilever Food Solutions, Chef Raynor Damons, Chef Citrum Khumalo, Disoufeng Pub, Ejardini, Hospitality Cares, Jackson’s Real Food Market, Jeanette Osuigwe, Chef Lance Williamson, Love Me So, Love Me So, Perron, Saigon Suzy, Swiss Hotel School, Taste-Buds Cooking Club, Thathimvuyo Caterers, Thava Indian Restaurant, The Curry Boss, The Local Grill, The Noble and V8 Roadhouse.



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Next stop for Chefs with Compassion: Cape Town, Pretoria, Durban and Bloemfontein, followed shortly by Vereeniging, Makopane, Potchefstroom and Port Elizabeth. Says Coovashan Pillay, national project manager for Chefs with Compassion: “Our need in these areas is for food waste warriors to champion the rescue of produce from the markets and farmers, a warehouse facility where produce can be sorted and dispatched to kitchen hubs and volunteers in the form of chefs to cook in the hubs and hands to fulfil the warehouse- and sorting functions.”

Nationally, Chefs with Compassion’s greatest need is for four-tonne trucks to transport the produce from the markets to the warehouses and to collect donations of staple ingredients. In Johannesburg alone, the cost for a vehicle to do the market run five days a week is around R5,000. “Our funding will quickly run out without the vehicles to make the entire chain work, and we’re calling on logistics companies, truck rental companies, and suppliers who have vehicles that are currently not

being used to assist us in ensuring the sustainability of this initiative,” says Chef Co.

Donations can be made via Zapper or EFT and corporate donations qualify for a Section 18A certificate. For more information and to make a contribution go to www.chefswithcompassion.org.za or email info@chefswithcompassion.org.za.

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