



Dallas Chefs Fought Through a Pandemic, Then the Power Went Out

Chefs and restaurateurs already face a pandemic. And then came an unprecedented winter storm that piled on major losses and property damage.

BY EVE HILL-AGNUS | FEBRUARY 19, 2021



On Tuesday, when temperatures peaked at 14 degrees, Cibo Divino owner Daniele Puleo stood by the oven in his Sylvan Thirty shop and restaurant, overseeing the brisk shuffling in and out of pizzas charred by the inferno. The power was out, but the oven blazed, making food for people who were walking in from a frozen world. They continued until the dough supply gave out midday yesterday.

The restaurant community, which has been slammed this year by hit after hit, rose yet again as the climactic conditions were compounded by a canceled Valentine's Day, lengthy closures, and an unsteady return to normalcy.

In the Dallas Farmers Market area—the enclosed Shed and adjacent shops and apartments—power failed as well. Ka-Tip owner and Farmers Market resident George Kaiho trekked down with his wife and a cousin to stir up the stove. They lit the gas appliances in the dark and turned out a simple menu of bacon, eggs, and pancakes and comforting shrimp and chicken congees. They sold hot tea and coffee and let people bring containers to fill with hot water, knowing others were in dire straits at home.

Tuesday and Wednesday, as power danced on and off, Kaiho was able to add some of their regular menu items. When the restaurant darkened naturally, around 4 p.m., the tiny team stopped. "We couldn't see anymore, so we closed," Kaiho says.

Their landlord at the Farmers Market allowed them to enter the Shed to purchase 12 dozen eggs, coffee, and milk from Market Provisions when their supply ran out. "They opened just for us. And few other people," Kaiho says.

Many lost power across the city. Empire Baking Company posted on social media that, without power, the bakers had been unable to do their overnight baking. They were forced to close the Inwood bakery. No power, no daily bread. No power, no warm mugs of coffee. Roasters like Noble Coyote, Full City Rooster, and others bleakly announced their abrupt shuttering. For those seeking staples, the basics were snatched out from under them.

For some, losses were great, but dwarfed in comparison to concern for staff. Anastacia Quiñones-Pittman, executive chef at José, returned to a frigid restaurant that had been shuttered for five days. She threw out the contents of a walk-in refrigerator gilded with provisions for a Valentine's Day menu. Oysters, lobster tails, and tomahawk ribeyes went into the dumpster.

There was no way to know how high the cold chamber's temperature had risen before the power was restored, though the thermostat read 40. And so thousands of dollars of product were tossed.

"There were tears," she says. But the worst part was feeling helpless. She was unable to help her employees, with whom she kept in constant contact through a group chat. (Fourteen of her 18 back-of-house employees lost power.) The restaurant closed, its propane tanks unused, she arranged to make them available to staff members in need. She delivered several and left a few others on the patio.

Close relationships with suppliers like the local Chefs Produce meant she was able to secure enough supplies to open with a few of the menu's most popular items for curbside pickup on Thursday. She would like to reopen the dining room for dinner on Friday, but is tiptoeing back, not wanting to spread the staff too thin.

"Tomorrow, we need to go shop," Kaiho told me yesterday. "We normally shop at the Hong Kong Market, but their sprinkler broke, so it's gonna be tough." The next hurdle becomes provisioning, with suppliers sideswiped and no deliveries on icy roads.

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