

Sonoma Family Meal brings chefs together to feed fire victims

CHRISTI WARREN

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Inside the kitchen at the Vintners Inn Event Center on Tuesday, about 1½ miles north of the devastation of Santa Rosa’s now infamous Coffey Park neighborhood, more than a dozen volunteers were buzzing about, chatting happily at their stations, readying dishes designed by Sonoma County chefs to be handed out to fire victims for dinner.

They were there as part of Sonoma Family Meal, a relief effort helmed by Press Democrat food writer Heather Irwin that aims to provide free, chef-prepared meals to as many people affected by the fires, as long as possible, for as long as there’s a need.

The idea sprung up as Irwin and her evacuated family members gathered around a kitchen table at a friend’s apple farm in Sebastopol on Oct. 14.

Exhausted after a week of being away from their homes during the deadly wildfires, no one was in the mood to cook, which meant pre-packaged salads, risotto cakes and quiche. Anything they could throw together, she said.

“So I thought there was really this unserved population of people who were displaced and just so traumatized,” she said.

“That we could offer up chef-made meals for anyone who wanted to pick them up, for any reason.”



That night, she got to work contacting every chef she could think of, and the next day, Sonoma Family Meal served its first lunch at Franchetti's on Dutton Avenue in Santa Rosa. The first day, all the food was prepared and dropped off by area chefs. Lasagna from Single Thread in Healdsburg, barbecue from Zazu Kitchen + Farm in Sebastopol, dessert from Moustache Baked Goods in Healdsburg.

Since that chaotic Sunday, Sonoma Family Meal has grown into a full-scale kitchen operation, with chefs Miriam Donaldson, from Wishbone, and Aaron Jonas, from Aaron Jonas Catering, heading up the kitchen. After a week handing out lunch and dinner to go at Santa Rosa Junior College, the group has streamlined to one distribution a day, from 4 to 7 p.m. at the Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Building. In all, more than 35,000 meals have been distributed.

"I'm here to provide a food safety net and make sure that everyone who needs help is getting help, so they can turn around and help someone else," Donaldson said. "We're trying to provide a food safety net on the other side of the food chain, too, though, and that's the farmers."

As much as possible, the kitchen crew has been using products from local farmers and ranchers dropped off daily at its kitchen.

Tuesday morning, Donaldson walked up to "the most wonderful surprise," she said: a palette of organic local vegetables dropped off by Farmers Exchange of Earthly Delights (F.E.E.D. Sonoma), paid for by the Farmers Guild.

"So what that means is the farmers are paid, which means they can continue to farm," Donaldson said.

Tuesday night's dinner options included beef tacos with rice and beans, penne with a bolognese sauce, roasted chicken and potatoes with gravy, Asian chicken salad, a quinoa salad and stuffed peppers.

Hours before dinner, volunteer Deborah Smith stood in front of piles of fresh bell peppers, cut in half and ready to be filled: half with rice and ground beef from Sebastopol's Victorian Farmstead, the other half with romanesco, broccoli, carrots, squash and caramelized onions from F.E.E.D. Sonoma — topped with a goat cheddar cheese from Petaluma Creamery.

"It's all gourmet, that's the thing," said Smith, 49, of Petaluma.

"It's the most delicious gourmet food, comfort food. The other day at the JC, they made homemade pickles for the sandwiches. That's the level of love."

Smith, who lives in Petaluma, was spared any evacuation orders, but hosted her sister's family for a week while they were forced out of their home. Across from her was volunteer Lindy Baker, 65.

Baker was evacuated from her Annadel Heights home for eight days, though it was spared in the fires. Tuesday was her first day volunteering with Sonoma Family Meal.

“I’m a food blogger, and I kind of know how to cook a little bit, so I thought I could help,” she said.

“And it just makes me feel good giving back. I feel very fortunate, very blessed that my house is just fine. ... It’s the right thing to do.”

For more information or to donate, head [here](#).

You can reach Staff Writer Christi Warren at 707-521-5205 or christi.warren@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter [@SeaWarren](#).







