José Andrés Fed Puerto Rico, and May Change How Aid Is Given

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SAN JUAN, P.R. — José Andrés was walking along a dark street in a stained T-shirt and a ball cap, trying to decompress after another day of feeding an island that has been largely without electricity since Hurricane Maria hit a month ago.

He’d gone barely half a block before two women ran over to snag a selfie. A man shouted out his name from a bar running on a generator and offered to buy him a rum sour.

The reaction is more subdued in rural mountain communities like Naguabo, where Mr. Andrés and his crew have been delivering supplies so cooks at a small Pentecostal church can make 5,000 servings of arroz con pollo and carne guisada every day. There, people touch his sleeve and whisper, “Gracias.” They surround him and pray.

“He’s much more than a hero,” said Jesus R. Rivera, who was inside a cigar store watching Mr. Andrés pick out one of his daily smokes. “The situation is that still some people don’t even have food. He is all that is keeping them from starving.”

It’s overwhelming, even for Mr. Andrés, the larger-than-life, Michelin-starred Spanish chef with a prolific, unfiltered social media presence…

“Every day I have this personal anxiety inside,” Mr. Andrés said during a Jeep ride through the countryside in late October. “We only came here to try to help a few thousand because nobody had a plan to feed Puerto Rico, and we opened the biggest restaurant in the world in a week. That’s how crazy this is.”

Since he hit the ground five days after the hurricane devastated this island of 3.4 million on Sept. 20, he has built a network of kitchens, supply chains and delivery services that as of Monday had served more than 2.2 million warm meals and sandwiches. No other single agency — not the Red Cross, the Salvation Army nor any government entity — has fed more people freshly cooked food since the hurricane, or done it in such a nurturing way.

Mr. Andrés’s effort, by all accounts the largest emergency feeding program ever set up by a group of chefs, has started winding down. But it illustrates in dramatic fashion the rise of chefs as valuable players in a realm traditionally left to more-established aid organizations.

With an ability to network quickly, organize kitchens in difficult circumstances and marshal raw ingredients and equipment, chef-led groups are creating a model for a more agile, local response to catastrophes.

“It’s part of a larger trend we’re starting to see with corporations and individuals who are applying their unique skill sets to solve problems after a disaster,” said Bob Ottenhoff, the president and chief executive of the [Center for Disaster Philanthropy](http://disasterphilanthropy.org/), which helps donors make strategic contributions related to domestic and international emergencies.

In addition to sending money or showing up to hand out blankets or boxes of food, companies like UPS and IBM are designing ways to quickly supply logistical and technical aid.

“Chefs are part of that trend now, too,” Mr. Ottenhoff said. “They’re starting to say, ‘Look, people are in need of not just food but good food, and we know how to serve large quantities of good food very quickly.’”

Kimberly Grant, the chief executive of Mr. Andrés’s [Think Food Group](http://www.thinkfoodgroup.com/), which runs 27 restaurants, put it like this: “Who else can take raw ingredients that are seemingly unassociated and make them into delicious food and do it under extreme pressure?”

Restaurateurs have long offered food when trouble hit their communities.

Kitchens near the World Trade Center in New York served thousands of meals each day to emergency workers after 9/11. In response to the 2004 earthquake off the coast of [Sumatra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumatra), Indonesia, the celebrity chef Cat Cora started [Chefs for Humanity](http://chefsforhumanity.org/). Competition barbecue teams that headed to Joplin, Mo., after the 2011 tornadoes organized themselves into [Operation BBQ Relief](https://operationbbqrelief.org/), a nonprofit group that has since responded to [more than 40 disasters](http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/28/us/cnn-hero-stan-hays-operation-bbq-relief/index.html).

Two weeks ago, [a food writer in Northern California](http://www.pressdemocrat.com/news/7559619-181/sonoma-family-meal-brings-chefs?artslide=0) tapped the region’s best chefs to provide a steady stream of meals for people who had lost homes to wildfires. The restaurateur and TV personality Guy Fieri, who had to evacuate his Santa Rosa residence, [organized a team of volunteers](https://www.today.com/food/guy-fieri-feeds-california-wildfire-evacuees-first-responders-t117562) and began serving mashed potatoes and pork loin to firefighters and others in a parking lot.

Mr. Andrés helped out after Hurricane Sandy, but his first big lesson in emergency food relief came in August, when [he rallied local chefs](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/food/wp/2017/08/30/jose-andres-is-on-the-ground-in-houston-ready-to-cook-for-displaced-residents/?utm_term=.0c209646d1a6) in Houston to help feed survivors of Hurricane Harvey.

Other Houston chefs and caterers started a website called “I Have Food I Need Food” and used social media to [create a system](http://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters/article/How-a-Midtown-shelter-became-a-kitchen-command-12252653.php) to organize donations, cook food and get it delivered. They codified their effort in a manual and sent it to chefs in Miami who were staring down Hurricane Irma, which landed 16 days later.

Mr. Andrés went to Houston in part to study how to expand the scope of [World Central Kitchen](https://www.worldcentralkitchen.org/), a nonprofit association of chefs he established in 2011 after helping Haiti earthquake victims a year earlier. The idea was to learn how he and Brian MacNair, World Central Kitchen’s executive director, could add emergency food relief to an agenda that already included building school kitchens, organizing culinary training and offering other forms of support in several countries.

But nothing prepared Mr. Andrés for what he faced in Puerto Rico. After taking one of the first commercial flights to the island after the storm, he realized that things were worse than anyone knew.

“We decided we would just start cooking,” Mr. Enrique said.

The next morning, Mr. Andrés went to a food distributor and loaded up his car. “I was already smart enough to know I would need aluminum pans, so I bought every aluminum pan I could,” he said.

They began cooking big pots of the classic island stew called sancocho on the street in front of Mr. Enrique’s small restaurant. Word spread and the lines grew. They sent food to people waiting in 10-hour lines at gas stations. They heard that workers at the city’s biggest medical clinic were going hungry, so they added it to what was now a makeshift delivery schedule. “Every day it would just double,” Mr. Enrique said.

Mr. Andrés didn’t realize that his was the biggest hot-food game on the island until a week or so after they started. Someone from the Salvation Army pulled up and asked for 120 meals.

“In my life I never expected the Salvation Army to be asking me for food,” he said. “If one of the biggest NGOs comes to us for food, who is actually going to be feeding Puerto Rico? We are. We are it.”

More cooks arrived to help. Partnerships were forged with other aid groups and large food companies. Sandwiches and fruit were added to their repertory of rice dishes.

The team moved its base of operation to the island’s largest arena. To pay for it all, at least in the beginning, they used Mr. Andrés’s credit cards, or cash from the pockets of the Orvis fly-fishing vest he wore like a battle jacket.

Mr. Andrés left the island only a few times, the first after 11 days on the ground. He had lost 25 pounds and became dehydrated.

His team deployed food trucks, like a strike force, to isolated neighborhoods and towns that needed help. Agents of [Homeland Security Investigations](https://www.ice.gov/hsi), a division of United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, were serving as emergency workers, and staying in the same hotel as Mr. Andrés’s crew. The chef persuaded them to load food into their vehicles every morning as they headed out to patrol.

With limited ability to communicate, the crew organized everything with satellite phones, WhatsApp and a big paper map of all the feeding stations on the island, which Mr. Andrés carried like a general at war.

He negotiated with a chain of vocational schools around the island to let culinary students cook there. During visits to his kitchens, 18 in all, he admonished volunteers to add more mayonnaise to sandwiches, keep the temperature up on the pans of rice or serve bigger portions.

The [Compass Group](http://www.compass-usa.com/), a giant American food-service operation that Mr. Andrés recently partnered with, sent someone who understood what it takes to feed several thousand people at a time.

Mr. Andrés recruited his own chefs, too. David Thomas, accustomed to making $540 suckling pigs as the executive chef at Mr. Andrés’s [Bazaar Meat](https://slslasvegas.com/restaurants-bars/bazaar-meat-by-jose-andres/) restaurant in Las Vegas, suddenly found himself trying to figure out how to make meals out of donations that might include 5,000 pounds of lunch meat one day and 17 pallets of yogurt the next.

The operation grew so big that at one point you couldn’t find any sliced cheese in all of Puerto Rico. The team had bought it all up for sandwiches.

Eventually, the effort would cost World Central Kitchen about $400,000 a day, paid for by donations from foundations, celebrities and a flood of smaller donors, as well as two Federal Emergency Management Agency contracts — one early on to cover the cost of 140,000 meals, and another for $10 million to cover two weeks’ worth of meals while Mr. Andrés’s team scaled down the operation.

Mr. Andrés, who often rolls right over regulations and ignores the word “no,” clashed more than once with FEMA and other large organizations that have a more-seasoned and methodical approach. In meetings and telephone calls, FEMA officials reminded him that he and his people lacked the experience needed to organize a mass emergency feeding operation, he said. Or to feed an island.

“At the end, I couldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t try to do what I thought was right,” he said. “We need to think less sometimes and dream less and just make it happen.”

“We are not perfect, but that doesn’t mean the government is perfect,” Mr. Andrés said. “I am doing it without red tape and 100 meetings.”

FEMA officials contacted for this article were quick to point out that many other groups and agencies besides World Central Kitchen were feeding Puerto Rico; a spokesman would not publicly discuss Mr. Andrés or his operation.

Late last week, the system that was serving more than 130,000 meals a day became much smaller. A core crew will most likely keep things going until Thanksgiving, with one main kitchen and a handful in some of the neediest regions.

Mr. Andrés flew home to Washington, D.C., on Thursday. “This has been like my little Vietnam, but now I need to go back to normal life,” he said…