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Bergen

HEALTH & LIFE | FOOD & FASHION | HOME & HAPPENINGS



LOBSTER BENEDICT

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LET'S EAT!

FEAST YOUR EYES

8 EATERIES WITH GREAT DÉCOR

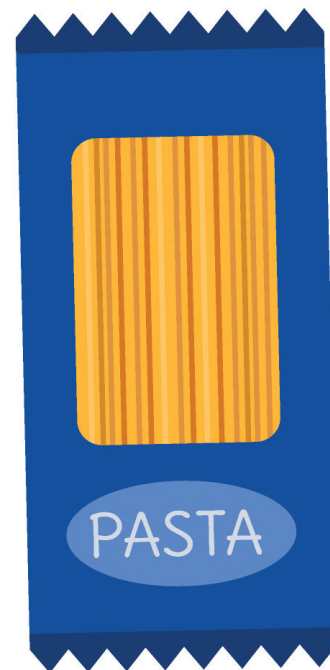
SOUPS & SIDES

YOU'LL WANT TO TRY

SOME LIKE IT HOT

6 FIERY DISHES TO TEMPT
YOUR TASTE BUDS

A TIME OF SHORTAGES



For most residents of our affluent county, temporary difficulties in finding certain food items are a nuisance, but for some they mean actual suffering. *By Leslie Garisto Pfaff*

They were a portrait of the pandemic: photo after photo of yawningly empty supermarket shelves, as shortages led to hoarding, which aggravated shortages, which prompted ever more fevered hoarding. Those days are gone, but shortages persist. Last month, shoppers in some Bergen supermarkets were challenged to find unflavored seltzer or their favorite brand of diet cola, thanks to a nationwide dearth of carbon dioxide, the source of sodas' fizz. At the same time, avocados were in short supply, reflecting the drought that plagued Mexico's farmers.

"You could get avocados, but they were the watery kind, from Peru," says Hackensack resident Carol White, who notes that, at least in her local ShopRite, Mexican avocados are once again in stock (or were, at the time of this writing in early October).

This summer's intense heat and accompanying drought affected other crops as well. On its website, the fruit and vegetable distributor Riviera Produce in Englewood noted that heat has had an impact on the supply of potatoes, rendering them not only scarcer but also smaller. Karen Toufayan of Ridgefield's pita supplier Toufayan Bakeries notes that wholesale and

{ SPECIAL REPORT }

retail bakers nationwide are experiencing a shortage of imported ingredients, including baking powder, gluten, spices and seeds. And if you've been having trouble locating your favorite vintage, the likely culprit is a shortage of glass bottles, which have been siphoned to pharmaceutical companies for the storage of vaccines.

Still, for most consumers, these spotty shortages are small potatoes—annoying, yes, but hardly dire. (The one exception to that is the undersupply of baby formula that made headlines in the spring of 2022 and is now beginning to ease.) But one group of Bergen County consumers has been hit particularly hard by what might be called rolling food shortages: the 62,000-plus residents who depend on the county's food banks and pantries to feed themselves and their families.

WHAT'S MISSING?

Dumont's The Food Brigade channels food to those in need through a variety of programs, including a food pantry, and over the past several months the nonprofit has struggled to find enough meat to feed the 500-plus people who depend on it. "We're a local distribution agency for the United States Department of

Agriculture," says President and Co-founder Karen DeMarco, "and we've just gone through a two-month period when there was no meat available through their program." The Food Brigade has also seen a decline in canned meat and fish, including chicken, tuna and salmon, which means its clients have had to rely on canned foods that contain meat, such as chicken chili and beef stew. In addition, DeMarco says, dairy and eggs have been in significantly shorter-than-usual supply.

The meat shortage has hit many of Bergen's food pantries, including Englewood's Center for Food Action (CFA), which is also experiencing shortages of cereal and even pasta. And at Table to Table, the Hasbrouck Heights-based food rescue that redistributes surplus food from restaurants, grocers and suppliers and delivers it to food-insecure families and individuals, the dearth of meat has taken on greater significance as the holidays approach. "We've already been told by one of our donors not to expect turkeys this year," says Julie Kinner, Table to Table's executive director, "and that's very distressing to us." For

those who depend on the nonprofit, she explains, a turkey isn't just a holiday tradition; it can feed a family for multiple days. "It's something people depend on and get excited about," she says, "and I'm nervous about it for this holiday, because I don't know what's going to happen."

ONE EFFECT, MULTIPLE CAUSES

While the deadliness of the pandemic has waned, many of its effects are still with us, including issues plaguing the global supply chain and a worker shortage that's affected multiple sectors of the economy, from farming to food processing to transportation. Transportation, says DeMarco, "has become a huge problem, in part because of rising prices. Instead of sending out a half-filled tractor-trailer, companies are waiting until a truck is full to send it out. So what happens is you have a lot of feast and famine—you'll get

"Instead of sending out a half-filled tractor-trailer, companies are waiting until a truck is full to send it out. So what happens is you have a lot of feast and famine—you'll get a huge amount and then, suddenly, there's nothing."

—Karen DeMarco, president, The Food Brigade

a huge amount and then, suddenly, there's nothing." Shortages in the availability of packing material trickle down and result in a shortage of foods that need to be packed in order to be shipped, such as meat, milk and eggs.

As noted earlier, heat and drought have affected both food yields and quality. And an avian flu epidemic, which swept through poultry farms in 40 states beginning in early 2022, is still causing shortages of chickens and turkeys in much of the U.S. Individual consumers can navigate shortages more deftly than food pantries: When you can't find turkey cutlets in the meat aisle, you can easily substitute chicken or forgo poultry altogether and opt for salmon filets. Food pantries, on the other hand, depend largely on food donations and can't easily pivot when the supplier calls and says there's no meat available this week.

MORE MOUTHS TO FEED

Starting in May of this year, The Food Brigade began to see an increase in the number of people visiting its pantry. Previously, it had been feeding some 330

families; as of early October, that number has increased to 500. In fact, food banks and pantries all over the county report significant increases in the number of clients they serve. The most obvious culprit: inflation. In the first quarter of 2022 alone, the amount the average American spent on groceries jumped 4.5 percent. "When you have people who can barely make ends meet on a regular basis and then they go to the grocery store or the gas station and there's a 30-percent increase in prices, they don't have the extra income to cover it," says Cheryl Sorabella, board president of the nonprofit Social Service Association of Ridgewood & Vicinity. And of course, food and gas aren't the only commodities affected by inflation: Everything from clothing to cars has seen a steep jump in price over the past two years, and those increases are hardest on low-income families. And this

is happening just as moratoriums on rent and other housing expenses are being lifted, squeezing those families even more.

But while need has risen, donations to food pantries have actually decreased. "We're not getting as much donated as we were in the past," says Nancy Dreszler, director of the Social

Service Association, "so it's hard for us to keep the shelves full, and we can't keep high-value items like the canned proteins on the shelves." A shipment of boxed milk, for example, generally disappears in a matter of hours. Dreszler suspects that inflation has affected donors as well as recipients, a suspicion echoed by Table to Table's Kinner. "I think a lot of our donors are giving less just because they have less," she says.

Perhaps donations have decreased partly because so has the visibility of hunger. In early 2020, we were exposed to news articles about swelling lines at food banks, and the public responded. "During the pandemic," says Sorabella, "we had so much food. We were getting a lot of donations and a lot of volunteers. We had farming resources that would bring us big boxes of produce. And a lot of that dried up as people started to go back to their lives and got busy and forgot." Many of those people also must have assumed that, as their own lives approached a return to normal, the exigencies of the pandemic must also be receding. Clearly, for many Bergen residents, that simply isn't true.

HOW TO HELP

When there's not enough, "more" is always a pretty reliable response, and certainly the pantries and food nonprofits are happy for every donation they get. But to have the most impact, not just on shortages overall but on specific shortfalls (of meat, poultry, eggs, cereal, holiday turkeys and whatever else may be in short supply in the months to come), consider donating cash. Money allows the nonprofits to buy specifically what they need, or a reasonable substitute, rather than waiting for that truckload of milk that may never arrive. In addition to cash, supermarket gift cards are always welcome. In fact, many pantries are substituting them for turkeys in their holiday gift baskets, so that recipients can go out and buy turkeys on their own—a plus, because they can choose the size they need or opt for a ham or a frozen lasagna if they prefer.

If you choose to give food rather than cash or gift cards, check your local pantry's website; some list the items they're most in need of, which, given the problem of shortages, can change from week to week. And favor quality over quantity: canned fish or meat, say, over ramen noodles. DeMarco cautions against buying oversized items. "We don't need one giant jar of peanut butter," she says. "We'd rather have five small jars so we can feed more families."

While inflation could be slowing, most economists project that it will be around for the next couple of years, so the pantries' needs are unlikely to go away any time soon. The lines of vehicles that were so prominent in 2020 have been replaced by lines of human beings—harder to see unless you're actively looking for them. But the need is no less concerning.

"I think that people are getting tired of hearing about food insecurity because it was such a big thing during the worst of COVID," DeMarco says. "But it's bigger now, it's more of an issue, because people aren't getting any additional help." That's why it's more important now that those of us who have enough, or more than enough, overcome our "food insecurity fatigue" and step up to be the help that's needed.

