

When a food hall becomes a meal delivery service for hospitals

Downtown's glamorous High Street Place stands empty, but its chefs are still cooking

By **Kara Baskin** Globe Correspondent, Updated April 28, 2020, [an hour ago](#)



High Street Place's Lauren Johnson (left) and Pennypacker's owner Kevin McGuire delivered meals to Carney Hospital. Barbara Couzens was there to receive them. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

High Street Place was supposed to open in March between Federal and High streets, a spectacular array of food stalls peddling everything from tacos to smoothies to fried chicken. There are subway-tiled walls, Art Deco flourishes, and reindeer moss lining the walls illuminated by thousands of twinkling lights. It spans 20,000 square feet, with

community tables, leather banquettes, and open-air dining. A video entertainment wall has a 28-by-11-foot screen, allowing sports fans to watch four games at once.

Except right now there are no sports, there are no community gatherings, and there are no customers. The opening is on hold, the stalls are empty, and the building lies dormant, a hollow relic of normal life.

However, its chefs are still cooking, serving medical workers instead of the downtown lunch crowd. Several of High Street Place's restaurant partners — Big Heart Hospitality, Daiquiris & Daisies, Farmacy Cafe, Fuji at High Street Place, Humoveh, Mike & Patty's, Mother Juice, North East of the Border, and Pennypacker's — signed up to provide meals to front-line workers at hospitals throughout the area. They include Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston Medical Center, Carney Hospital, St. Elizabeth's Health Center, East Boston Health Center, and more.

Rockhill Management, which manages the property, funded the project and pre-bought the food. In total, the vendors will supply workers with 7,000 meals over the course of five weeks; some deliver in person, or else Rockhill employees make drops.

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Brian Axelrod from the Farmacy Café starts his day at 4 a.m., driving to Chelsea to roam the New England Produce Center for smoothie ingredients for workers at BIDMC.



This meal includes a Porchetta Sandwich with Fig Mostarda and a Romaine Salad with radishes, celery, and marinated feta. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

He then returns to his 1,200-square-foot headquarters in Newton to make 200 drinks in bulk, which he drives to the hospital twice a week. His specialty is orange creamsicle, made with fresh-squeezed orange juice, frozen bananas, pineapple, ginger, and turmeric (“it’s anti-inflammatory and good for people standing on their feet,” he says).

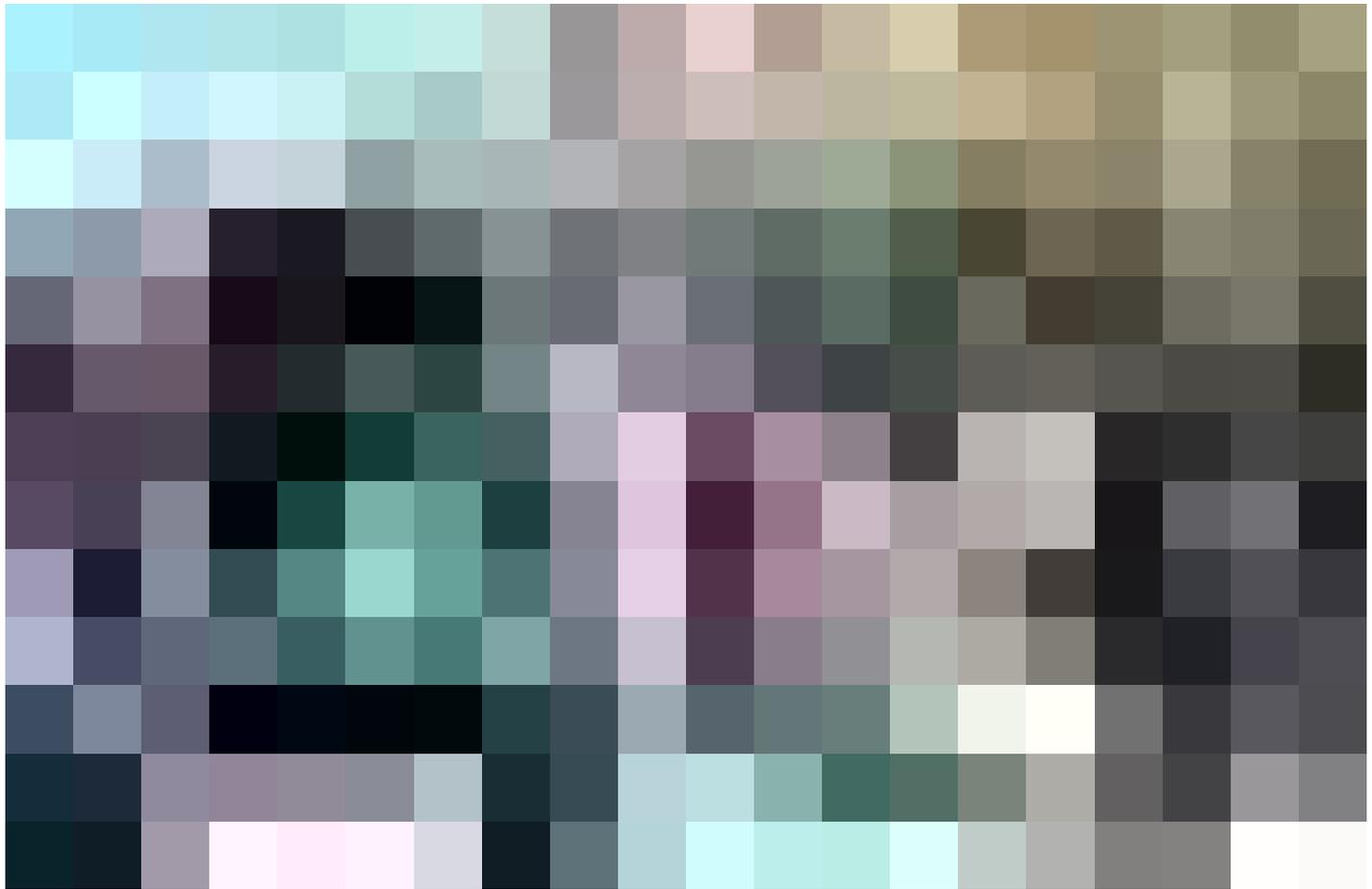
Caroline Moore, the hospital’s director of volunteer services, greets him at the entrance and distributes the food to workers throughout emergency rooms and ICUs. Many work 12-hour shifts and rely on snacks for fuel; nutritious smoothies are a welcome alternative.

“I had a doctor break down in tears when he saw my cart because he realized he hadn’t eaten in 12 hours,” she says.

This definitely isn't how High Street Place envisioned their debut. But restaurants are used to adjusting, chefs say.

"There's something about the industry constantly changing and pivoting, going from zero to 100 in service. I feel like we're built for this," says Big Heart Hospitality's Tiffani Faison, whose pizza stand and raw bar were slated to open at High Street. "There's a strong air of unpredictability in this business anyway."

And so chefs are doing what they know: making food. Quincy-based restaurateur Jimmy Liang of the JP Fuji Group shuttered his sit-down restaurants, which he says aren't well-suited for takeout or delivery; now he uses the empty kitchens to make 1,000 dinners for workers at South Shore Hospital with a skeleton crew. He chose South Shore, in Weymouth, because it's close to home.



Carney Hospital president Tom Sands thanked High Street Place's Lauren Johnson and Pennypacker's owner Kevin McGuire for the meals. Seventy meals from Pennypacker's and 100 juices from Mother Juice were delivered to the hospital. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

This week it was salmon, chicken, and beef bowls, plus 50 boxes of spicy tuna and California rolls.

“It was my first day making sushi again in a long time — going back to basics,” he says, laughing.

He’s blunt about the future of his restaurants, though: They’ll suffer. He expects up to an 80 percent decline in business. But he thinks that when Fuji at High Street ramps up, it will be successful.

“There’s a takeout and delivery component there. And as long as people are back to work, as long as there’s a need for food, I think High Street is in a good place. The places that are suffering more, I hate to say, are my existing businesses. I have one takeout casual concept, but everything else is dine-in, full bar, bigger operations. The next 12 to 18 months will be tough, but takeout and delivery will be through the roof,” he says.

Worry about the future is one thing; sourcing is a more immediate issue.

“It’s hard to get good-quality stuff,” says Farmacy’s Axelrod. “There’s a shortage of a lot of foods right now. Suppliers aren’t shipping in broccoli, fresh greens. Organic bananas are hard to find.”

Kevin McGuire from Pennypacker’s in Somerville specializes in roasted meat sandwiches, but now pork is hard to come by. He plans to serve 600 meals to workers at Carney and Mt. Auburn hospitals, and luckily, he can pivot with his menu. Recently, he prepared fried chicken and grilled asparagus. His High Street workers have been let go; he relies on staff from his Somerville store and does the deliveries himself.

“But the hospital workers are very happy,” he says. “They’re ecstatic.”

And, as Faison says, this is just what restaurants do.

“Their basic functionality is to feed and nourish us — and we’re still doing that, on a different level,” she says.

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