

CHEF TO THE RESCUE

Who better than a military veteran with restaurant experience to battle food insecurity in Bergen?

Even before the pandemic, there were hungry people in Bergen County. Add months of lockdown and thousands of lost jobs to that picture, and you've got significant food insecurity in our suburban region, including among people who never thought they'd have this problem. Thank goodness for Dionisio Cucuta Jr.

People who give back to their community generally don't do it for the recognition, but Cucuta is getting it anyway. The military veteran and culinary master from Teaneck, known as "Chef Dion," has become an irreplaceable community asset—especially during the pandemic—for organizing food donations to vulnerable communities in Bergen County. As a result of his efforts, Cucuta is one of two dozen recipients of the Russell Berrie Making a Difference Award, given annually by Ramapo College of New Jersey on behalf of the late teddy-bear entrepreneur's namesake foundation to New Jersey residents for community service. He's even copped the grand Berrie prize of \$50,000.

"I'm excited and very grateful," Cucuta tells BERGEN. "It's been a long year, but it's become natural for the community to get involved with us. I'm grateful that I have the opportunity to help folks who need it."

From 1977 to 1983, Cucuta served as a cook in the Marine Corps. After completing his service (including duty overseas), he worked in the restaurant industry in New York City. He even trained under famed chef David Burke. A decade



ago he moved to New Jersey, and injuries from his military service started to catch up with him. He required a hip replacement and several knee surgeries, and became "disabled and unemployable," he says, as far as full-time work was concerned.

But Cucuta wasn't finished. He has taught culinary arts at Bergen Community College, coached and mentored the Junior Raiders football team at Englewood High School and—with his wife, Stephanie Taylor-Cucuta—mentored young men and women via the Disabled Combat Veterans Youth Program and Englewood's Culinary Cadets Program.

It's helping vulnerable residents with food insecurity, however, that perhaps makes the

most sense for this trained chef. "I've traveled and seen poverty, and I understand food insecurity is a big part of society," says Cucuta. "So my volunteers and I got together [after the pandemic started] and we went right into this." It began with the modest notion of making sure that people in Englewood could put food on the table. But around May 2020, Cucuta partnered with the Table to Table food rescue organization and started Table to Table Tuesday, which now serves about 650 families each week in Teaneck and Englewood, as well as another 100 or so in Jersey City. There are additional branches in Oakland and Westwood, Cucuta says, but Englewood is the county's distribution hub.

Table to Table Tuesday runs primarily as a drive-up, curbside operation at First Baptist Church of Englewood, where Cucuta and his

volunteers assemble and distribute bags of food containing three HelloFresh brand meal kits that feed a family of four for about a week, in addition to soft drinks, coffee and raw, organic fruits and vegetables. There is also a walk-up distribution center at the church for those who live nearby and/or those who are undocumented and thus cannot drive. "We support anyone, no questions asked," Cucuta says. All the recipients need to do to get their share is register in advance at dcvyp.org so the team knows how many packages to prepare each week.

And just as in the restaurant biz, the emphasis here is on hospitality and customer service. "These people lost their jobs, maybe they lost their homes and their kids aren't in school," he says. "We must smile; we must be courteous. I greet everyone in every car and assure them it's going to be all right."

Even when things return to normal after the pandemic, Cucuta plans to continue his services. "Food insecurity is not going anywhere," he says. In fact, he would like to purchase land in Sussex County and start his own "full-fledged farm," where he'd grow his own crops, open a farmers' market, a banquet facility and an à la carte restaurant. He even has plans to produce wine and honey with his own vineyards and bees, essentially creating jobs for deserving employees while also donating food to the hungry.

For now, though, Cucuta plans to use his \$50K winnings to purchase one or two vans so the organization can pick up food from distributors and deliver packages to seniors and the disabled. He and his wife will also use some of the money to catch up on bills and donate to their church. "Being a veteran, I'm strategically disciplined—I go after certain things systematically and I'm prepared for what's next," says Cucuta. "I'm just grateful to have this opportunity."

FRESH-GROWN FRUITS AND VEGGIES!

You can wait for National Eat Your Vegetables Day on June 17 to pick your produce, but many farmers' markets are open now. What's in season? Expect plenty of zucchini and Swiss chard along with varied tomatoes, peppers, green beans and summer squash toward the end of the month. For fruit, markets will feature blueberries, strawberries, raspberries galore! Hungry? Stop by one of these markets now, but don't forget to check the venue's safety precautions.

- **Hasbrouck Heights**, Borough Hall, Tuesdays, noon–6 p.m.; hasbrouck-heightsnj.org
- **Paramus**, Petruska Memorial Park, Wednesdays, 2–7 p.m.; paramusborough.org
- **Ramsey**, Main Street train station, Sundays, 9 a.m.–2 p.m.; ramseyfarmersmarket.org
- **Ridgewood**, Ridgewood train station, Sundays, 9 a.m.–3 p.m.; ridgewoodnj.net
- **River Vale**, Town Hall, Thursdays, noon–6 p.m.; rivervalenj.org
- **Rutherford**, Williams Center Plaza, Wednesdays, 11 a.m.–6 p.m., Saturdays, 8 a.m.–2 p.m. (opening July 3); rutherfordboronj.com
- **Teaneck**, Garrison Avenue and Beverly Road parking lot, Thursdays, noon–6 p.m.; facebook.com/teaneckfarmersmarket
- **Westwood**, Knights of Columbus parking lot, Saturdays, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.; facebook.com/westwoodfarmersmarket