



**Poems to Go
is the perfect
side at Second
Harvest, area
restaurants**

A 'brilliant pairing'

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Poems To Go provides poems a la carte with food pick-up, drive-thru and delivery services.
RED EYE COFFEE

As the nation fights to flatten the curve in the face of this destructive pandemic, there has been an unprecedented turn towards creative forces to buoy spirits. In light of growing needs for artistic outlets and release, the Council on Culture & Arts launched a new initiative called Poems To Go. The project is offered in partnership with the Tallahassee-Leon County Office of Economic Vitality which recently launched the "Open for Takeout" interactive map. **See POEMS, Page 2C**



Second Harvest of the Big Bend was one of the first organizations to join the initiative. CEO Monique Ellsworth says the program is the first step in what she hopes will be many collaborations to engage artists with the community while addressing food insecurity. MONIQUE ELLSWORTH

Poems

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Poems To Go provides poems a la carte with food pick-up, drive-thru and delivery services. Participating restaurants and service organizations can download a free, printable selection of original poems by local writers to include with each to-go meal.

The growing list of current participants include Second Harvest of the Big Bend, Cabo's Island Grill and Bar, Chi Chi's Cafe, Ma's Diner, Red Eye Coffee, Mae's Mobile Kitchen, Jeri's Midtown Café, Lofty Pursuits, Brooklyn Pizza, Madison Social, Chi Chi's Cafe and 926 Bar & Grill.

Kathleen Spehar, COCA's executive director sees Poems to Go as yet another way to expand community partnerships, employ artists and give visibility and support to local restaurants and organizations.

"This home grown art bite is a great reminder of what makes this city special, and that we are in this together," says Spehar.

Second Harvest of the Big Bend was one of the first organizations to join the initiative. CEO Monique Ellsworth says the program is the first step in what she hopes will be many collaborations to engage artists with the community while addressing food insecurity — nurturing not just the body, but the mind as well.

Second Harvest partners with 135 agencies throughout 12 counties and have increased their weekly direct distributions in Leon and five neighboring counties as COVID-19 continues to impact the work economy and safe access to food. Masked and gloved volunteers place the poems with meal kits and have served anywhere from 300 to 1300 people at each distribution.

"I think it is a brilliant pairing," says Ellsworth. "When someone gets back to their home to figure out how to best prepare the food they've been given and support the people in their life that they love, the fact that they also have poetry with them too, is a special partnership to give to the community at this time."

When the email first went out to businesses inviting them to include poems with to-go orders, Jeri Madden of Jeri's Midtown Café said she jumped at the chance. A life-long lover of music, she is looking forward to a post-pandemic world where she can participate more in arts events. She takes a few moments to slow down and savor each poem as she includes them with orders.

"I feel like every time I look at one or put one in the bag, I always hope it's the poem that they needed to read," says Madden.

Owners of Mae's Mobile Kitchen, Erick and Pamela

Moody, say the initiative speaks to their core values as a business and mission to support local artists.

"I am a firm believer that everyone needs to be uplifted during these times and instead of living in fear I like to live in love and laughter," says Erick Moody.

COCA's assistant director Amanda Karioth Thompson hopes this initiative will meet people wherever they are on the current spectrum of emotional and physical well-being. She sees Poems To Go as a catalyst for people to meet their basic needs — art included among them, not just an added supplement.

"If people are wanting or needing to get take-out or delivery, we want them to do that in a safe way that also inspires," says Thompson.

"All art forms are about storytelling and communicating a larger truth, and I think the literary arts do that especially well," she continues. "We have incredibly talented poets in our community and their words are provocative and poignant, and allow for people to find some universality in our feelings right now."

One of the featured writers, Cynthia "Rose" Portalatin is happy to continue sharing poetry with the community in a safe manner. Portalatin is a member of the Tallahassee Authors Network and Big Bend Poets and Writers and has used her writing career to promote agricultural and minority outreach programs. She wrote "Summer in My Capital City," for a broadcast poetry reading on the Vibes House Reggae radio show. It is one of the 20 original poems in the Poems To Go collection.

"I can live without a television, but my world would feel empty without music or books," says Portalatin. "As a poet, expressing emotions and feelings in the written form is second nature to me and needed even more so during these days of social distancing to feel connected to the world."

Summer on the Southside is quite a...different tone/ then that of pretty gardens found in Northeast homes/ Yet, when I hear the brass horns play.../I know that this is My kind of day.

After reading through poems like Portalatin's, excerpted above, Ellsworth continues to believe in the power of the pause inherent inside each work.

"I am distracted, stressed, and busy, but when I was reading, I stopped everything for a moment and lost myself in the art," says Ellsworth. "To give someone something to focus on and read that is positive, or just provides a still moment, is a real gift."

To download the collection of poems and learn more about the Poems To Go project, visit coca.tallahasseearts.org.

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).