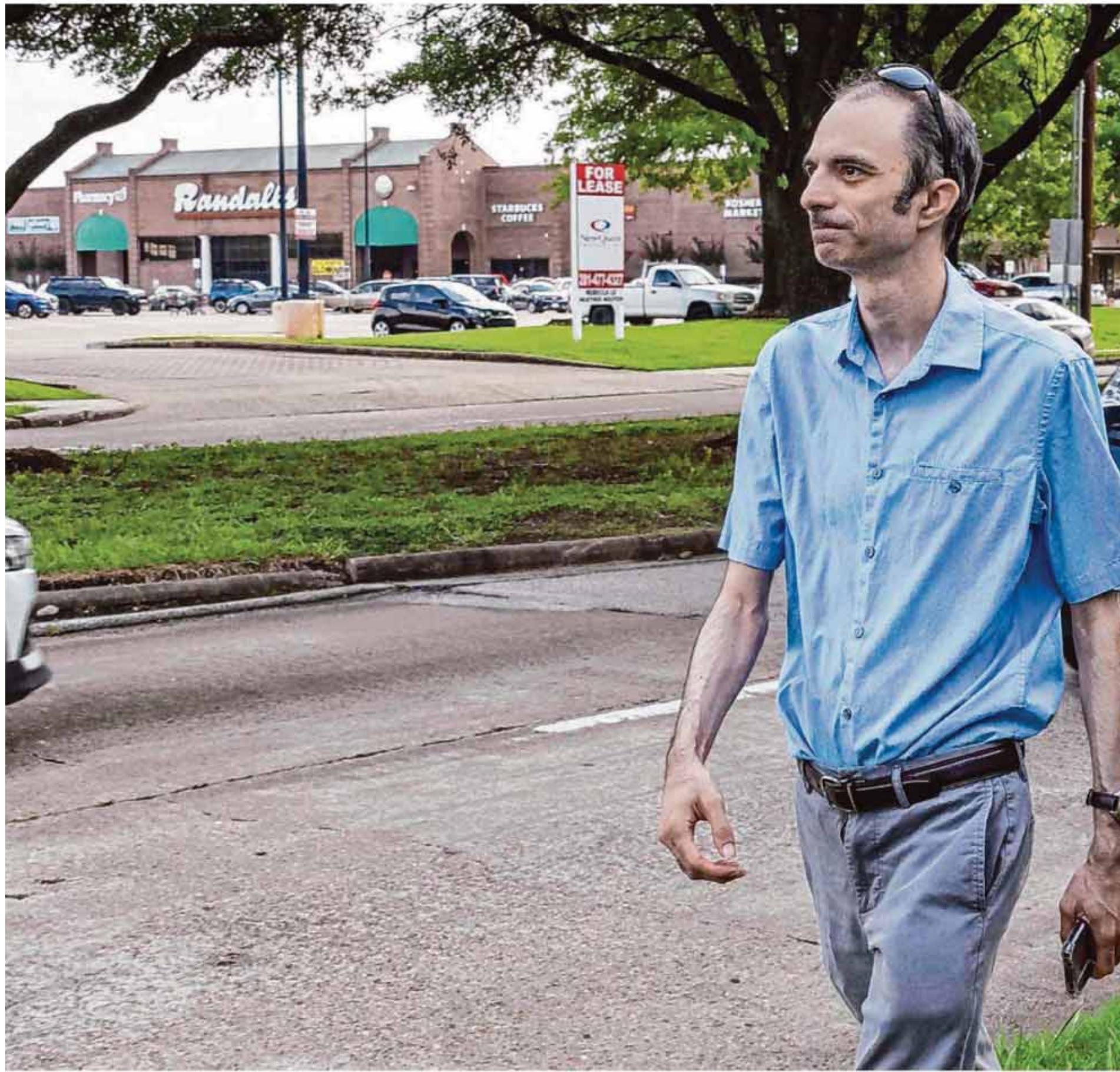


FLAVOR

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Kirk Sides/Houston Chronicle

Arthur Pronin walks past the soon-to-close Randalls store on West Bellfort. The grocer, which is set to close in August, is a major supplier of kosher foods.

Randalls store closure limits kosher options

By Aviva Bechky
STAFF WRITER

Arthur Pronin has shopped at the same Randalls in the Meyerland area for 34 years, buying turkey, wines and Shabbat candles from the store's extensive kosher selections.

Now that the store on West Bellfort is preparing to close, Pronin, a Meyerland community organizer, said he and the local Jewish community writ large are facing a "massive loss."

"One of the reasons we moved to

Local Jewish residents say shutdown is 'massive loss' to the community

Meyerland when I was young was, one, to be bar mitzvahed, but two, because it had things like this: a Jewish Community Center, a Randalls with a kosher presence," Pronin said. The closure is "just one more thing, one more blow to the community."

The store, 4800 W. Bellfort, is expected to operate until Aug. 16, according to Christy Lara, the director of public relations for Albertsons in Texas and Louisiana.

Albertsons owns and operates Randalls.

The closure is part of Randalls' yearslong shrinkage of its local footprint — only nine stores will remain in Houston after this one shuts. The Meyerland store in particular, however, was noteworthy for its comprehensive kosher selections, which include a meat counter and bakery.

"In such a competitive environment, our company must some-

times make the tough decision to close an under-performing store so that we can reinvest in our remaining stores in the marketplace," Lara said in a statement. "The kosher offerings available are unique to this location and are not being moved to another location."

An H-E-B, about 2 miles away, will continue to sell a selection of kosher products. But other kosher options have already disappeared: The Kroger at 10306 S. Post Oak cut its bakery and deli offerings several years ago, and the Jewish grocery store Belden's closed in 2020.

Randalls continues on A13

Boba Wali fuses South Asian flavors with bubble tea

By Bao Ong
STAFF WRITER

As a practicing Muslim, Arva Anees knows the drill all too well. At weddings, parties and even many restaurants, nonalcoholic drink options rarely go beyond soda or water. Even at dry events within her own community, she notes that mango lassi or lemonade is usually as exciting as it gets.

"Those who don't drink always feel a little bit of FOMO (fear of

missing out)," Anees said.

The 28-year-old Pakistani American recently launched a popup called Boba Wali, serving what may be Houston's first selection of Desi-inspired bubble teas. But more than that, Anees is expanding the landscape of creative, nonalcoholic drinks — not just for the South Asian community but for anyone craving the popular beverage known for its bobbing tapioca pearls and oversized straws.

On a recent weekend afternoon, Anees' biggest popup event took place in Sugar Land at a trunk show highlighting South Asian fashion designers.

Anees and two of her cousins served the two drinks currently featured on Boba Wali's menu: a creamy mango lassi made with whole milk and a splash of cardamom powder and the rooh afza lemonade, where rose syrup is used to infuse the citrus base. They mix drinks in cocktail shakers and pour them into plastic cups

filled with squishy dark tapioca pearls and popping boba flavor with lychee or yogurt.

She hopes to eventually add chai to the menu. It's also what inspired the business name, as chai wali is a common term that refers to a female serving or selling tea. At Boba Wali, Anees' husband, Muntasir Sayeedi, often helps take orders, but it's all women making the drinks.

Anees grew up on Long Island, N.Y., and went to

Boba continues on A13



Elizabeth Conley/Houston Chronicle
Arva Anees is the owner of Boba Wali, a new popup serving Desi-inspired bubble tea.

Houston Restaurant Weeks announces lineup

By Aviva Bechky
STAFF WRITER

About 200 restaurants are signed up to offer special deals throughout August as part of Houston Restaurant Weeks, with more restaurants expected to join.

The annual event, which runs from Aug. 1 to Sept. 1, is the largest yearly fundraiser for the Houston Food Bank — and offers a business boost for the restaurants involved. This year's list, announced Tuesday, includes restaurants such as Bar Bludorn, BCN Taste & Tradition, Brennan's of Houston, Flora and Xochi.

That means diners can try dishes including Bludorn's rainbow trout in brown butter and Flora's pescado en mole at a significant discount.

Though the current list features about 200 restaurants, HRW stated in a news release that it expects about 400 to participate in total, with more being added over the next few weeks. Every participating restaurant offers fixed-menu meals at the same prices: \$25 for a two-course brunch or lunch, \$39 for a three-course dinner or \$55 for a three-



Paula Murphy

Xochi is participating in Houston Restaurant Weeks this August.

course dinner. For each guest who takes advantage of the deals, restaurants donate \$1, \$3 or \$5 to the food bank, depending on the price point of the diner's meal.

Those donation amounts represent a

change from last year, when restaurants gave \$3, \$5 or \$7 per meal to the Houston Food Bank instead. As Houston restaurants are increasingly struggling with their bottom line, the new donation amounts "will help

operators through a difficult time," according to a news release.

Julie Voss, chief development officer of the Houston Food Bank, said the bank remained grateful for all the work that goes into running HRW.

She said she's been closely communicating with Katie Stone — the president of the Cleverley Stone Foundation, which runs HRW — about the donation changes.

"It will affect us. We've already lost a significant

amount of funding from the government," Voss said. But at the same time, "we've known this was happening, so we were able to budget accordingly for it."

Last year, the event raised over \$2 million for the food bank, HRW announced on Tuesday.

This is not the first time that the donation amounts have fluctuated. In 2020, HRW lowered the donations as restaurants dealt with the pandemic. And like in 2020, Stone said she's hoping HRW will offer some much-needed support for restaurants at a hard time.

"Many restaurants are saying that the struggles we're facing this year are even tougher than the ones they were facing in 2020. The challenges are different, more complex," Stone said. "And so there is very much a sense of, you know, we wish HRW was starting tomorrow."

Founded in 2003 by Cleverley Stone, HRW has grown from a one-week event that raised almost \$6,000 to a month-long fundraiser that sends millions to the food bank. Cleverley Stone passed away in 2020, and Katie Stone, her daughter, has since taken over the event.

Keith Lee effect comes to Texas flood relief effort

By Aviva Bechky
STAFF WRITER

Food influencer Keith Lee and La La Land Kind Café are partnering to sell a specialty drink that will raise money for flood relief efforts in Kerr County.

The iced drink, nicknamed the Keith Lee Latte, will include matcha, a "secret syrup" and a whole strawberry on a skewer laid across the top of the drink, according to a news release and Instagram post.

According to the release, 100% of the proceeds will go to supporting families and recovery efforts in Kerr County, which has been devastated by floods

that killed at least 100 people.

The café launched the drink last Friday and will sell it through July 27. It will be available at La La Land's more than 20 locations, which span Houston, Dallas and Los Angeles.

"Driven by kindness and purpose, this collaboration brings together Keith Lee's passion for community with La La Land's mission to make a positive impact," the statement said.

Lee, who has amassed more than 17 million followers on TikTok, is known for frank reviews filmed in his car — and for the outsize attention he brings to the restaurants he



TikTok food reviewer Keith Lee is partnering with La La Land Kind Café to raise funds for Texas flood relief.

reviews. He's visited and reviewed restaurants in Houston before, and last year, he announced his move to Texas.

A video clip in the news release showed him nodding his head and licking the foam from the intensely green Keith Lee Latte off his fingers.

"That's enough matcha for the rest of the week," Lee said in the video, smiling.

La La Land joins several other restaurants and food businesses donating to support the victims of the Kerr County floods, including Cabo Bob's, KP's Kitchen, Jonathan's the Rub, Red Dessert Drive and Cottage Grocery.

RANDALLS

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Which is why this loss feels "very detrimental" to the local Jewish community, said Pronin. He expressed particular concern about the employees, some of whom he said he's known for 20 years.

In a notice issued last month under the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, Randalls said it would be laying off 102 employees. In a statement, Lara said, "The company is working to place all associates in nearby locations."

But Pronin isn't sure that everyone — especially those with specialized positions in the kosher sections — will be able to find equivalent jobs. And more broadly, he said, the Jewish community would lose a "safe space" to hang out and run into one another.

other

Texas state Rep. Lauren Ashley Simmons, who represents the district encompassing the West Bellfort Randalls, said she was "extremely frustrated," both personally and as an elected official. The "abrupt" loss just means that her constituents' options for buying fresh foods, and especially kosher products, would dwindle, she said.

"In my opinion, this Randalls is highly frequented. It's well used. The kosher products there are affordable," Simmons said. "And without that Randalls being there providing competition, then ultimately, you know how those things go. It's probably going to drive up the cost, and it's going to become more expensive for people to have to go to other stores."

Ellie Stanton, who said she lives just half a mile

from the West Bellfort Randalls, has been shopping there for 11 years. She also volunteers with Seven Acres Jewish Senior Care Services and picks up ingredients for cooking classes at the center from the grocery store.

The closure, she said while shopping for oatmeal cookie ingredients, is "going to impact my voluntary work, that's for sure."

Since she keeps kosher, she said she'll likely end up spending more time at H-E-B, but she had enjoyed the convenience of the closer and smaller Randalls.

The Randalls store also sells products like hot prepared kosher foods — think rotisserie chicken — that Rabbi Chaim Lazaroff, the program director for Chabad Lubavitch of Texas, said he hasn't seen at other Houston grocery stores.



The closure of the Randalls on West Bellfort is part of a company push to shrink its local footprint — only nine stores will remain in Houston after this one shutters.

Nevertheless, he said, Jews in the area are generally lucky with how many options they have for kosher food. If another provider doesn't step up to fill the void, the community will adapt.

"Kosher is a lifestyle," Lazaroff said. "For many,

it's not a convenience, it's a requirement. And so people will just figure it out, just like our fathers and grandfathers did."

BOBA

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college in New York City. She and Sayeedi lived in Queens, where they had access to South Asian-inspired bubble tea shops.

In October 2023, shortly after Anees got laid off from her human resources job and was about to finish up graduate school, they moved to Houston to be closer to family members who came here a few years earlier for the large Pakistani community and the warmer weather. The young couple also wanted to escape the

soaring cost of living in New York.

Soon after their arrival, the idea for Boba Wali started as casual banter between Anees and her cousins tossing around business ideas. It simply lived as a day dream for more than a year.

But Anees and Sayeedi partook in an Islamic pilgrimage in February to Saudi Arabia, known as umrah; that jump-started things. They spent a week wearing special white garments to pray, walked between the hills of Safa and Marwah, and trimmed part of their hair as part of the ritual.



Mango lassi and rooh afza lemonade are featured at Boba Wali, a new pop-up serving bubble tea.

"I learned to be OK with whatever happens," Anees said.

Two months later, Boba Wali took off with its first event. They served their beverages to about 30 customers for an all-female event at an Islamic center.

They currently charge \$7 for each boba drink, which Anees believes is "fair and equitable pricing." Boba Wali is also aiming to add a series of mocktails to the menu.

For now, Anees is focused on slowly growing the popups and has more events planned this year, including a halal food festi-

tival. She relies on Sayeedi's knowledge of restaurant operations, which he picked up on as a New York City health inspector. They also recently debuted a white cart with floral designs to use at the Sugar Land event.

But Boba Wali is also about preserving culture, Anees said.

The Desi-inspired boba options fill a gap in the market, but it's also how Anees balances her Pakistani American identity.

"We're still finding our place in Houston, but I feel like I belong here," she said. "You never feel like the other."