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**HELENE****CHARLOTTE AND ASHEVILLE: TWO CONNECTED NORTH CAROLINA CITIES**

We all know and love Asheville, Charlotte's beloved neighbor to the west. While different in culture and scenery — Asheville is known for its relaxed mountain energy, while Charlotte is a metropolitan banking town — our two cities share a lot in common.

Many of our favorite Charlotte spots, like PIE.ZAA, have locations in the Asheville area. Familiar spots like Summit Coffee Co., PlantHouse, Blaze Pizza, Burial Beer Co., Hi-Wire Brewing and Botiwalla by Chai Pani have all been affected by Hurricane Helene, the catastrophic storm that has devastated Western North Carolina.

Employees and their families are displaced and business owners are facing uncharted territory — no one expected this level of devastation.

In the days following the storm, images and videos show historic levels of flooding with popular destinations like Asheville's River Arts District and Chimney Rock's Main Street completely decimated. Businesses have been literally swept away in Helene's wake. Now, much of what remains is wreckage, mud and debris.

Many Asheville businesses are focused on prioritizing employees' welfare, as well as providing support to the community and surrounding towns. Charlotte businesses have also risen to the occasion, providing much-needed supplies to Western North Carolina and beyond.

**HOW OTHER WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA BUSINESSES ARE COPING AFTER HELENE**

A couple miles down the road from PIE.ZAA's Ash-

eville location is Summit Coffee Co., a Davidson-based coffee shop with locations in Charlotte and other areas across the South. Its Asheville spot was severely damaged when the French Broad River flooded the River Arts District, leaving total destruction in its path.

Summit Coffee Co. CEO Brian Helfrich said in the days leading up to the storm, he expected minor flooding — nothing that the store couldn't handle. In reality, Summit Coffee was ambushed by rushing water almost as high as the building itself.

"The first photo I received from the franchise owner was around 2 p.m., when the main wall had collapsed and water was over 10 feet high," Helfrich said. "Later that night we saw video coverage of the River Arts District with only the roof of our building visible above the floods."

The building's main wall is mostly gone, the roof is partially caved in and the store is waterlogged.

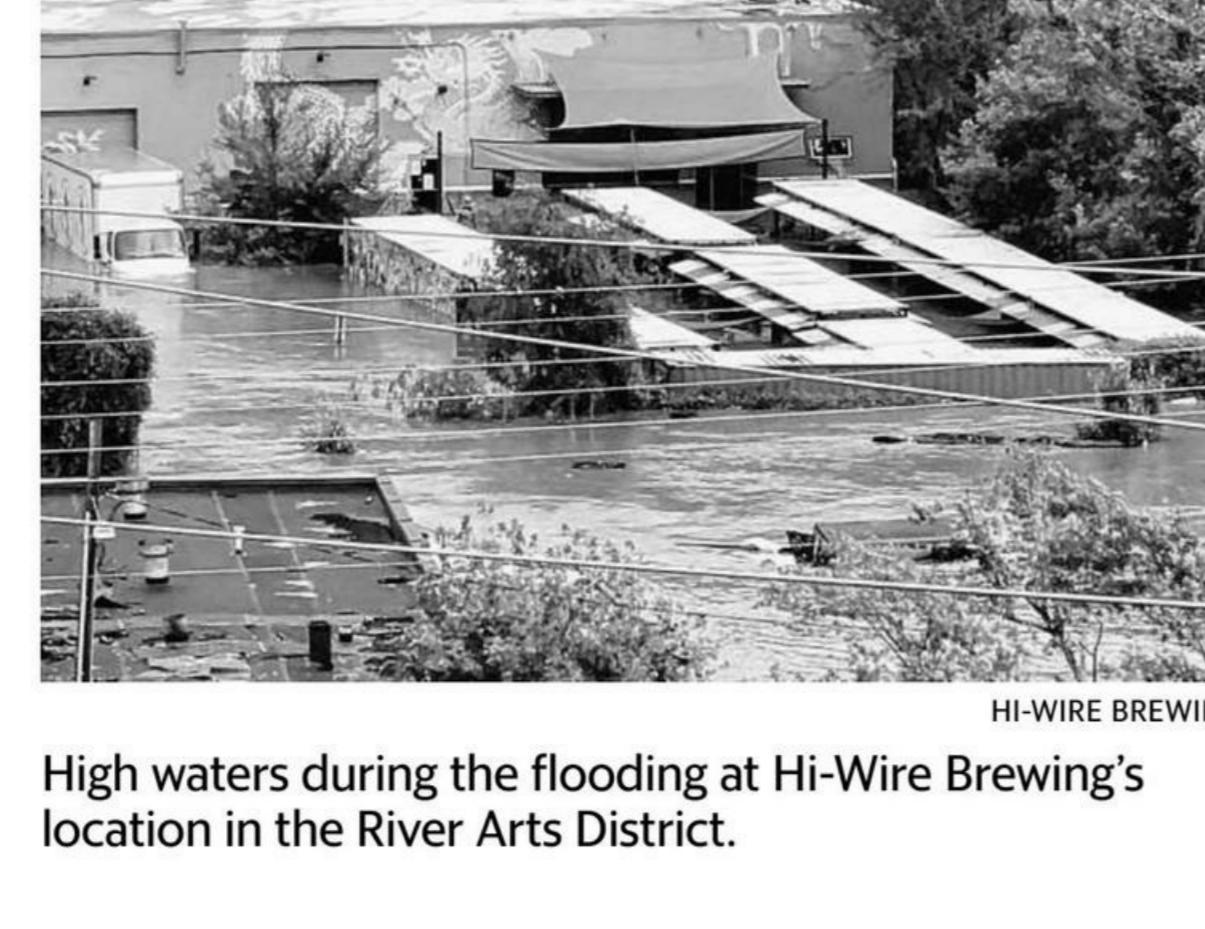
"I'll never forget the physical reaction," Helfrich said upon seeing the initial photos of the flooding. "It gave me chills and tears. Everything was simultaneously tense and draining from my body."

While the fate of the coffee shop is unknown, Helfrich said his priority right now is the welfare of his crew. Through Oct. 6, Summit Coffee Co. is supporting its team by giving 100 percent of proceeds from all online coffee orders to a fund for its displaced Asheville staff.

"Our short-term priorities have been to support them," Helfrich said. "This online coffee sale should at least help relieve stress for a while. We'll figure out what happens with the cafe after a few days."

In terms of the weeks ahead, Helfrich, like many others in Western North Carolina, doesn't know what the future will hold.

"We don't quite know



High waters during the flooding at Hi-Wire Brewing's location in the River Arts District.

what the future looks like, other than that we are committed to having a presence in Asheville," he said.

Hi-Wire Brewing, a brewery headquartered in Asheville with a location in Charlotte also faced devastation at its River Arts District location.

"It is heartbreaking," co-owner Bryna Frosaker told us. "There's just mud everywhere. (The flood) went probably 10 feet up the building."

Frosaker, an Asheville local, was there throughout the worst of the storm. She says she didn't realize the magnitude of the destruction until she was able to finally get cell phone reception.

"I knew what was happening in Asheville, but I didn't realize the breadth of it going on elsewhere," she said.

In order to touch base with Hi-Wire employees and check on their wellbeing, Frosaker reached out to an employee based outside of Asheville. They were able to connect to all of Hi-Wire's team members. All were safe — but not unscathed.

"We had one employee with a tree go through his daughter's bedroom," Frosaker said.

Hi-Wire's Biltmore Village location also received some damage, but Frosaker is hoping to reopen there soon.

"As soon as we have power and water — and assuming our employees can get safely to work — we can begin operations again," she said.

"We'd never forget the

Like Summit Coffee, PlantHouse has multiple locations across the Carolinas, including in Asheville and Charlotte. Severe flooding overtook the plant store's Biltmore Village location.

"The water was almost all the way to the ceiling," Charlotte store manager Brittany Pineda said.

Pineda told CharlotteFive that many of the PlantHouse employees live near the damaged store in Asheville, a point of concern as the damage in the area was severe. She eventually received confirmation from the Asheville store manager that the entire PlantHouse team is safe and accounted for.

"It was pretty scary for us just trying to figure out if everyone on the team was OK and if the store was OK," she said.

While some business owners have had luck reaching employees, others are still trying. Jimmy Sierra, a franchise owner for Blaze Pizza locations in Charlotte, Gastonia and Asheville, said it's been difficult to make contact with a majority of his crew.

"So far we have been able to get in contact with about 20 percent or less of our team members," Sierra told CharlotteFive. "All are OK (so far) except one. His house suffered damage when a tree fell on top of the house — no idea the extent of the damage yet."

Sierra, a Puerto Rican native, is no stranger to hurricanes. However, that doesn't make their impact any less jarring — especially

locally here in North Carolina.

"I never expected Asheville to go through that," he said.

Both of Blaze Pizza's Asheville locations are relatively undamaged, and its Gerber Village location has had power and water restored.

Sierra hopes to reopen as soon as possible. Not only does he want to reopen for the people of Asheville, but also for team members who rely on Blaze Pizza for income.

"Our team members have always been an important part of our success, and we want to be there for them in this time of great need," he said.

**RESTAURANTS GIVE FOOD AND WATER TO WNC RESIDENTS AFTER HELENE**

One of the biggest concerns for the people of Asheville right now is access to food and water. Botiwalla by Chai Pani, an Indian restaurant with locations in Asheville, Atlanta and Charlotte, is working hard to provide life-saving food relief with the support of World Central Kitchen, an organization that prepares food for communities impacted by natural disasters.

A spokesperson for Chai Pani Restaurant Group told CharlotteFive that all 150 team members are safe and accounted for.

The restaurant group has set up an internal resource center for staff, equipped with charging stations, Wi-Fi and onsite translators for team members who don't speak English.

"It's critical they have what they need to start FEMA applications, insurance claims and relief applications with incredible organizations like Giving Kitchen and Southern Smoke Foundation. More than anything, it's become a community space for our team to be together, to hug each other," the spokesperson said.

In the days since the storm, Burial Beer Co., an

Asheville-based brewery with a Plaza Midwood Charlotte location, has also been able to provide clean water, Burial beer and free burgers to Asheville locals at its South Slope Taproom.

**HOW TO HELP SMALL BUSINESSES IN WNC AFTER HURRICANE HELENE**

Here's how to help these businesses in both cities in Helene's aftermath:

- PlantHouse's Bailey Ryan has set up a Go Fund Me, with all proceeds going to crew members and their families. PlantHouse Charlotte has also been serving as a donation drop-off spot. The store is accepting water, nonperishable food, hygiene products and other essentials.

• At PIE.ZAA, Kotch has set up a Go Fund Me to help support the Asheville community.

• Hi-Wire Brewing is collecting hurricane relief supplies at its Charlotte, Wilmington and Durham locations to be flown to Asheville and surrounding areas.

You can support Hi-Wire's staff via its online relief fund.

• Summit Coffee Co. is supporting its team by giving 100 percent of proceeds from all online coffee orders through Oct. 6 to a fund for its displaced Asheville staff.

• Sierra has also set up a Go Fund Me for Blaze Pizza employees in Asheville, with all donations going directly to the staff to help them rebuild and recover.

• Guests can add a donation directly to their check when they dine at Botiwalla by Chai Pani in Optimist Hall. All donations go towards supporting Chai Pani Restaurant Group team members who have been impacted by Hurricane Helene.

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**FOOD**

dining and purchasing out in the real restaurant world, as restaurants share explicitly clear views on social justice or environmental issues, run donation cocktail specials and offer tip the kitchen charges to improve the back-of-house wage gap.

According to Lewis, "Conscious consumers are aware of what they're buying ... transparency is a competitive edge. You should be leading with your core values."

**INGREDIENT-DRIVEN MENUS CAN TELL THE STORIES OF HISTORIC FOODWAYS**

Dishes that go beyond the plate and connect diners to the historical context of an ingredient will be the ones captivating diners and getting national recognition.

"If you're going to have something on the menu, use that menu item, that dish and the servers bringing it to the table to help tell that story," Lewis said.

At the A Noble Grain brunch hosted by Food & Wine, the simple-on-the-surface ingredient of rice was the centerpiece, set against the backdrop of the ingredient's history and role in Charleston for a deeply compelling pairing.

"The people that grew this rice and the people that cleared the fields and had the innovation and education and intellectual property to be able to do so were enslaved West Africans," Lewis said.

This ingredient was the foundation of Charleston's economy, Gullah Geechee cuisine and modern-day Southern cuisine as we know it, Food & Wine's

The City that Rice Built explains.

Equipped with a story behind the meal, the eight dishes unfolded like a marvel:

- Chef Kevin Mitchell's **rice paper crisp** was perched on top of skillet-fried okra.
- Alexander Smalls' **smothered shrimp was suspended in tender rice grits**.
- Duane Copeland's **spongy rice bread** was a vehicle for Charlotte Jenkins' okra **purloo**.

The use of culturally-significant ingredients demonstrated how dining that acts as a vessel for storytelling can mark deeply personal and ultimately memorable. The food has a frame of reference; the food makes a mark.

Chef Mike Lata, a James Beard award-winning Charleston chef at FIG and The Ordinary, said that the best meals often are sometimes less about the food on the plate and more about the context in which they're presented.

Connecting an ingredient to a place, to history, to story is a way to build that context and heighten a diner's senses. "Your receptors," he calls them.

As long as the food is "consistent and good," it's the "vibe, a soulfulness, a history and a romance" off the plate that tugs on the heart strings, Lata said.

**MID-SIZED MARKETS ARE RIPE WITH OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG CHEFS**

While Lewis said, "L.A. right now is where there is the most momentum when it comes to concentration" of restaurants and chefs with dynamic, international cuisine, he

noted the expensive reality of living and building a restaurant career in these cities, pointing to the opportunity that young chefs have in mid-sized cities.

"You don't get into the hospitality industry to get rich," Lewis said. That's why he sees many of the next **cuisines** being built in markets such as Charlotte over the next 10 years.

"It's a young person's game," Lata said, referring to the intensity of hours and physical labor required of chefs. In smaller, somewhat less concentrated cities, these young chefs may confront fewer barriers to entry, more direct access to learning from the pros and ultimately, greater means to start their own concepts.

Lata thinks these chef-driven, independent owner-operators will have an advantage, too.

These more intimate restaurants "will be the best experience," not the restaurant group that went from one to five concepts in a blink, who might end up showcasing "stellar mediocrity," he said.

**WHIMSICAL, NON-TRADITIONAL PAIRINGS**

Let's zoom in at the oysters presented at the Grand Tasting from the 167 Raw team in Charleston. The **oysters were paired with Guinness**, not only dousing two versions of a Guinness mignonette on the oysters, but also pairing them with a cup of the Irish stout. This bitter-meets-briny blend made for a stand-out pairing.

At a seminar demonstration at the festival, chef Stephanie Izard, with restaurants in both L.A. and Chicago, whipped up

an Asian-inspired shrimp French toast with a toad-in-the-hole egg and a tequila cocktail, composed of fresh heirloom tomatoes, tamarind and pickle brine.

If there was one take-away from Izard's seminar: Experimenting with food and drink combinations can and should be full of merriment, creating an internal foundation ripe for recipe-testing.

Izard kept calling the diversity of ingredients before her a "playground." That game-on attitude will make waves in the industry, both playful and disruptive.

**QR CODES ARE LEAVING, BUT TECHNOLOGY IS STAYING**

While in Charleston, I attended an event with Blackbird, an app that incentivizes users to become regulars at local restaurant partners with exclusive perks and features its own payment currency called \$FLY. The NY-based company just launched its perks in Charleston.

Blackbird founder Ben Leventhal has had his finger on the pulse in this industry for years; he founded both Eater and Resy. His newest endeavor is a testament to how technology and dining will continue to grow hand-in-hand.

This symbiotic tech x dining collab **doesn't mean QR codes** on every table again (please, no), but it means creating connective, easy-to-use, reward programs and restaurant-guest relationships with a click of a button.

"As today's dining landscape becomes increasingly fragmented, with little direct connectivity between guests and restaur-

ants, Blackbird's technology helps restaurants really get to know their patrons," Leventhal said.

"Checking in on Blackbird prompts a personal response from the restaurant team, allowing them to build a relationship with that guest."

Blackbird leverages user-friendly technology to induce social belonging, even social status, for diners, and foster relationships between diners and restaurants. The app even organizes breakfast clubs and burger leagues.

There is an undeniable connection between what restauranteurs do and their sense of identity, almost as if snagging that hard-to-get reservation at the newest, flashiest place is modern-day social capital, a flex, a display of social clout.

Lata has been a chef for three decades, and in order to maintain balance and inspiration in this work, he said he has "to make it fun ... I need to light up and inspire the young people that are around me ... that's my focus, I'm going to bring out their best."

This sentiment parallels what was shared by Charlotte-based Chef Greg Collier about the BayHaven Food and Wine Festival. Collier told CharlotteFive that he designed networking events and panels at the upcoming festival to show young Black culinarians and future hospitality leaders that "it's possible ... there is a pathway ... you can get the awards, you can get the nominations."

It's not rocket science; a happy employee translates to good hospitality at the table or on the line. With mentorship and a team that feels valued, educated and empowered, Lata thinks, "The next 10 years should look like we're doing the best work we've ever done, and we're having the most fun doing it."

And the thing is, hospitality is quite frankly never out of style, and it's something that restaurants have direct agency over.

"Hospitality can be created," Lata said. "Good food is subjective, but hospitality is not."

**NOT TO SOUND TRITE, BUT HAPPY EMPLOYEES WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

"Restaurant health has flipped from the happy customer to the happy employee," Lata said. It's not a novel idea, but it's what it takes to be in it for the long haul — to sustain the laborious work inside the restaurant and stay relevant in the industry.

Along with many restaurants increasing staff wages and benefits over the last few years to prevent turnover and invest in the workforce, a