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For accurate storm forecast, check Waffle House

HANNAH SCHOENBAUM  
Associated Press

Golden hashbrowns, gravy-smothered biscuits and crispy waffles with a hearty helping of maple syrup are among the classic Southern comfort foods. But when hurricanes tear through Southeastern towns, the hot meals and bold yellow signs of the local Waffle House provide another kind of comfort.

If a Waffle House stays open in town, even in a limited capacity, neighbors are reassured that the coming storm is unlikely to cause devastation. A closed location of the dependable diner chain has come to indicate impending disaster. The metric is known as the Waffle House Index.

What might sound like silly logic has become one of the most reliable ways for Southerners — and even federal officials — to gauge a storm's severity and identify communities most in need of immediate aid.

About two dozen Waffle House locations were closed in the Carolinas and the chain's home state of Georgia on Tuesday, nearly two weeks after the states were among those battered by Hurricane Helene. Several other locations were open but serving a limited menu.

What is the Waffle House Index?

The South's favorite disaster authority provides an informal measure of how significantly a storm will affect or has affected a community.

A map of the chain's over 1,900 locations, concentrated in



CHUCK BURTON, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Luke Churchill, left, stands with his wife, Mary, and their children, Katie, 13, Liam, 9, and Raighan, 3, as they wait in the rain outside an open Waffle House restaurant Sept. 16, 2018, in Wilmington, N.C.

the Southeast and mid-Atlantic, helps residents of storm-prone states assess whether they're likely to lose power, experience severe flooding or endure other extreme conditions that might cause a resilient restaurant to close its doors. For some, it's a telltale sign of whether they need to evacuate.

Waffle House is known not just for serving breakfast 24/7, 365 days a year, but also for its disaster preparedness. For decades, people across the South have noticed that the local Waffle House seemed to be the only business still open during a storm or the first to reopen after it passed.

The restaurant chain's reputation for remaining open when people desperately needed a place to warm up, charge devices and grab a hot meal became a fairly reliable — albeit amusing — resource to help track recovery efforts. The company even operates its own storm center, which Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp visited Tuesday as he continued to assess damage from Helene



CARLOS R. MUNOZ, SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE

A billboard lies atop a Waffle House restaurant after being knocked down by Hurricane Michael on Oct. 14, 2018, in Panama City, Fla.

and prepare for Milton.

How does the index work?

Waffle House's social media shares color-coded maps of its restaurant locations in certain regions that will soon be hit or are recovering from storm damage. The Federal Emergency Management Agency also offers some live tracking.

Green means the location is serving a full menu, indicating minimal damage in the surrounding area. The lights are on and the syrup is flowing.

Yellow means the restaurant is serving a limited menu, a signal that it's pulling power from a generator and might have a low food supply. The area might not have running water or electricity, but there's enough gas to fry up bacon for hungry customers.

Red means the location is closed, a sign of unsafe operating conditions and severe destruction to the restaurant or nearby communities.

How did the index start?

Former FEMA administrator Craig Fugate said he thought up the Waffle House Index while leading Florida's emergency management efforts in 2004. He was searching for something to eat while surveying the devastation left by Hurricane Charley and was only able to find a Waffle House serving a limited menu.

His team began to notice other open Waffle Houses in communities without power or running water. The restaurants eventually became a key feature on a color-coded map that his team provided to help the public and local officials identify where storm damage was most severe.

Fugate continued to use his color-coded map when he joined FEMA under President Barack Obama. He was the agency's administrator in 2011 when a deadly tornado tore through the town of Joplin, Missouri. Both of the town's Waffle Houses reportedly stayed open.

The restaurant chain's disaster readiness is no coincidence. Seven locations were destroyed and 100 more shut down in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina, but company executives saw business skyrocket at restaurants that reopened quickly.

They soon embraced a business strategy centered around keeping their restaurants operable during and after a disaster, according to the company's website. The chain said it invested in portable generators, bought a mobile command center and trained employees on what they can still serve if they lose electricity.

What does the index say about Hurricane Milton?

Waffle House closed many Florida locations before Hurricane Milton made landfall, indicating damage to the area would likely be severe.

Milton knocked out power to more than 3 million customers and whipped up a barrage of tornadoes. Milton caused at least four deaths and compounded the misery wrought by Helene while sparing Tampa a direct hit. The storm made landfall late Wednesday as a Category 3 storm in Siesta Key, about 70 miles south of Tampa.

Grammy Awards to remedy lack of diversity

MARIA SHERMAN  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — For years, the Grammy Awards have been criticized over a lack of diversity — artists of color and women left out of top prizes; rap and contemporary R&B stars ignored — a reflection of the Recording Academy's electorate. An evolving voting body, 66% of whom have joined in the past five years, is working to remedy that.

At last year's awards, women dominated the major categories; every televised competitive Grammy went to at least one woman. It stems from a commitment the Recording Academy made five years ago: In 2019, the Academy announced it would add 2,500 women to its voting body by 2025. Under the Grammys' new membership model, the Recording Academy has surpassed that figure ahead of the deadline: More than 3,000 female voting members have been added, it recently announced.

"It's definitely something that we're all very proud of," said Harvey Mason Jr., academy president and CEO. "It tells me that we were severely underrepresented in that area."

Reform at the Record Academy



JULIO CORTIZ, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Grammy Awards are displayed at the Grammy Museum Experience at Prudential Center on Oct. 10, 2017, in Newark, N.J.

dates back to the creation of a task force focused on inclusion and diversity after a previous CEO, Neil Portnow, made comments belittling women at the height of the #MeToo movement.

Since 2019, about 8,700 new members have been added to the voting body. In total, there are now more than 16,000 members and more than 13,000 of them are voting members, up from about 14,000 in 2023 (11,000 of whom were voting members). In that time, the academy increased its number of members who identify as people of color by 63%.

"It's not an all-new voting body," Mason assures. "We're very specific and intentional in

who we asked to be a part of our academy by listening and learning from different genres and different groups that felt like they were being overlooked, or they weren't being heard."

Mason says that in the last five years, the Recording Academy has "requalified 100% of our members, which is a huge step." There are voters who have let their membership lapse — and those who no longer qualify to be a voting member have been removed.

There have been renewal review processes in the past, but under the current model, becoming a voting member requires proof of a primary career in music, two recommendations from industry peers and 12 credits in a single creative profession, at least five of which must be from the last five years.

Comparisons might be made to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which announced in 2016 that it would restrict Oscars voting privileges to active members — ineligible parties included those who haven't worked in three decades since joining the Academy, unless they themselves are nominated — as a response to #OscarsSoWhite criticisms of its lack of diversity.




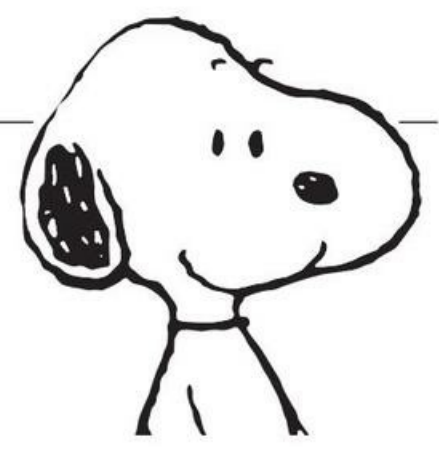
ON GREENSBORO.COM

Ashley Virginia and Elias Alexander embrace after her performance at "Songs of Hope and Justice" on the Elm St. Stage at NC Folk Fest in Greensboro on Saturday, September 7, 2024.

WOODY MARSHALL, NEWS & RECORD

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