

Bringing comfort one bite at a time

In the wake of Hurricane Michael, chef José Andrés and World Central Kitchen have descended on the Panhandle to fortify residents and first responders.

BY TIM CARMAN *Washington Post*

José Andrés is back in a disaster zone, posting photos and videos on Twitter from the Florida Panhandle where his nonprofit organization, World Central Kitchen, is feeding thousands of people devastated by Hurricane Michael, the tropical storm that quickly grew into one of the biggest hurricanes to ever hit the area.

The chef, restaurateur and humanitarian's visit to Florida comes just a month after he traveled to North Carolina to help feed residents in the wake of Hurricane Florence and as he's promoting his new book, *We Fed an Island*, which details the many trials that Andrés and WCK faced while preparing millions of hot meals for the people of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. He has become a regular presence in areas affected by earthquakes, fires and hurricanes, a fact that not only underscores his commitment to disaster relief but also the frequency with which disasters are striking.

'This is like *Groundhog Dog*,' says Andrés, referencing the Bill Murray flick in which the main character relives the same 24 hours over and over. 'It's probably getting boring for the people following on Twitter.' If his followers are suffering from disaster fatigue, Andrés isn't. Or at least he's not showing it.

Since he arrived on Oct. 14, he has been preparing and delivering meals in Panama City and Mexico Beach, two of the towns hardest hit by Michael. Just as important, Andrés is on the ground, hearing the stories and frustrations of those most affected. He has been using the giant megaphone of his Twitter account (682,000 followers and counting) to ping state and national officials, passing along the people's most pressing needs. The chef has named Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, Florida Gov. Rick Scott and William 'Brock' Long, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, among others.

In *We Fed an Island*, Andrés and co-author Richard Wolffe make the argument that emergency responders need to loosen their grip on bureaucratic rules when disaster strikes, which can hinder the process of feeding people, and embrace complexity. Andrés appears to be following his own advice. Unlike in North Carolina, where World Central Kitchen had lined up restaurants and volunteers ahead of Hurricane Florence's landfall, the organization didn't have enough warning to do the same in Florida. So the team improvised, Andrés says.

Volunteers first started cooking at a FEMA emergency operations center, Andrés says, but they soon set up outdoor paella pans to expand production. On Oct. 14, the crews served 10,000 meals, which was 2,000 more than those served the day before, Andrés notes. WCK has also teamed up with the American Red Cross, preparing chicken Parmesan lunches for locals who are calling shelters home until they can piece their lives back together. The partnership with the Red Cross comes right after Andrés took the **charity** to task in *We Fed an Island* for its unwillingness to underwrite WCK's efforts in Puerto Rico.

'You can't have just one plan that takes cares of everything,' Andrés says about his flexible approach to relief work. 'You have to adapt.' Aside from feeding first responders, Andrés says WCK volunteers have been handing out meals to people who couldn't leave their communities before Michael basically wiped them off the map. They tend to be poor Americans, without cars or the funds to catch a flight out of town.

'Some people had to stay because they have no other place to go,' the chef says.

World Central Kitchen, by contrast, has been seemingly everywhere in the past year after disasters struck: North Carolina, Indonesia, California, Hawaii, Guatemala and, of course, Puerto Rico. WCK volunteers continue to feed people in Indonesia after an earthquake and a tsunami claimed more than 1,400 lives there. Between Florida and Indonesia, Andrés predicted that his teams would serve more than 25,000 meals on Oct. 22 and surpass that number, as WCK activates more kitchens.

As he often does, Andrés downplays his contributions in a disaster zone. ('They don't need me,' he says.) But even if Andrés' presence isn't needed to prepare meals, his presence, as one CNN anchor recently noted, 'brings comfort to a lot of people.' He is also an unfiltered reporter, delivering dispatches from the front lines. He usually posts his videos straight to Twitter, but he kept one on his phone - until he sent it to the *Washington Post*.

In the video, he talks about the destruction he has seen in Mexico Beach, the paella his teams plan to serve and the people who are still missing. As if realizing it's too raw and real to talk about bodies possibly buried under the rubble, Andrés shifts back to his work.

'But we do what we do, which is cooking, feeding,' he says, 'to make sure that everybody at least will have a hot plate of food.'



José Andrés and volunteers with World Central Kitchen are no strangers to relief efforts. One year ago this month they were in San Juan, Puerto Rico, preparing paella after Hurricane Maria. His nonprofit made close to 2 million meals.

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