NEWS

"It's all just a bunch of hocus pocus!"
HOCUS POCUS KENNY ORTEGA

Eateries around New Haven are propped up by Yale catering orders

BY ELSPETH YEH
STAFF REPORTER



KAREN LIN
Yale's event calendar provides steady business for New Haven caterers. The University offers restaurants reliable revenue, new customers and opportunities for community engagement — though at least one business has been hurt by Yale budget cuts.

Yale students' inboxes are flooded with notices advertising events, from speakers to screenings to socials. Sometimes, the factor determining which ones they will attend is the food that will be provided.

Catering for University events composes a major part of New Haven food business, with many outfits working constantly to keep up with demands. And while catering is a large aspect of the restaurant industry in many cities, New Haven's scene is particularly intertwined with Yale.

For Koffee Katering, the catering outshoot of the coffee shop on Audubon, a busy day consists of 40 to 50 orders, according to catering manager Andrea Ascah-Robinson.

"We're frequently at Yale throughout the course of the day," Ascah-Robinson said in a phone interview. "You'll often see our little Koffee Katering vans out and around campus."

These sentiments were echoed by many Elm City restaurateurs.

Haven Hot Chicken owner Etkin Tekin '12, for example, said in a phone interview that his business has "a variety of touchpoints and contacts" at his alma mater.

In the past, Haven Hot Chicken has provided catering services for major Yale events such as Bulldog Days and first-year move-in, and Tekin said the restaurant frequently works with Yale sports teams. Because the eatery's chicken is halal certified, Haven Hot Chicken has a particularly close relationship with the Muslim Student Association, Tekin said.

Lia Yu, a manager at Basil Restaurant in the Dwight neighborhood, said in a phone interview that most events Basil caters are Yale-associated. Yu said that orders are consistent during the school year, "when the students are around."

"You can always tell where the Yale calendar is based on the events going on around town," Eileen Shekman, the general manager of Sherkaan Indian Street Food, said.

Shekman said she pushed to introduce catering to Sherkaan's business model a couple of years after the restaurant opened, and that it has grown in the years since. She said Sherkaan caters many events hosted in the Humanities Quadrangle, in part due to the restaurant's proximity to the building.

Yale's event calendar provides many local restaurants a helpful dose of stability.

"We do a lot of frequently repeating events throughout the course of the year, particularly in the University settings, because oftentimes our clients will have things like repeated lunch seminars or repeated meetings throughout the course of the year," Ascah-Robinson said.

Ascah-Robinson added that members of the Yale community have also referred new customers to Koffee Katering.

Outreach was also a major motivation for Tekin when he decided to launch catering at Haven Hot Chicken.

"It's great for visibility and brand awareness," he said. "We often hear from folks that order catering from us that there's a lot of first time guests that had never had our food before, and then we'll often see them in our locations in the days and weeks after that catering order."

Catering is one of the ways Sherkaan draws new customers, according to Shekman.

For city businesses, the portion of revenue brought in by catering varies.

"It's definitely a nice pillow to have on slower weeks in the restaurant. We could have a buffer of $5,000 in catering orders — that certainly helps," Shekman said.

Earlier this month, beloved New Haven cupcake staple Katalina's Bakery closed its doors after 15 years in business. Explaining her decision to shutter her business, owner Katalina Riegelmann said University budget cuts meant she "lost a lot of standing orders with Yale."

Basil, which has operated in New Haven since 2008, relies on large catering orders, especially in the winter months.

Some businesses use catering as a way to give back to neighbors and the environment.

Haven Hot Chicken works with a nonprofit that donates catering orders to hospitals for family members who are there supporting sick loved ones. And Koffee Katering — whose founder said had the idea to launch a minimal-waste catering business after observing how much garbage was discarded during large events — provides "zero landfill catering." All the materials in its catering packages are compostable, and employees return to events after they have wrapped to pick up waste for compost.

"We really want to be a part of the communities that we serve," Tekin said, "and there's challenges in our community sometimes, and so it's really impactful to us to make a difference in situations like that."

Tekin said that he values opportunities to speak in Yale School of Management classes and at the Entrepreneurial Society at the University of Connecticut so that he can connect with a younger generation of aspiring business owners.

Koffee Katering's "Yale Budget Lunch" costs $19.95 per meal.

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First phase of Whitney Avenue safety improvements wrapped this summer

BY PREMRUDEE MEPREMWATTANA
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One of New Haven's busiest thoroughfares is getting a major facelift.

Last September, city officials announced a $13.2 million project to improve safety on Whitney Avenue. The effort to redesign the avenue, a major transportation corridor that runs through much of New Haven and Hamden, includes a "road diet" that will cut the roadway down from four to three lanes, pedestrian refuge islands and a two-way bicycle lane. The project's first phase, which involved work on the stretch of the avenue that runs from Canner Street to Cliff Street in East Rock, wrapped this summer.

"The prime focus is on improving pedestrian safety crossing Whitney Avenue, reducing crossing distances, and having some more points for crossing," City Engineer Giovanni Zinn '05 said in a phone interview.

The safety of Whitney Avenue has long been a source of concern in New Haven. From January 2023 to May 2026 alone, there were nearly 250 crashes on the avenue, according to data from the University of Connecticut.

One resident, Ben Berkowitz, said he used a radar gun to measure the speed of cars in the year before the construction started and found that the average speed was "well over 45 miles per hour," adding, "I definitely clocked people going 60." The speed limit on the New Haven portion of Whitney Avenue is 25 miles per hour.

Zinn, who oversees the project's design and implementation, has been involved in Whitney Avenue developments for several years. He said that the first of this project's two phases was "fairly smooth overall." Some New Haven residents are split on its implementation.

"It is good," Nancy Borstelmann SPH '86, who lives in East Rock, said in an interview. She added that her neighbors are "waiting to see" what progress looks like and are worried that the reduction in lanes will be "a little more challenging."

Borstelmann said that the possibility of slower traffic, however, is a worthy trade off, because "people, children, dogs, all matter more than getting to work five minutes sooner."

Berkowitz and his son were biking on the newly paved bike lane to meet friends at East Rock Park one afternoon this week.

"Historically, I wouldn't want to bike on Whitney. It just felt loud and fast," Berkowitz said in an interview. "But this feels like more of an invitation."

But Berkowitz said that Whitney Avenue's redevelopment was "logistically done poorly" and "really delayed."

He said that there was a long time when the road "was blocked off and nothing was happening."

Asked about the delay, Zinn said that the road was never completely closed to traffic and added that construction cannot continue through the winter. He said last year that both phases of the project would be completed by 2027.

Whitney Avenue is named for Eli Whitney, who graduated from Yale College in 1792 and invented the cotton gin one year later.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
A $13.2 million city project to reduce cars' speed and increase pedestrian safety on the corridor, which runs through much of New Haven and Hamden, concluded its first phase this summer. New Haven residents gave varying views on its development.

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