



Feeding Chatham

Based in a chef's kitchen in Pittsboro, a nonprofit stocks community fridges with prepared meals and fresh ingredients, turning surplus into suppers and neighbors into family.

written by JILL WARREN LUCAS / *photography by* ANNA ROUTH BARZIN

Chef Sera Cuni carries a sort of talisman in her pocket: a heart-shaped stone that reads “Change the World.” It’s there when she greets her team at Cafe Root Cellar in Pittsboro, some of whom are young and just getting started in life. It’s there when she plans menus for her restaurants in Pittsboro and Chapel Hill.

And it’s there when she works with dozens of volunteers and food purveyors to stock six Feed-Well Fridges she’s placed across Chatham County with food for anyone who needs it, no questions asked.

The stone was a gift from Cuni’s wife, Susan White, her business partner in both the restaurants and Feed-Well. Having it with her helps Cuni focus on ways to expand the nonprofit to

help more North Carolinians experiencing food insecurity.

“I play with it all day, especially when I need encouragement to keep things good,” she says. “It reminds me that little things make a difference.”

LITTLE THINGS HAVE ADDED UP TO A CAREER IN which Cuni is as known for her advocacy as she is for her food. Her journey started in Connecticut, where as a child she advanced rapidly from Easy-Bake Oven mixes to mastering classic recipes from her Italian and Czech grandparents. They taught her, respectively, to roll handmade pasta and bake flaky kolacky cookies. She and her dad often cooked together, too, and watched Julia Child’s show every weekend.

Indeed, other than playing soccer, a skill for which she earned a college scholarship, Cuni’s



Chef Sera Cuni is known for her Root Cellar restaurants and her nonprofit, Feed-Well Fridges, as well as her appearances on national TV. In 2023, she won the grand prize on Food Network's *Supermarket Stakeout*.

happy place has always been in the kitchen. After a sports injury sidelined her soccer aspirations, she decided to attend culinary school. While grateful for the technical training, she credits her first kitchen job with teaching her not only how to work in a professional kitchen but also how to treat colleagues and guests — especially those who struggle to get by — with respect.

“They’d show me ‘the real’ way to cook and manage, how it’s done in real-time, which is very different from what they teach at culinary school,” Cuni recalls with a laugh. “What I learned in that kitchen still guides what I do today.”

In the early 2000s, Cuni moved to Chatham County to be closer to her parents. She honed her skills at The Fearrington House Restaurant and Foster’s Market, eventually purchasing mentor Sara Foster’s Chapel Hill location in 2013 to become the first Root Cellar Cafe & Catering. By 2018, she achieved her dream of opening a restaurant, Cafe Root Cellar, in her adopted hometown.

The seeds of what would become Feed-Well Fridges took root in March 2020, when restaurants shut down in the early days of the pandemic.



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Unable to serve guests, Cuni grew distressed thinking about deliveries of fresh ingredients that would go to waste at her restaurants.

At the same time, she knew that more people were coming to the food pantry at Chatham Outreach Alliance (CORA) — many of whom had never needed help before. So she hunkered down at her Pittsboro café to prepare and deliver meals to help increasingly at-risk neighbors get by.

Cuni committed to cooking for as long as she had supplies. As her stock dwindled and word of her efforts spread, members of her extensive network rallied to send provisions. This as-yet-unnamed project helped fill a widening gap, notably among people who found themselves jobless or unhoused due to pandemic shutdowns.

Cuni currently prepares meals for Feed-Well Fridges in the kitchen at Cafe Root Cellar in Pittsboro, but plans are in the works for a new commissary kitchen to house the growing nonprofit.



Cuni and her volunteers stock six Feed-Well Fridges — including one at Chatham Outreach Alliance (CORA) in Pittsboro — with more fridges on the way. She and her wife, Susan White, have received calls from people all over the country wanting to implement their model.

ALTHOUGH SHE WORKS 80 TO 90 HOURS A WEEK, Cuni finds time to participate in local causes as well as state and national culinary organizations. It was at one such group’s annual conference in fall 2022 that the concept for Feed-Well to become a permanent operation formed. The inspiration came from a woman who organized a community fridge program in Des Moines, Iowa.

Cuni went home fired up and told her wife. White loved the idea but worried about their capacity: They were already devoting seven days a week to running the two restaurants. Around the same time, White began contemplating a career change, and she eventually left her job at the UNC School of Social Work to help Cuni bring Feed-Well to life.

Cuni then reached out to potential partners at supermarkets, restaurants, farms, and small businesses. Like her, they were uncomfortable with dumping excess food that could be used to feed others.

By August 2023, Feed-Well Fridges launched as a nonprofit “aimed at nourishing our North Carolina community one meal at a time.” Its six fridges, and even a refrigerator truck, have been procured through gifts and fundraisers. As of September 2025, the initiative has kept 100 tons of food waste out of landfills. Even better, it has provided about 75,000 prepared meals — plus thousands of pounds of ingredients for immediate consumption and home cooking.

CUNI NEVER KNOWS WHAT DONORS WILL PROVIDE, but the daily bounty is usually enough to stock all six fridges. While the Des Moines model relies on community members to fill fridges, Feed-Well sorts donations to ensure food safety and prepares individual chef-made meals that are whisked to the fridges by volunteers. This means neighbors can choose from deli sandwiches and salads, generously portioned main dishes and sides, seasonal fruit and vegetables, as well as desserts.

Sometimes, donations are so great that they can’t be shared without help. Last spring, Feed-Well’s social media feed put out a request for volunteers to convert a fast-ripening, 160-pound “monkey load” of bananas into baked goods.

The name is a nod to Siler City’s Feedwell Cafe, renowned in the early 1900s for its welcoming atmosphere.

Among those who answered the call was 12-year-old Meadow Withington, whose family runs Lilly Den Farm in Goldston. Her mother, Mackenzie Withington, often donates her time and leftover farm goods to help fill a nearby fridge.

With four years’ experience making sweets for the farm’s bakery, Meadow was undaunted when presented with two 40-pound boxes of speckled fruit. “I made banana bread for two days, and we froze some bananas to make more later,” she says. “I feel good about doing this. I love being able to help people who are hungry to have good food.”



Sera Cuni's Mac & Cheese

Yield: 8 servings.

- 1 pound (16 ounces) penne or whatever pasta you like
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 4 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 (12-ounce) cans evaporated milk
- 1 cup whole milk
- 2 cups sharp cheddar, shredded
- 1 cup Gruyère, shredded
- ½ cup mozzarella, shredded
- ½ cup Monterey jack, shredded
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 clove garlic, chopped (about 1 teaspoon)
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce
- 1 teaspoon salt (plus more for pasta water)
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 cup (about 8 ounces) Velveeta, cubed
- 4 ounces cream cheese

Boil pasta in salted water until just al dente (1 minute less than package instructs). Drain and set aside.

In a large pot over medium heat, melt butter. Whisk in flour and cook 1 minute to form a roux. Slowly whisk in evaporated milk and regular milk until smooth. Simmer 5 to 7 minutes until slightly thickened. Melt in shredded cheeses. Stir in Dijon, garlic, hot sauce, salt, and pepper. Lower heat and add Velveeta cubes and cream cheese, stirring until melted. Stir until smooth and creamy.

Toss pasta into cheese sauce until well coated. If you want to bake the mac and cheese, place in a 9 x 13 pan. Cover with some of the shredded cheeses and bake, uncovered, at 350° for 10 minutes.

Cuni enjoys providing chef-made portions, especially her luxurious mac and cheese.

CUNI CHOSE THE NAME FEED-WELL FRIDGES AS A NOD TO THE Feedwell Cafe, a Siler City eatery renowned in the early 1900s for its rabbit dinners and welcoming atmosphere. To build on that spirit of hospitality, Cuni and her team initially prepared generous individual servings made from scratch. Donated prepared foods — like catering trays of fried chicken, baked cod, rice, or potatoes — were supplemented with vegetables or grains for nutritionally balanced meals.

Cuni still enjoys providing chef-made portions, especially her luxurious mac and cheese, a favorite among families. But donors' benevolence allows fridges to be stocked each day with mostly ready-to-eat fare. This is especially helpful for those who live without electricity or access to a kitchen.

"These are things that don't last long, and let's face it — food is expensive," Cuni says. "If there's a kid there, it's great to be able to hand them a whole package of cupcakes. Their eyes light up. If Mom only has \$20 for groceries, that's not something she's going to buy."

Created with an optimistic build-it-and-they-will-come mindset, fridges are located at community centers and



Volunteers like 12-year-old Meadow Withington of Goldston have helped Feed-Well turn large donations of produce into baked goods like banana bread.

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churches like El Camino United Methodist in Siler City.

On a recent day at El Camino, volunteer Betty Varju is greeted by Angelica, one of a group of regulars awaiting the delivery. Angelica smiles shyly while helping carry totes from the car.

“Sometimes, when people help, they feel more invested — more like, it’s OK to take food,” Varju says. “It’s not necessary for people to do anything other than show up and get what they need, but I get it. I’m taking a few leeks myself today.”

Varju reminds those gathered to encourage friends and neighbors to visit this or another Feed-Well Fridge. “The people who provide it want it to be enjoyed,” she says. “It’s the same

food you’d find at a grocery store or restaurant, because that’s where it comes from.”

Entranced by the colorful cornucopia of the day’s choices, a young boy there with a parent tenderly clasps his hands as if in prayer. “I hope there is a mango,” he whispers, after considering cakes and other sweets tucked into the freezer. “That’s what I most want.”

FILLED FRIDGES ARE OFTEN EMPTIED WITHIN AN hour, and recipients have left heartfelt notes that Cuni cherishes. In one, a writer said that before discovering Feed-Well, cold temperatures had reduced their options “to eating or having our utilities on.” Another note, playfully bedazzled and signed by “your friendly local hobos,” expressed thanks on behalf of “all homeless people” gathered in a nearby camp “who would honestly go hungry most nights without this place.” The writer added, “We are so blessed to have true kindhearted people in this world still.”

Sarah-Lyona Perry, who used a Feed-Well Fridge before becoming a volunteer, views Cuni as a trailblazer. “When I think about this work, it’s countercultural. It’s inviting people to be trusting of the community, of individuals,” Perry says. “It’s not about profit or things that we’re taught to value. It’s the opposite. It takes people like Sera who will get in there and make it happen.”

Cuni deflects praise but gladly accepts opportunities to advocate for those who endure adversity. In fact, Feed-Well Fridges has transformed the way she views her culinary career, redirecting her purpose to making sure that healthy food gets to the people who need it.

“Food rescue opened my eyes to how much gets wasted and how much good it can do when shared,” she says. “That feels bigger than anything I’ve ever done.”

Eventually, Cuni hopes to focus full-time on Feed-Well Fridges. With one sandwich at a time — one sweet potato, bowl of stew, or slice of cake — she aims to make her welcome table long enough to nourish every North Carolinian in need. **Os**

Jill Warren Lucas is a writer based in Raleigh.

Learn where fridges are located and how to help at feedwellfridges.org.