

# BANKING ON SOUP KITCHENS

BEHIND THE SCENES AT VICTORIA'S FOOD  
BANKS AND SOUP KITCHENS

BY  
BY JANE MUNDY

# By 7:00 am, the lineup outside The Mustard Seed Street Church and Food Bank stretches down Queens Avenue in Victoria.

The doors don't open until 9:00 am but everyone waits because sometimes it's slim pickings—the market might run out of high-demand items like meat, cheese or ice cream. A volunteer offers coffee, bottles of water and greetings until customers holding their grocery bags are let inside, 10 at a time.

They first check-in with volunteer Jill, who asks if anything has changed regarding their health and if they need anything extra. Jill then hands them a ticket indicating household size, which is their passport to shop at the market.

"These people are tough but some break down—they are having a moment—and that is hard," says Jill, whose daughter recently passed away due to mental health issues. "When people sit down to eat, sometimes they open up, and being able to provide a service for them also helps me."

Charlene checks in for the second time this month. Her three children are listed on the computer and her shopping bags are topped with baby formula.

"Sometimes we turn people away if they come here more than twice a month," says Jill. "If unhoused, they can shop four times a month because there's nowhere for them to store or cook food."

The Mustard Seed Market used to have shopping carts but some clients took hours to shop, reading every ingredient on every package. Now, there's a streamlined setup: volunteers behind the counter tell shoppers what's available.

"How about apple pie, whole wheat or white bread? You need carrots? These strawberries are perfectly ripened," says Jeff. Cereal and a dozen kinds of fruit

pies are flying off the shelves. There are even gluten-free bins to sort through. Other volunteers fill shopping bags with marshmallows, stove top stuffing, instant rice and ground coffee. Granola bars are popular. "What kind of lentils would you like, red or yellow?" Jeff asks a woman who is new to Canada, with kids in tow. She has never seen marshmallows or stove-top stuffing and has no idea how to cook it, but Jeff talks her into accepting a pumpkin pie. "Cilantro or parsley, iceberg lettuce or bok choy?" he asks the next in line.

**IT'S 8:00 AM** at the Food Distribution Centre's commercial kitchen (operated by Mustard Seed). Chef Chris Hammer has cooked breakfast for 20 volunteers and is on to tomorrow's lunch—pork butts and onions are in the oven for about 200 pulled pork sandwiches that will be served in Mustard Seed's dining room and St. Vincent's soup kitchen. He already sent 150 portions of mac 'n cheese and a vat of ham and lentil soup to Mustard Seed for today's lunch.

Tony is in the enormous warehouse sorting boxes of nectarines and squashes: bruised fruit is sliced, bagged and frozen by the 'fruit team foursome' in the kitchen; two more volunteers are putting together 'no-cook hampers' for people who are unhoused or live in a single room without a fridge or stove: Cans of fruit and soup with pop-tops (that don't require a can opener); protein and granola bars; apple sauce, crackers and bananas. "I'm checking everything for expiry dates and if a product is opened, it goes to the compost pile. We try to

recycle as much as possible and the rest is landfill," says Tony. It's a win-win situation as grocery stores can have zero waste.

"One of our goals at Mustard Seed is to provide culturally appropriate choices," says Treska Watson, director of operations. "For instance, we got a shipment of whole artichokes that our Syrian clients love, but some Canadians maybe aren't as familiar with. If you don't know what to do with say, an eggplant, you probably won't use it and that's why clients choosing the items they want is crucial. Food that is familiar is so important because it gives people comfort."

**OVER AT OUR PLACE** on Pandora Street, John Lubberts, age 74 and a retired cabinet maker, clears tables and greets guests by name as they sit down for lunch—croissant, tater tots and omelet. He has been volunteering here for 20 years. "Needless to say, I've seen a lot of people come through, mostly homeless single men and women, but lately people on fixed incomes are showing up for lunch and dinner," says Lubberts. "We don't turn anyone away." Years ago, sandwiches were served outside to a few hundred people in a line that stretched down the chaotic 900-block of Pandora Avenue—where much of Victoria's unhoused population have pitched tents.

"We have an obligation to look after people who may have gone down the wrong path and some are not able to get off the street," says Lubberts, adding that most everyone is respectful and leave the table for someone else when their meal is finished. Granted, a few nod out and some individuals are not allowed in the building—and they know it—so volunteers deliver take-out meals and the Outreach team will talk to them about coming back inside. The dining room's back wall is adorned with painted portraits of guests and volunteers—some of whom passed away. Lubberts knows them all, as does kitchen manager >



1



2



3

1. Volunteers help guests shopping at the Mustard Seed Market. 2. Kitchen manager and chef Brian Cox checking farm-fresh vegetables. 3. Portraits of guests and volunteers decorate the Our Place Dining Room.

Brian Cox, who has been full-time at Our Place since 1989!

Cox checks a delivery of produce from Gatton Farms where owner Jason Austin donates fresh produce from his five-acre farm in Saanich. On tomorrow's menu will be "Farm to Food Bank" roast carrots, turnips, leeks and beets, maybe with perogies and sour cream. And the greenest cabbages.

"My cooks arm-wrestle to ride shotgun with me on a gorgeous sunny day to Newman Farm," says Cox. "They also grow veggies for us, and their pollination project involves several acres of sunflowers and plants for bees, so imagine driving through those fields." Cox loads his van with 500 to 1,000 pounds of vegetables, or 25 banana boxes of anything that can grow efficiently.

Back in his office, Cox spends a good part of the day looking for sales at major grocery stores. Food wholesalers provide 'hotsheets' that may advertise a restaurant closure with 200 pounds of chicken wings in the freezer—maybe half price or free to a good home. And a lot of groceries comes from the Food Distribution Centre, which recovers fresh food from grocery stores and redistributes it to local agencies serving individuals and families in need, such as Our Place. For instance, every evening

they pick-up many loaves of bread from Cobbs Bakery because preservatives aren't added to their bread.

**ONE COOK IS** thawing pre-made sausage rolls but they try to serve mostly scratch-made food. Even though it means more preparation, 75 percent of the cooks are Red Seal certified and they take pride in serving fresh, local food. First and foremost is budget, but Our Place has buying power. "Sales reps come by with items they have to move, maybe a few hundred pounds of chicken thighs and we don't have a set menu," he explains. "Of course, all food has to be recognizable. French snails or a confit of rabbit could incite riots while comfort food like stews, pasta and chili are hits."

Cox says that years ago, about half their food was donated, the other half they had to purchase: 50/50. Today it's 10/90, with 10 percent donated. No wonder the rising cost of food is concerning. Cox says he has to be more creative with portion sizes and different styles of delivery, meaning less to-go containers (one case of styrofoam cups is \$40), and more ground beef, beans and lentils to satisfy protein requirements. "Guests have been asking 'where's the beef' since we opened, so we do our best with variety and comfy food and always

keep in mind more fibre, but again it has to be recognizable." Cox slips ground veggies into sloppy joes, grated carrots and dark green veggies to the spaghetti sauce. "I don't write on the menu 'banana squash soup,' because someone will say they've never eaten squash before," says Cox. "I just turn my head and smile and everyone will eat squash in 'veggie bean soup.'"

Cox is known as the leftover king. "Now winter is here and soup is on, you can be really creative with leftovers and nothing gets thrown out. We serve more vegetarian meals—lots more than 30 years ago when it was meat and potatoes. I'm not pro-vegetarian but glad to serve less red meat over the years. Chicken noodle soup will have lentils and squash—sometimes writing the menu is tricky," he says, laughing. "We have a white board with a seven-day plan that is constantly changing. Say Thrifty's donates 100 pounds of chicken breast and 100 pounds squash with *best before date* tomorrow. We have an understanding that the next meal is the most urgent and triage the food—what needs to be served now and how we can fit this in the week's menu."

**AT 8:00 AM**, the Soup Kitchen in the basement of St. Andrew's Cathedral is

already buzzing. Volunteers serve 100 to 200 bowls of soup for breakfast and a steady stream of guests leave with brown-bag meals comprising a sandwich and other items they request, such as cookies made by volunteer Jan. Most guests decline peanut butter and they all only take what they need. "There are days when some regulars don't say a word, they grunt and point," says team leader Sheila as she pours coffee and a regular says hello as he places a brown bag in his green garbage bag. "I'll take one of everything and two socks, the white ones," says another customer. "Cookies and a banana would be nice too, thanks dear," he says to Sheila. Everyone takes yogurt, all the socks are gone and everyone says thanks as they leave.

"In the past few months, we've been seeing a lot of young people with mental issues and addictions. But the majority of our customers are seniors, 15 percent low income and some days tons of unhoused people," says Sheila, as a young woman fills her pack with toiletries. Sheila suggests she pack deodorant in her pocket and not with the ham and cheese sandwich. She says socks and toothpaste would be great, so Sheila runs in the back and brings out more socks. Next in line, a man in a wheelchair scoops a travel book, socks and a cotton shirt.

Matt, age 37, is a new Soup Kitchen volunteer and does all the heavy lifting. "We've been lucky in our lives and this is a small way to give back to our community," says Matt. "It's a fine line, a paycheck away from needing organizations like this." Fred has been a regular for about a decade. "I like sitting down for soup and take a brown bag sandwich that will be supper outside," he says. "Then I'll walk a few blocks to Our Place for coffee and lunch weekends. I can't remember names, but everyone is so helpful and friendly."

"Everyone is struggling with the price of food so our demographics have changed," says Treska Watson. "We are seeing an increase in seniors, single-parent families, newcomers to Canada, and especially international students who can't make ends meet. A huge spike in double-income families is very upsetting. When you have to choose between paying the rent and groceries, they reach out to food banks and soup kitchens."

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Treska Watson and Brian Cox say that financial donations are the most useful because they can harness wholesale buying power—stretch that money further at grocery stores. "Food rescue is unpre-

dictable from day-to-day and we don't know what is coming in because stores are trying to reduce waste so they want us to take what they cannot sell and that changes," Watson explains. For instance, there could be many days without dairy, so they buy yogurt and milk. "We might get six pallets of squash and we are grateful to our farmers that donate but now everyone has squash fatigue," she adds, laughing.

If you don't have money, any donation is helpful. And if you don't have the means to donate, maybe you can volunteer. Or simply spread the word. "People sharing information reduces the fear of using our services," says Watson. "I talk about my food bank work in a social setting and someone will pour their heart out—they had to use the food bank last year. We don't want people to be scared or ashamed, we are here for you."

"Some of our guests aren't doing well, but these folks are someone's mother, aunt or son. We are doing our best to help them and recognize they are folks just like us," says Cox. "We are trying to do one thing that can impact someone's life. And we try to be as dignified as possible in a nice clean building and try to have fun. How can you make a life decision on an empty stomach?"

## BC FOOD BANK & FOOD SECURITY TIMELINE

**1982:** After watching two men searching for food in a restaurant dumpster, the late Murray Black and his wife Edna opened the Soup Kitchen.

**1986:** There were 31 food banks in the province—feeding 8,300.

**2016:** Food bank use reached an all-time high of 103,400 people, 32 percent of whom were minors. 2016 was the third year in a row that food bank use in BC increased.

**2019:** The Mustard Seed purchased the warehouse with funding from the Province of BC, Vancity Credit Union and Victoria Foundation.

**2021:** Fourteen percent of children in Greater Victoria were living in poverty, according to the 2021 BC Child Poverty Report Card. Food Banks register new client families where the parents have been skipping meals so their children can eat. Vancouver still had the highest poverty rate in the country—11.2 percent.

**2023:** The Mustard Seed has 32 grocery partners helping rescue between eight and 12,000 pounds of food daily, an increase from 11 Thrifty Foods stores rescuing about 4,000 pounds of food per day.

**1985:** The Mustard Seed Food Bank turned away single men because they ran out of food and single males were best able to fend for themselves, reported CBC News.

**2013:** The Victoria Foundation began giving grants to the Mustard Seed to explore a food distribution network to address food security in the Capital Region.

**2017:** The Food Security Distribution Centre, operated by Mustard Seed, opened.

**2020:** the South Island FarmHub launched by CRFAIR to purchase local, organic food from farms and processors and redistribute back into the community.

**2022:** The Living Wage jumped 20 percent in Victoria and food prices rose 25.7 percent from the year before. Across Canada, the Hunger Count report showed visits to food banks have risen by 35 percent in the past year two years.