

Chefs up their game when short supplies mean empty shelves at food stores

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Whether scrambling for scarce provisions or conjuring up some immunity-boosting magic, these pro yacht chefs tackled pandemic challenges with aplomb.

When provisioning a yacht at the beginning of the pandemic, dealing with supply shortages meant it took a crew to buy toilet paper, said Chef Danny Davies. But one thing was not in short supply: “The captain, chief stew and I all took turns buying, and when we’d leave with four or five carts of groceries, we received *lots* of dirty looks from the local shoppers.”

That was on the 150-foot M/Y *Excellence* in Key West, where the crew of nine did a stint of short charters after life had ground to a halt in Nassau. “We weren’t even allowed to go into the grocery stores there,” Davies said.

Chef Craig Kovalsky was on a monthlong freelance gig at that time. “We pulled into St. Vincent, and we sat for five days in quarantine. Provisioning, or lack of, was made up of desperate bids for the last pundit of berries, or paying an exorbitant amount for a fish that could feed five,” he said.

For Kovalsky, things went from bad to worse at their pickup destination. “Our guests were arriving in days. A yacht docked next to us had provisions flown in, but their guests never arrived,” he said. “Between the barren shelves of the local market and the half-price goods I was able to buy due to a charter cancellation, I was finally ready. The next day our charter was canceled due to some of the guests testing positive for COVID.”

It got crazy for Chef Rachel Hargrove, too. After filming was cut short for Season 8 of the Bravo TV reality show *Below Deck*, for which she was part of the cast, she repatriated back to the U. S. and locked down for three months. Then in June 2020, she picked up a gig to deliver a yacht back to Europe.

“No one was flying, so we had guests on board. I had never done an Atlantic crossing with guests before,” she said. “The yacht was well-stocked to begin with, but we barely made it to Porto, Portugal, with food and booze. There, boats had not been shipping food, so we found ourselves in a predicament with no food, only tinned and frozen, and all that was left was picked over. It became incredibly scary. Once we got to our final destination in Antibes, we bunkered down and provisioning became more organized.”

After Key West, Davies’ yacht went to Tampa, where one of the owners lived nearby. When not cooking for their dinner parties, he made food from scratch, baked, and experimented with healthy new recipes for the crew.

“Hoping to fend off COVID, we did juices. Our stewardess, Jen Walker, made a ginger-turmeric tea in my biggest lobster pot weekly, and we drank that in shot glasses all week long,” Davies said.

“All three of our stewardesses wanted to eat more activated charcoal, which is supposed to be good for you, so I came up with black burger buns. They were a hit and now are part of my menus.”

After Kovalsky’s temp gig, he was hired as head chef for the M/Y *Nita K II*. “Pandemic or no pandemic, if owners use their boat heavily, it’s my job to continually create and innovate the dishes I serve them,” he said. “They used their boat every weekend, so we were busy.”

For crew, having a variety of fresh dishes helped keep them healthy, Kovalsky added. “In these times, not everybody risks seeing family during vacations, so if somebody was craving their grandma’s chicken pot pie, of course I’d whip that up for them.”

Hargrove said during the crossing, she cooked up a variety of casseroles, cake and cookies, biscuits and snacks, all predominantly healthy. “The guests and crew were all avid juicers,” she added. Her pulled pork nachos with salsa verde topped with cheese were also a hit. “I have a special procedure to keep them from becoming soggy,” she said.

When the permanent chef hired for the charter season couldn’t get out of South Africa, Hargrove was asked to stay on as cook.

“We were fully booked. We turned and burned — staying in Italy, France, Corsica and Sardinia. We’d bulk up where we could. For four heads of iceberg, sometimes we’d have to go to two stores, sometimes five to fill an order. Locals weren’t getting what they needed, and we can clean out a whole section easily, so we had to take that into consideration as well.”

After that charter season ended, she opted to stay put in Italy. And she also finished filming Season 9 of *Below Deck*.

Despite the struggles to run a galley amid pandemic restrictions and global supply shortages, each of the chefs reported a reason for gratitude.

Hargrove, an ayurvedic practitioner who specializes in ayurvedic nutrition, said she was in a good position to serve healthy food, and at one point, she found herself cooking 100-percent ayurvedic and vegan foods.

Davies, originally from England, had served five tours of duty as an army chef, and his military background served him well, he said. “I’m disciplined, good at time management, know how to deliver, and how to keep people’s morale up. Also I have training similar to that of a first responder, which makes people on board feel comfortable.”

Kovalsky noted that every chef (and every person) faces challenges all the time. “And the ones I’ve faced are far inferior to what I could have faced. I’ve been employed, I have my health, and my friends and family are healthy. Honestly, I’ve been very lucky.”



