

Growing the Good: The Chicagoland Food & Beverage Network sets a Bigger Table for people in need

DAVE CASPER: Welcome to Growing the Good. I'm Dave Casper, head of BMO's North American commercial banking business. We're working with our customers to help them through this incredibly volatile time. They're stepping up in so many ways, helping to keep commerce moving and keep people safe. I have the pleasure of speaking with a number of CEOs running businesses in a variety of industries, hearing their personal stories about the challenges they're facing, and some of the very innovative ways they've adapted in these uncertain times. Today I'm speaking with Alan Reed. Alan is the executive director of the Chicagoland Food and Beverage Network and Bigger Table. Alan, it's Dave Casper, how are you?

ALAN REED: I'm doing great. How about you today, Dave? I'm great.

DAVE CASPER: Hey, thanks so much for doing this.

ALAN REED: Thanks for the invitation. Truly appreciate it.

DAVE CASPER: Maybe to just start out for our listeners. Tell us a little bit about the Chicagoland food and beverage network. And for profit arm bigger table.

ALAN REED: Great. Um, so Chicagoland food and beverage network is an almost four year old organization. And we are in charge with bringing together the food and beverage industry of the greater Chicagoland area. And that's 4500 companies and over 130,000 people working in the industry. See, FBN believes that Chicago is the Silicon Valley of food and beverage. But then sometimes we don't really act that way. So we bring together people in companies, we did it 40 times in 2019, and almost 70 times virtually in 2020--to drive growth, innovation and connection and collaboration. We're proud to have 125 corporate members including ADM, Kraft, Heinz Mars Wrigley, Kellogg, Eli's cheesecake, and a variety of emerging brands and startups. We're also proud that Bhima was a founding member, separately but related bigger table was launched as a 501 c three charitable nonprofit as an extension of the Chicagoland food and beverage network in March of 2020, literally just as COVID was coming to Chicago land, to bring together that same food and beverage industry to give back to communities across Chicago. And while it seemed like terrible timing to launch as the global pandemic began, it's actually provided us a real sense of focus and purpose. By the end of the year, we will have provided

almost 600,000 servings of healthy food to area food banks and pantries. And given the increased demand at food banks in the midst of COVID, the timing was perfect, provide a new avenue of support to the critically important work that our food banks and pantries do for us.

DAVE CASPER: Oh, Alan, that's a that's a really good summary, I want to dig in a little deeper in the bigger table. So you've gotten a lot of different companies, totally different parts of the industry all seeming to work together. Some are even competitors, I assume. So how do you how do you do this? And how does it work?

ALAN REED: Well, truthfully, it's not easy. But I do have to tell you that first, the food and beverage industry is special. And especially in Chicagoland. We started with a really simple idea. And that's that ingredients, labor and manufacturing companies can get involved with helping solve food insecurity. But because they don't typically make finished products, so they can't just can't donate a bag of soy protein isolate to a food bank, even though it's healthy, something has to sort of help to bridge that gap. So this hadn't been done before. So what we did is we went through a process to make sure that the Chicagoland food and beverage network, ingredient and flavor and manufacturing companies were sort of aligned behind a clear vision of addressing food insecurity, by creating products for food banks, really from excess ingredients and access time. Once we did an initial pilot of 10,000 servings of hot cocoa, which we did, finished in February of 2020, the group was asking for more, they were ready to do that to the next project. So that started us down the path with COVID sort of coming to town, just down the path of the next 250,000 servings. And I'll tell you, the key thing that really makes it work is these companies, our partners have been so generous with their time, their know how their ingredients, their packaging, their artwork. I mean, they donate everything. And it's incredible what can happen when you sort of get together and align behind this common cause. And everybody can see, hey, that's how I can help. And then we have big plans for 2021. Specifically, we plan to deliver 1.5 million servings of healthy food to Chicagoland area food banks to support their efforts during the ongoing global pandemic. And we're pivoting a little bit we've sort of done these chocolaty beverages, in large part because that's what we have the ingredients for We are now aggressively reaching out and looking at sort of more center of the plate for looking at things like plant based chili and chicken soup. And some, I think more sort of savory center of the place sorts of things that actually sort of create that meal. We also know that in the midst of the pandemic, and beyond it, jobs will be incredibly important. Throughout this time, food and beverage manufacturing continues. So we are beginning a food and beverage manufacturing Workforce Development Program, to train people to come to work in the industry to ensure that there's jobs for them as this horrible pandemic continues.

DAVE CASPER: So as we get closer to the end of the year, you've got a great background in the food industry. What's your outlook for 2021

ALAN REED: the food and beverage industry is it's strong, it's creative, and it's resilient. I see innovations and sort of COVID pivots across the industry every day and companies sort of really reinventing themselves. So while certain sectors, I think restaurant hospitality, in particular will continue to be challenged, it's just just tough flooding for them for for 2021, which is not great news. 2020 has been up, then pretty tough flooding as well. But we are seeing some amazing creativity in grocery and carry out, mobile ordering, delivery. For all of these sectors, sort of finding a way to succeed. Despite the significant challenges. I expect to see more of that. And those that are doing it well, wow. They're, they're just going to get better and better at it. I keep an eye out for I'll say positive signs of life in food and beverage, just because it's like the industry is figuring it out and things they couldn't do. Just a few months ago, they've pivoted and now they're doing it. I will see more of the same in 2021 for sure.

DAVE CASPER: So Alan, thanks so much for sharing the great work that the Chicagoland food and beverage network and bigger table are doing to support the local Chicagoland community during this challenging year. Your contributions have and will continue to make a real difference. So thanks again and enjoy the rest of the day. Alan,

ALAN REED: Thank you so much. Appreciate your time.

DAVE CASPER: Thanks for listening to growing the good. I hope you'll join me again for another conversation. Until then, stay safe.