

the community during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding creative ways to bring their important programing and resources to the public.

The center, located in Burlington, VT is dedicated to educating people of all ages and abilities about science, the natural environment, and the importance of protecting the Lake Champlain watershed and others like it. Recognizing the importance of equitable access to achieving this mission, the center utilizes several programs that break down financial barriers to its facilities and ensures that these educational opportunities are available to all. Most years see more than 167,000 visitors to this award-winning, LEED-certified facility on the Burlington shores of Lake Champlain. Visitors of all ages come to experience over 100 interactive exhibits and 70 different species of fish, amphibians, and reptiles that inhabit the ecosystem we call home.

When COVID-19 began to spread throughout the northeast, the center, like so many businesses and facilities, was forced to close its doors to the public. But though they were unable to welcome visitors into the physical location, the center's dedicated staff were undeterred. After closing their doors on March 14, the staff drew on their considerable skills to quickly adapt to the new remote environment, offering a range of online learning tools, including educational videos, instructions for at-home science experiments, and live video feeds of animal exhibits in order to support local schools and families. They even continued remote programming for adults, including legislative updates on water quality work through the Clean Water Network and an LGBTQIA panel discussion during Pride Week. Some staff took it upon themselves, wearing masks of course, to stealthily clean out the shelves of the gift shop and set up remote centers of commerce from their own homes. Animal care staff reported to work without interruption, and the turtles and fish and frogs that call ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain home, thrived, all while missing their human visitors.

Having helped with our State's great success in curtailing the spread of the virus, ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain reopened to members on June 29 and to all guests on July 4, with extensive health and sanitary guidelines in place. Just as they were reopening, the center even hosted a wedding on just a few minutes notice, after staff spotted a well-dressed couple looking for a spot on the Burlington waterfront and invited them in for the ceremony.

Lake Champlain is one of Vermont's greatest natural treasures, and it has always been a priority of mine to preserve its beauty and the ecosystem it supports, which in turn provides an irreplaceable foundation for our state's economy. I am proud that all Vermonters can look to ECHO, Leahy

Center for Lake Champlain for opportunities to instill a passion for scientific discovery, preservation of natural resources, and stewardship of the Lake Champlain basin in the hearts and minds people young and old, even during a pandemic. I especially thank the staff at the center for their resilience, adaptability, innovation, and unwavering commitment to continuing this important work.

RECOGNIZING KING ARTHUR FLOUR

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I would like to take a moment to recognize a storied Vermont business, King Arthur Flour of Norwich, VT, for their accomplishments over the years and their commitment to serving the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost as old as the United States itself, this company was established in 1790, just 1 year into George Washington's Presidency. It began in Boston, with Henry Wood importing high-quality flour from England, and has evolved into a nationally recognized resource for home bakers and a beloved Vermont company. In 1984, King Arthur Flour moved to Norwich, where the business grew rapidly. Today, the brand is ranked second in the Nation for overall flour sales. But the rise to fame doesn't mean they abandoned the Arthurian principles that their name was inspired by.

In 2004, the family business was officially sold to its employees. Such an act demonstrates the high value the company places on their community and their employees. They also continue to source entirely from American farms, to ensure high-quality production and to support a sustainable agricultural economy. As always, they guarantee quality and purity by promising their customers products free of bleach, bromate, or any artificial preservatives. Through their commitment to their employees, the community, and to delivering high-quality, responsibly sourced products, this company truly demonstrates the values and character of a Vermont business.

King Arthur Flour further confirmed their commitment to serving and engaging with the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of this year, Americans were ordered to stay home to slow the spread of the virus. This led millions of Americans to begin baking at unprecedented rates. It was not uncommon to visit a grocery store this spring and see the empty shelves in the baking aisle. Like many other essential services, King Arthur was tasked with the need to fulfill a rising demand, while also keeping their employees safe. True to their character, King Arthur stepped up and did just that. Not only did they get their products to consumers, they continued to staff the Baker's Hotline. For the last

several decades, King Arthur has been about more than just selling products; they also want to educate and connect with people. Inundated with calls and social media engagement from home bakers, the company's baking instructors, whose jobs were put on hold, began answering the Baker's Hotline and managing the high quantity of social media interactions.

When the country needed an at-home pastime, King Arthur Flour answered the call. I have visited their flagship store in the past and can attest to the quality of their products and services. I applaud them for their commitment to serving the national community during such uncertain times. King Arthur Flour truly exemplifies what it means to be a Vermont business and deserves enormous praise. Marcelle and I visit their plant often in Norwich, and I am so proud of all they have accomplished. King Arthur's story during the pandemic was recently covered by Melissa Pasanen of the Vermont newspaper *Seven Days*, and I request that excerpts of this article be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From *Seven Days*, June 23, 2020]

HOW THE PANDEMIC PROPELLED KING ARTHUR FLOUR INTO THE NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT
(By Melissa Pasanen)

Laurie Furch, a former bakery owner, has answered calls for the King Arthur Flour Baker's Hotline for almost six years. Every shift, she handles dozens of questions from anxious bakers. She's used to troubleshooting problems such as Why are my cookies taking an hour to bake? Or, Can I substitute all-purpose flour for bread flour?

But not even the holiday baking season and its deluge of calls prepared Furch and her teammates for the tsunami of home baking appeals that struck the weekend of March 14. That Sunday, the hotline handled a 50 percent spike in calls.

As the coronavirus pandemic shut businesses and schools, and shelter-in-place orders rolled out nationwide, homebound Americans were baking at an unprecedented rate—and they needed help.

Millions of those bakers turned to Norwich, Vt.-based King Arthur for advice—and for flour to fuel the new national pastime.

The crescendo of phone calls was something the company could handle by redeploying staff from its temporarily shuttered baking education center and retail operation. Addressing a nationwide run on flour that left grocery store shelves bare was a bigger challenge.

"Not only were people all learning how to bake," Furch said, "then Americans decided they all needed flour at the same time."

King Arthur started as a regional New England brand and eventually developed national distribution for its products. In recent years, when customers from Florida or California emailed to ask where to buy the flour, they could be referred to a nearby supermarket.

The pandemic changed that—and shone a national spotlight on a beloved Vermont company and how it does business.

It's a welcome story that demonstrates nice guys can finish first.

"THE NEW HOT CATEGORY"

Normally, the flour business is pretty sleepy and doesn't tend to grab headlines.

Plain wheat flour is a low-margin business that many consumers consider an undifferentiated, basic commodity.

"If you want to make money, you don't grow potatoes; you sell potato chips. You don't sell flour; you sell breakfast cereal," explained Jeffrey Hamelman, a certified master baker and retired original director of King Arthur's Norwich bakery.

But COVID-19 has affected almost everything, including the flour world.

March is the slowest time of the year for flour sales, although it leads up to Easter, which is the second busiest baking season after the winter holidays.

So Bill Tine, King Arthur's vice president of marketing, was surprised when, seemingly out of the blue, hotline call volume took its giant leap in mid-March.

Tine said he recalls a late Sunday evening phone call to check in with colleagues about the unusual numbers. But, honestly, he said, that period of time is a blur. King Arthur, like every essential business, was busy figuring out how to keep going and keep its employees safe. Then, unexpectedly, they were simultaneously faced with the sudden spike in demand for flour and baking advice.

The week of March 16 was when grocery store orders started to pick up in an unseasonal way. Over the next four weeks, they leapt 600 percent over prior year sales, Tine said. There were well-publicized shortages of toilet paper and hand sanitizer, but, he said, "It was a little bit of a shock that all of a sudden flour became, like, the third thing that started to go out of stock."

In response to empty grocery shelves, more consumers ordered direct from King Arthur than ever before, reaching six times normal sales.

On April 19, the company tallied a new one-day website traffic high of close to 1 million user sessions and 2.3 million page views. It blew past the previous record of 542,000 sessions on the day before Thanksgiving 2019.

And the orders looked different, Tine said. Direct sales were traditionally a mix of harder-to-find specialty products. But now consumers were ordering the core supermarket item they could not find: King Arthur's signature 5-pound red-and-white paper bag of flour.

While management was scrambling to get those bags back on grocery shelves nationwide, Furch, her hotline colleagues and the team that handles social media interactions were on a never-ending hamster wheel.

As call volume snowballed, it started to feel "like a continual Christmas season," Furch recalled. All told, the calls, emails, social media interactions and web traffic across April and May saw a sixfold increase.

Management did what it could to deepen the bench. The four-person digital engagement team grew to 17, thanks to bakers and baking instructors whose regular jobs were on hold or much reduced. The hotline similarly drew on six reinforcements from within the company, bringing its ranks to 21.

At no time, according to Tine, did the company technically run out of flour. What it ran out of was enough bagged flour to feed the newly voracious appetite of Americans stuck at home.

During the initial spike, Tine explained, King Arthur had enough flour to fill orders because the pipeline was full in preparation for Easter. In fact, throughout the whole flour "shortage," he said, there was never insufficient grain or even milling time to turn the grain into flour. The roadblocks were bagging capacity and speed of distribution.

Starting in mid-March, King Arthur was in constant communication with its milling and distribution partners to add shifts and speed up delivery, Tine said. The company paid the extra cost of shipping flour from

mills by truck instead of the usual railcars. And King Arthur signed a contract with a new distribution center to get grocery shelves restocked as quickly as possible; it also negotiated a partnership with an additional mill.

But no matter what company leaders did, it felt like they were just plugging holes in a leaky bathtub. There simply were not enough additional bagging lines at any of their partners to fill the orders.

"As soon as a truckload of flour came in, it was sold that next day," Tine said. Unlike toilet paper hoarding, he pointed out, people were using all the flour they bought and heading back for more: "People were actually baking."

To the surprise even of those in the flour business, it turned out that the quarantine was compelling people to bake, whether because they couldn't get out to buy their daily loaf, they craved comfort food or they simply had a lot of time on their hands. Suddenly, social media feeds were filled with photos of pies, cakes, cookies and crusty loaves of sourdough tagged #quarantinebaking.

SPEAKING UP

King Arthur's management team is well aware that there is always room to do better. Last November, senior leadership started on-going diversity, equity and inclusion training. The program was to be rolled out to the entire company, until the pandemic put it on pause.

"We've got to be more proactive and more forward-looking on how to make sure that we're actively getting all people to our table," said Tine.

While women are well represented in management at King Arthur, the company has very little racial diversity. "We live in a white state," said co-CEO Karen Colberg, quickly adding, "That doesn't absolve us from trying to talk about [race], to raise awareness, to make change and to be in it."

On June 1, King Arthur reacted to the protests sparked by the police killing of George Floyd with a social media post condemning "the devastating racial injustices that continue to plague our country" and announcing a \$200,000 fund to support racial justice changemaking organizations.

This was a big step for a company whose potentially controversial statements had previously been limited to "Say no to raw dough" (due to the risk of E. coli in raw flour, not salmonella in raw eggs).

Only a few hundred of the 39,000-plus Facebook reactions to the racial justice post were negative. The social media team responded with a firm but empathic reiteration of the company's position.

Social advocacy, Colberg acknowledged, "is new for King Arthur, and it's the right thing to do for us." The company had been planning to launch a Pride Month campaign instead on June 1 but decided to postpone it. Although some have accused big consumer brands of jumping on the cause bandwagon, King Arthur felt compelled to take a clear stand, she continued, "not because of some expected payoff—though I do believe people value it."

To those who say King Arthur should stick to baking, Colberg responds, "If we can't speak to what is unfair . . . then we are not being responsible leaders to our organization and our society as a whole. There are so many injustices out there and we have to do better."

NEW NORMAL

At about 9:30 a.m. on Friday, June 12, the bread bakers at King Arthur's Norwich headquarters were wrapping up their shift that had started at 3:30 a.m. Masked and well spaced, two bakers lifted rounds of dough, folding and shaping them deftly.

On the pastry side, the scent of cinnamon was so strong it seeped through the glass viewing windows and visitors' mandatory masks.

During Vermont's "Stay Home, Stay Safe" period, the King Arthur bakery continued to bake at reduced volume for local customers. The retail store had just reopened with strict safety guidelines. Jeanne Seymour had driven 70 miles from Guilford as soon as she heard the news. Her basket was soon full of baking tools and ingredients.

"I love that it's Vermont, that it's one of our companies," she said, "and that it's employee-owned."

In a classroom, a pair of education center employees were bagging loaves they'd baked for local community groups. The tally had just reached 10,000 loaves donated during the pandemic—15,000 including those baked at King Arthur's Washington education center. Both locations are targeting late July or early August to restart classes—albeit with fewer students to ensure social distancing.

The Norwich complex fondly known as Camelot by King Arthur employees is slowly moving back toward normal.

The question for King Arthur is what "normal" will look like, at that facility and around the country. Baking usually slows in the summertime, Tine said, but as of mid-June, sales are up more than 50 percent compared to a year ago. "I would say that they're settling in, not settling down," he said. "We're settling in to a new normal."

The company feels confident it has developed systems to respond to any future spike in demand. The challenge, Colberg explained, is to figure out how to nurture the new interest in baking hatched by the pandemic. "How do we engage people that have shown some interest in baking and keep them baking?" she pondered.

The bigger question, perhaps, is whether baking during the pandemic has taught Americans anything.

"I think people like the tactile aspect of it: the touching, the smelling, the feeling. We don't always engage all of our senses in what we do," Furch of the Baker's Hotline said. "Baking also forces you to pay attention to somebody else's rhythm, which is the rhythm of the dough. I think people are learning patience."

REFERRAL OF NOMINEES FOR FEDERAL RETIREMENT THRIFT INVESTMENT BOARD

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Mr. President, I support the referral for a committee hearing of the nominations of Frank Dunlevy, Christopher Bancroft Burnham, and John M. Barger to be Members of the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

TRIBUTE TO ROBERT J. HALSTEAD

● Ms. ROSEN. Mr. President, it is my honor today to recognize the career and service of Robert J. Halstead, a pillar of the Nevada environmental community, who retired earlier this month after serving the great State of Nevada for over three decades.

Bob has been instrumental as a leader in the fight against the failed and fiscally irresponsible proposal to dump our Nation's nuclear waste at the Yucca Mountain site in Nevada. Since