NEWS

"Gratitude is when memory is stored in the heart and not in the mind."
LIONEL HAMPTON AMERICAN MUSICIAN

Business owners say Restaurant Week increased lunch traffic

BY NICOLAS CIMINIELLO AND KELLY KONG
STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Tourists and locals alike took advantage of fine dining discounts during New Haven's Restaurant Week, which features 23 participating restaurants city-wide.

Market New Haven, a city partner organization that supports economic activity in downtown New Haven, manages Restaurant Week, which ran from Nov. 2 to Nov. 15. Four participants said that the event increased business, especially during lunch.

"After 18 years the promotion remains a fixture in the city's dining calendar with many restaurants planning around it each season," Bruno Baggetta, the chief marketing officer of Market New Haven, wrote in an email. "It consistently brings added activity to dining rooms and nearby businesses throughout New Haven, which is why the program continues to earn strong support year after year."

According to Baggetta, any restaurant that adheres to the price points set by an advisory committee of participating restaurant owners can join Restaurant Week. This year, lunches were fixed at $25 for a two-course meal and dinners cost either $45 or $55 for a three-course meal.

He also wrote that all restaurants contribute a moderate fee to offset marketing costs, as well as a donation to Connecticut Foodshare. The Wallingford-based food pantry coordinates with restaurants to donate surplus food to those in need. This year's donation was $5,000.

Joseph Iannoccone, the owner and executive chef of the Italian restaurant Casanova, said that Restaurant Week was beneficial for the new business. During the two-week event, he estimated that the restaurant served an additional 20 to 25 more customers for a weekday lunch than usual.

"For the students, it's a nice thing," Iannaccone said of the price discounts, which allowed customers to order a multiple-course meal without paying a typical fine dining price. "It's all about exploring, getting new customers in and getting the word out."

During Restaurant Week, a meal at Casanova cost between $20 and $30 less than it usually would, according to Iannaccone.

Iannaccone also said he was confident that the event drove up tourism in the city.

"It pulls people in from all over the place," he said. "There's a million more people coming to New Haven just because of Restaurant Week."

According to Kenna Loren, the front of house manager for Melting Pot, another recently-opened downtown restaurant, Restaurant Week was an important way for new businesses to build community ties. Melting Pot is a franchised restaurant, specializing in its multiple-course fondue menu. The recently opened New Haven location is Connecticut's only Melting Pot.

"We're trying to participate in every event we can, just because this not only is our first year, but we're locally owned and operated, so our owners really like to be involved in the community," Loren said. "Just any event that we can participate in and be involved and network and meet other restaurant owners, we would definitely be interested in."



NICOLAS CIMINELLO / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Four participants said the event resulted in increased patronage and extra revenue for the city's economy.

Moe Gad, the owner of downtown restaurants Pacifico and Villa Lulu, said that Pacifico was one of the first participants in Restaurant Week when it started 18 years ago. His second restaurant, Villa Lulu, joined the event this year.

Gad said that with the fixed price points, customers were able to enjoy lunch and dinner at around a 25 percent discount. The event led to around a 25 percent increase in customers, but a much higher one during lunch, according to Gad.

Sean D'Addio, the general manager of ZINC, said that Restaurant Week brought a different spirit to the restaurant.

"In general, it's a nice way to have people want to come out to restaurants, overall, and experience places that they may not have had the opportunity to experience in the past," D'Addio said. "It's really kind of a no-brainer. It brings business and makes the vibe in the restaurant itself feel a little more lively and uplifting."

According to D'Addio, ZINC has recently undergone a transition, expanding from its classically modern American cuisine to one with more widespread influences.

He pointed to this change as an attempt to bring a renewed focus on the city's burgeoning fine dining scene.

"We're really looking to put New Haven back on the map, especially back on the map in the food scene, and elevate what we're doing," D'Addio said.

The participating restaurants spanned eight neighborhoods throughout the city.

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New Haven organization set to receive federal job training grants

BY NICK CIMINIELLO
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The New Haven-based workforce development organization Workforce Alliance has been awarded federal funding to expand on-the-job training and apprenticeships, including a recent grant of $1.5 million in federal funding for job training in the city's high-demand industries, especially healthcare.

The News spoke to executives at the organization about the awards and their delays, an uncertain economic climate and the future of New Haven's labor market.

The grant from the Department of Labor amounts to $8 million total for the state and was split up between the state's five workforce development boards, including Workforce Alliance, which serves South Central Connecticut. Although the grant was announced on Nov. 4 by Connecticut Department of Labor Commissioner Danté Bartolomeo, the federal shutdown, which ended last week, has delayed the funds.

"These funds help Connecticut's workforce stay highly trained and globally competitive," Bartolomeo wrote in a press release. "It benefits both Connecticut and the nation."

The awards were part of $86 million granted to 14 states by the United States Department of Labor. The funds are meant to support employee training in shipbuilding, artificial intelligence, manufacturing and other critical, high-demand sectors, according to a U.S. Department of Labor press release.

Connecticut was one of only four states to receive $8 million, the highest individual grant given.

Workforce Alliance CEO William Villano and Director of Special Grants and Projects Jill Watson said that the state's emphasis on employer engagement and incumbent skills training likely played a role in its receiving the award.

"We really focused on community health centers and doing some work with them to grow their workforce," Watson said about the application process. The grant is focused on "expanding workforces within certain industries," she said.

Villano highlighted what she described as a current uncertain economic climate and how it has affected the labor market and the hiring practices of local employers.

"Many of them have expressed that they still have a need for employees, but also many are hesitant and somewhat skeptical about where this economy is going," Villano said. "It's tough both for the job seeker and the employer."

While Villano said that Connecticut had seen an upward trend in manufacturing after the nationwide downturn in the early 21st century, regional hiring has regressed. According to the 2025 Connecticut Manufacturing Report, manufacturing employment in Connecticut fell by 1.2 percent in the 12 months before August 2025, compared with increases of 1.9 percent and 2.8 percent in 2021 and 2022, respectively.

"They're just kind of in a slowdown," Villano said. "Tariffs and uncertainty about whether or not we're headed for a recession" are part of the equation, he added.

The state press release mentioned "AI integration" specifically as part of the funding in both manufacturing and IT programs, as well as "other skilled trades with AI integration."

Villano said he is not yet concerned that AI will be destructive for the regional labor market.

"We haven't seen a whole sector of occupational areas totally eliminated because of AI," he said. "I think we will at some point, but right now, I don't think people have incorporated AI broadly."

Workforce Alliance's programs for job seekers and on-the-job training have expanded to include AI skills.

"AI is not going to replace someone. The person who knows how to use AI is going to replace them," he said.

While there has been a recent increase in biosciences investment in the region, Workforce Alliance is focused on other sectors.

"It's not an easy field to get into," Villano said of the bioscience sector. "There are really no entry-level jobs without, at a minimum, a bachelor's degree, and more likely a master's degree."

"We do a lot of short-term training," he added.

Nevertheless, healthcare is likely to be the fastest growing labor market in the state, Villano said.

"The biggest demand for us right now is in healthcare. Yale New Haven Health System is the largest employer in the state," he said. "They have a number of hospitals that they've acquired, and Hartford Healthcare is doing the same. I think at some point in the future those two will run everything in the state."

Watson also spoke about other new programs, including some funding the organization had received from the Department of Labor's Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations, or WANTO, grant. Workforce Alliance was one of only seven organizations nationwide to win the grant, which focuses on expanding pathways for women in apprenticeship programs and "nontraditional" fields.

However, similar to the issues with the current grant funding, complications within the federal government had delayed the distribution of WANTO funding.

"We submitted our application in November of last year, it was awarded to us in January, then it was withheld and we thought we lost it," Villano said. "With the help of Senator Murphy's office we finally got it in June."

Before the shutdown ended on Wednesday, Villano said there might still be a delay in funding even after it ends.

"They've got to get a lot of people that have been laid off back to work and they've got to catch up, and where this particular grant is in the queue of things they need to do, who knows?"

Workforce Alliance is located at 370 James St.



XIMENA SOLORZANO / HEAD PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
The New Haven-based Workforce Alliance has recently been awarded millions in federal funding for job training programs, but disorder within the federal government has delayed and complicated the distribution of funds.

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