

Provisions owner Nicole Hodge sits in front of the new art installation at her Vallejo restaurant.



Make it a date night (at home) with Provisions.

Provisions for the Community

A VALLEJO CHEF ADAPTS TO “THE NEW NORMAL” IN ORDER TO SERVE HER CITY THE BEST WAY SHE KNOWS HOW. **BY LAUREN BONNEY // PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALI GODLEY**

I don't know exactly what led me here," reflects Nicole Hodge, chef-owner of Provisions in downtown Vallejo.

Having just started her fledgling catering company, League of Chefs, Hodge found herself inexplicably drawn to the waterfront town when she answered a Craigslist ad for a professional kitchen in Vallejo. She quickly got to work hosting gourmet pop-up dinners, plating decadent five-course meals for eager guests.

In May 2018, Hodge opened Provisions, a cafe and retail store. Though she says the transition from catering business to full-fledged restaurant was “insane,” it was the kind of problem she thrives on.

“For me, I love challenges. Running a business is great for my mindset,” she says.

“Same goes for cooking. If something is messed up or you need to get 300 pounds of chicken by tonight, cook it all, and feed people—I love all of that.”

Despite her passion for culinary problem-solving, Hodge never intended to run a catering business, let alone a restaurant. In fact, Hodge's career path was pure happenstance.

It began in her early 20s, when a pair of friends asked her to cater their wedding on a tight budget. “I was like, ‘Oh, I can do that. I can figure out how to feed 200 people for \$150,’” says Hodge, who had no professional catering experience at the time. “Then it turned into a thing where people actually liked what I was making.”

Flash forward to 2020, and the restaurateur was running not one but two

successful culinary businesses, receiving plenty of accolades for her sophisticated-yet-accessible cuisine.

And then, the pandemic changed everything.

“We were quite busy [when the coronavirus] hit, and I shut our doors well before we legally had to,” she says.

Undeterred, Hodge spent many sleepless nights rearranging her business model to take on the crisis. Leaning on

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her catering background, she crafted up wholesome meals for takeout and delivery as well as an online market for basic grocery needs—a service that several of her customers rely on heavily.

“It's been really rewarding,” says Hodge. “It feels really nice to keep a lot of older people out of grocery stores. I've had some [customers] not go to the store at all because they get all their stuff from us.”

But no service has been quite as popular as the Friday Night Date Night—a pre-made three-course dinner for two, available by preorder.

So far, it's been a hit. The service has “single-handedly kept our doors open” while providing customers a sense of normalcy, says Hodge.

Now that things have settled into a new normal, Hodge finds herself with yet another challenge—accommodating her eatery for a COVID-19 world. During the cafe's closure, Provisions underwent a series of renovations, doubling the amount of space inside; adding a parklet for outdoor dining; installing 20 beer taps and stocking up on loads of wine; and shifting her menu to a prepackaged, picnic-style eating experience.

Like everyone else in the restaurant industry, Hodge is still figuring it out. But she is grateful for the staunch support she has received from her community.

“I feel like the city of Vallejo is the best place I've ever, ever owned a business,” says Hodge. “I feel like I work for [the people], and they work for me. I love this city.” *300 Virginia St., Vallejo, leagueofchefs.com*