

# CAUSES



Casa Blanca in Fort Myers participated in its first Sizzle Dining event in 2024. PHOTOS BY ROBYN GEORGE / THE NEWS-PRESS

## Sizzling results

### Southwest Florida restaurants raise \$62,000-plus in annual fundraiser

**Robyn George**

Fort Myers News-Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

The final numbers are in for Sizzle Dining 2024 and they're impressive.

To refresh your memory, Sizzle is an annual culinary event held in September at participating Lee, Collier and Charlotte county restaurants — from Babcock Ranch to Marco Island and everywhere in between.

For 21 days, venues offer two- to four-course lunches and dinners for \$19, \$29, \$39 or \$49. Pop-up brunches and chef-led demonstrations were added this year. And \$1 of each meal sold goes to the nonprofit Blessings in a Backpack.

"Blessings in a Backpack uses these dollars to fill backpacks with nutritious food for food-insecure elementary school students to eat over the weekend when school-provided meals are unavailable," Sizzle co-founder Guy Clarke

wrote in an op/ed for The News-Press.

It's a win-win event for diners, restaurants and the community.

"I think it's a great program," Pedro Aguirre, owner of Casa Blanca in Fort Myers, said. "It was our first time doing it. We saw a good turn-around, maybe 10 to 15 tables a week. If I get invited next year, I'll do it again."

Franco Russo, who had four restaurants participating, feels the same way.

"People love helping a cause and we do too," the owner of Two Meatballs in the Kitchen in Cape Coral and Fort Myers, Fresh Catch on Fort Myers Beach and Stones Throw in Cape Coral said. "It's definitely an added bonus and another reason to do it."

Getting back to the numbers — a record-setting 114 restaurants participated this year, selling a record-setting 62,529 meals, which translated to \$62,529 raised for Blessings in a Backpack.



Two Meatballs in the Kitchen in Cape Coral featured grouper (pictured), chicken and pasta dishes on its Sizzle Dining menu.

Sizzle has continued to grow and thrive since Guy and Erin Clarke started it in 2016 as a week-long event in Naples.

For three years before the 2024 event, Guy noted in his op/ed for The News-Press, participating restaurants raised \$91,000 for Blessings

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## Norman Love releases chocolate collection to benefit hurricane relief

Special to Fort Myers News-Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

To support hurricane relief efforts across the state, Norman Love Confections has created the I Love Florida Box, with a portion of the proceeds going to Better Together, a Florida-based nonprofit dedicated to serving families and children hardest hit by the impacts of Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

Available now through mid-November, chocolate lovers have the opportunity to give back in a sweet way when they purchase the limited-edition 25-piece I Love Florida Box. The box includes ultra-premium chocolates featuring five flavors of Florida: Key Lime, Florida Orange, Coconut Shell, Tahitian Caramel and White Chocolate Raspberry.

The I Love Florida Box sells for \$62 with a portion of proceeds supporting Better Together's hurricane relief efforts

across the state. The limited-edition, specialty box can be purchased in-store at all locations and online at NormanLoveConfections.com.

"After two major hurricanes have devastated cities across our state, communities near and far are coming together to help their neighbors in need," said Lisa Fisher, CEO of Norman Love Confections. "So many families have lost everything, and Better Together is boots on the ground, going door-to-door in the hardest hit areas distributing food, water and other relief supplies directly to families. We Floridians are resilient, rising after each storm, and helping others when even we ourselves are hurting. It's a privilege to be able to support Better Together's efforts through sales of the I Love Florida Box."

Better Together is made up of two programs — Better Families and Better

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A portion of the proceeds from the limited-edition collection will go to Better Together, a Florida-based nonprofit dedicated to serving families and children hardest hit by the impacts of Hurricanes Helene and Milton. PROVIDED BY BETTER TOGETHER

# Restaurants

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in a Backpack.

“Over the past three years, Sizzle Dining has helped more than 700 local children by ensuring 25,000 hunger-free weekends — that’s more than 100,000 meals,” he wrote.

Which makes this year’s numbers even more impressive.

“It’s inspiring to see how the restaurant community has united to ensure our children have access to food outside of school,” Cecilia St. Arnold, executive director of Blessings in a Backpack of Southwest Florida, said in a news release. “The support from Sizzle Dining is making a meaningful difference for so many families.”

The event also helps local restaurants during the summer lull before season kicks in.

“Sizzle, for us, turned by far the slowest month into the busiest month this summer,” Ismael Saucedo Jr., the general manager of La Fontanella in Fort Myers, said.

Its impact can be felt community-wide.

“Sizzle Dining is not just a celebration of our region’s incredible culinary talent, it’s a vital boost to our local economy during a traditionally slower time of



**The bar at La Fontanella Ristorante in Fort Myers was one of our favorite Sizzle Dining discoveries.** ROBYN GEORGE / THE NEWS-PRESS

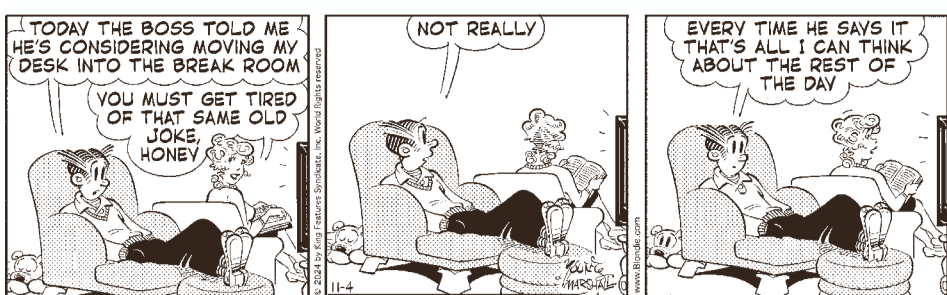
year,” Jau Tusa, Tourism Director of Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention & Visitor Bureau, said in a news release. “By supporting Sizzle Dining, visitors and locals alike help our restaurant community thrive, ensuring the vibrancy of our destination’s dining scene while contributing to a cause that supports local children in need.”

If you were one of the diners to purchase a meal or two at any of the featured restaurants during Sizzle Dining days, cheers to you.

“This achievement shows how even the smallest contributions can have a big impact in supporting those who need it most,” Guy said in a news release.

Robyn George is a food and dining reporter for The News-Press. Connect at rgeorge@fortmyer.gannett.com

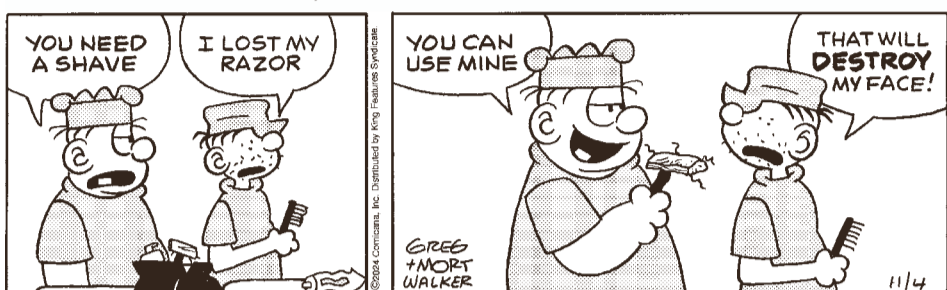
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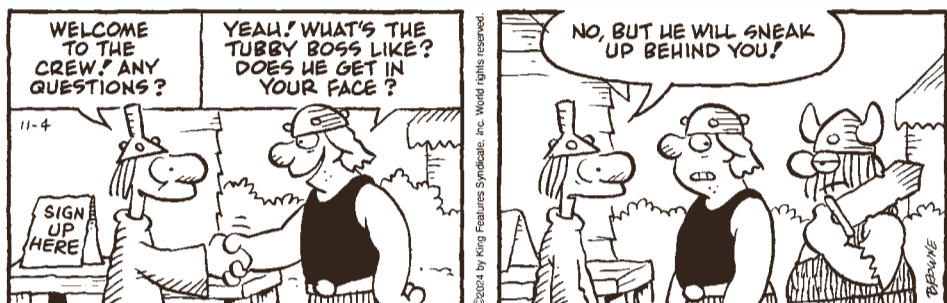
**ZITS JERRY SCOTT & JIM BORGMAN**



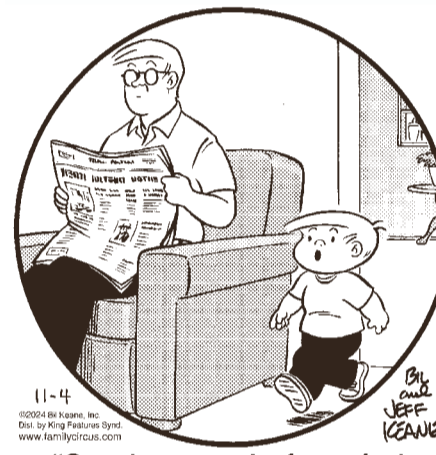
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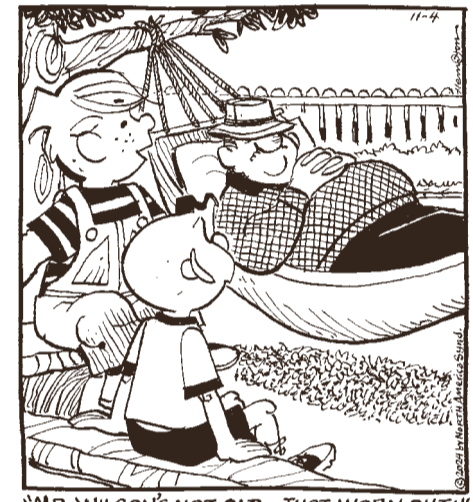
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**FAMILY CIRCUS BIL & JEFF KEANE**



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# Norman

Continued from Page 1C

Jobs — that help parents who are going through a hard time to keep their kids out of foster care, find work and address the root causes of their struggle so that they can reunite as a family with the tools and support system to thrive.

The nonprofit is providing a variety of resources to families before and after Helene and Milton, including temporary child care for first responders and families who need a safe environment for their children, distributing food and supplies to families in need and connecting displaced job seekers with resources and employment opportunities. Similar efforts took place following Hurricane Ian in 2022, and Norman Love Confections created and sold 1,214

#SWFLStrong Florida Boxes that collected \$36,074 for Better Together’s hurricane relief efforts.

“These past few weeks have been devastating for families across our state, especially those who are already living in poverty or facing other crises. We are working tirelessly to help connect these families with urgently needed resources, including a safe place for children to stay as their parents work to pick up the pieces,” said Megan Rose, CEO of Better Together. “We are so grateful to once again partner with Norman Love Confections as we work to keep families together through this unimaginable time. Every dollar will help further our efforts to serve families, children and underserved communities in the hardest-hit regions in Florida.”

To learn more about Better Together and its mission, visit BetterTogetherUS.org.

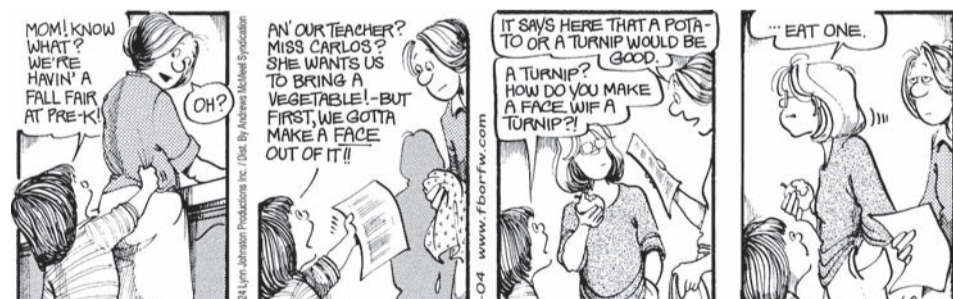
## GARFIELD JIM DAVIS



## PEANUTS CHARLES SCHULZ



## FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE LYNN JOHNSTON



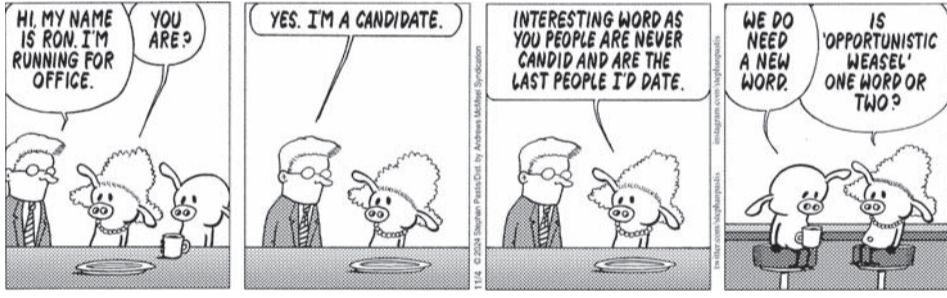
## BABY BLUES RICK KIRKMAN & JERRY SCOTT



## PICKLES BRIAN CRANE



## PEARLS BEFORE SWINE STEPHAN PASTIS



## JUMP START ROBB ARMSTRONG



## NON SEQUITUR WILEY



## CRABGRASS TAUHID BONDIA



## ZIGGY TOM WILSON & TOM II



## MARMADUKE BRAD ANDERSON

