In a small village called Clavellinas, on the outskirts of San Miguel de Allende, in the state of Guanajuato in Central Mexico, 300 children get what may be their only meal of the day whenever they go to school. It is a balanced meal, designed by a nutritionist, paid for by charitable contributions and coordinated by an organization of American expats called Feed the Hungry San Miguel de Allende (FHSMA).

It may seem like a cruel irony. While in upscale Mexican restaurants in New York, well-off patrons sip expensive tequilas and feast on filet mignon a la chile en nogada, thousands of children in Mexico go hungry. But for John Tunney, owner-operator of the growing Besito group of restaurants, this irony represents not just an opportunity but an imperative to give back.

The school kitchen in Clavellinas where these critical meals are prepared was renovated by the Besito restaurant group based here on Long Island. Building kitchens for Mexican kids is an integral part of its business plan, thanks to the efforts of Tunney and his wife, writer Mimosa Jones Tunney.

"I got involved with Feed the Hungry because we benefit from Mexican food," says Tunney, who recently welcomed his second child. "My 'pay it forward' way to give back is to feed these kids. I read an article about how hard it is to learn when you are hungry, and that pulls at my heart. The idea is to get them a good meal so they can learn and get an education. I mean, this is the future of our species."

Besito, which first opened in Huntington in 2006 and now has restaurants in Roslyn and West Hartford, Connecticut, with three more restaurants opening soon in Massachusetts, is better known for its kicking margaritas, tableside guacamole-making and high-end interpretations of Mexican cuisine. But it is also the sponsor of the school kitchen in Clavellinas. Thanks to a donation from the restaurant group, the kitchen, which had been rendered virtually inoperable due to water damage, is now up and running and providing meals for hundreds of children daily. And once the Massachusetts restaurants are open, Tunney plans to build or renovate another kitchen in another impoverished area around San Miguel. Tunney projects opening 50 restaurants up and down the Eastern Seaboard over the next four years. Each group of restaurants will support a kitchen, he says. "We can get a lot of kitchens that way. It's just an awesome goal."

Tunney, who has been traveling around Mexico since his college days, says he was searching for a cooperating partner through which to make the company's philanthropic donations when he found FHSMA.

"It had to be realistic and be sustainable," he says. "We searched and met the then-chairman Harry Gleason and decided they were the best answer to feed kids on a sustainable basis."

FHSMA was founded in 1984 by an Episcopalian group of mostly North American expats to San Miguel, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a popular retirement destination for its beauty, culture and affordability (there are an estimated 8,000–12,000 foreign residents in the almost 140,000 population of the municipality). The church folks began distributing meals to the community as a response to seeing so much poverty in the surrounding area, according to the organization's director of development, Janice Zimolzak.

In 1995, the organization formalized a business model to reach out to the very poorest schools to do the most good. A board and a team fund-raise and coordinate, and a group of volunteers (there are about 80, most of them retired) takes one morning a week to get the groceries, pack up all supplies and drive them out in their own vehicles, to the school kitchens, where local people are employed to do the cooking, a significant detail in a region where unemployment is the norm. The mission has expanded further, developing nutritional education programs for mothers and teaching schools and families to start gardens of their own. Untill recently, when a local government entity replaced some equipment, the organization had operated solely on private donations.

"John Tunney's participation is incredible," says Janice Zimolzak. "He sought us out, and so he is very special to us. He is one of those people who just have to look around, their eyes are opened, and they get it."

feedthehungryuma.org
besitomexican.com
visitmexico.com/en/retirement-in-san-miguel-de-allende