The burger met Maximiliano Solano in the middle of its journey. Solano plucked it from a chilled drawer and plunked it onto a griddle. He breathed in its greasy smoke through his now-mandated mask. He sprinkled it with salt using a gloved hand. He had made dozens of burgers already on a Friday evening and had hundreds more to go. This part of the burger's story hadn't changed. Fat bubbled. Edges crisped. It was going to be delicious.
But for months, the burger had been traveling through a complex supply chain crippled by the novel coronavirus. Now it was about to end up in a takeout box.

Before the pandemic, the most popular French bistro in the nation’s capital didn’t offer to-go orders. Le Diplomate was the kind of place where reservations were bragging rights, special occasions were nightly occurrences and a double-patty cheeseburger was a $20 menu item, the Burger Américain. Since April, the restaurant has gone through more than 3,500 pounds of beef to meet the demand for the burger, sometimes selling 450 of them in a day — the equivalent of almost a burger a minute. When the mayor declared in late May that Le Diplomate could serve diners again, first at tables six feet apart outside and then, in June, at a reduced capacity inside, the to-go burger orders kept coming.

Maximiliano Solano grills burgers at Le Diplomate. (Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post)

Solano pressed the patty with the back of his spatula and watched it ooze. This particular burger was on its way to an engineer who’d
just finished another day of working from home — an option Solano and his nearly 200 laid-off co-workers never had. Instead, the 26-year-old took a pay cut and a demotion from sous chef to line cook just to be one of the few dozen employees able to return to Le Diplomate’s kitchen.

On the burger’s journey from a Kansas farm to the engineer’s dinner plate, every person had a story like Solano’s. A rancher with five children who lost thousands every week. A factory worker who brought the virus home to her son. A courier who calculated the true cost of every delivery not in profit, but in the risk it required her to take.

To follow the burger is to glimpse the lasting toll of this pandemic: on the beef supply chain, on the restaurant industry, on the people who were struggling before this catastrophe began, kept going to work throughout it and are still waiting to see what their lives will become when it ends.

Solano tucked the spatula under the patty. It spiraled into the air, one moment closer to a destiny that was set in motion two years ago.
Before the burger was a burger, or a slab of beef, or an animal that mooed, there was a frozen plastic straw of sperm on a sprawling pasture outside of Eureka, Kan. Matt Perrier thawed it in a water bath for 45 seconds and examined the cow that would become a mother.

His great-grandfather bred cattle starting in 1904, then his grandfather and his father took over the ranch, and in the spring of 2018, Perrier was carrying on the family business. Science had transformed the breeding process, but the result was just the same:

The arrival nine months later of a Black Angus calf, weighing as much as an 8-year-old child.

The calf grew fast, but not fast enough to become one of the bulls (a father, in cattle-speak) that Perrier, 46, sells to other ranchers who are breeding their own herds. Instead, the calf would become a steer, and then, dinner. And though the supply chain leading to Le Diplomate is really more of a supply web, with each burger composed of...
multiple cuts of meat from multiple parts of the country, one thread leads back to the place where Perrier’s steers often ended up: Tiffany Cattle Co.

Some 60,000 cattle come to the Tiffany ranch every year to “finish,” to eat and drink and grow for four to six months until they are ready for their grisly end. This particular hoofed purgatory is for what co-owner Shawn Tiffany calls “white tablecloth” cattle — beef that ends up with pricey stickers on grocery store shelves, or on plates at expensive restaurants like Le Diplomate.

The steer arrived in the fall of 2019, riding on a truck with around 60 of his 700-pound-and-growing brethren. The ranch, built on a World War II-era base for Army Air Corps bombers, was a destination for top-dollar cattle from across the country.

Tiffany, 42, knew going into this business that high-end beef prices didn’t translate into high-end profits for ranchers like him and his
brother Shane. This life was long hours, small margins, squeezing in time with his five kids when he wasn’t with the cattle. But Tiffany never expected what happened in April.

The only doors out of cattle purgatory are the ones to the slaughterhouses, the big, powerful meatpacking facilities referred to as “harvesters” by those in the business. With only 26 major plants across the country that process steers, just one going dark can have a significant impact on the supply chain. In April and May, 16 of them shut down, some for a few days, some for a week or more, according to industry analyst Cassandra Fish. Covid-19 was spreading through the people-packed assembly lines, prompting President Trump to declare the plants essential businesses and order them to remain open.

When they came back online, the production lines ran more slowly than usual.

Will Williams, a cowboy at Tiffany, works the feed lots. (Christopher Smith for The Washington Post)
Tiffany couldn’t get the plants to buy cattle they’d contracted to purchase. For those they did take, every pound of cattle was priced around 25 cents lower than in the year before. Multiply that by the weight the steer grew to be — 1,400 pounds — and suddenly, Tiffany and the ranchers whose cattle he raised were out thousands of dollars every week.

“These ranchers, their livelihood is in jeopardy,” Tiffany said. “I spent every day trying to assuage their own fears.”

The longer his cattle kept growing past their “due date,” the more they cost to feed. The fatter they got, the less valuable their meat became. Tiffany’s wife tried to gently point out to him just how stressed he was.

By the last week of April, the beef-packing industry reached a once unthinkable low: 318,000 steers and heifers slaughtered, down 42 percent from the year before.
But the steer from Tiffany Cattle Co. had already left the ranch. He was sent up a ramp, onto a truck and 220 miles west to Dodge City, a Kansas town of 27,000 with two major meatpacking plants: Cargill and National Beef, the slaughterhouse where the steer met his end.

He arrived at a plant that had been transformed with steel partitions installed between work stations, temperature checks at the door, scattered break times and paid leave for sick employees. But in a town where a largely Hispanic population lives in close quarters at home and labors in close quarters at work, the virus’s spread was relentless. The Dodge City plant had one of the state’s largest outbreaks, with 550 cases by June, according to National Beef.

By the time the steer began making its way through what employees call the “kill floor,” Marisela Garman, 45, had already gotten sick.
She’d been taking the coronavirus seriously since the moment she heard about it. Before immigrating to the United States in 2018, she was a nurse at a hospital near Guadalajara, Mexico. Back then, she was rushing to leave her husband after years of psychological abuse. Only when she and her son arrived in Kansas and moved into her aunt’s trailer did she realize that her nursing license was useless in the state.

She started working as a babysitter and pet sitter, then she found out how much it would cost her to hire a divorce lawyer. National Beef paid nearly $16 an hour.

She worked on the kill floor, then moved to fabrication, where she learned about meat hooks and grinders and packaging, and how to stand almost shoulder to shoulder with her co-workers and move her hands as fast as the conveyor belt demanded. Her fingers always hurt, but on a Tuesday in April, she knew something was wrong when it was her head that started to ache.

Marisela Garman and son Diego. (Family photo)
National Beef sent Garman home for two weeks, with pay, as soon as she tested positive. But the virus went home with her. Her aunt got sick first. Then her 14-year-old son stopped being able to smell.

“It’s my fault,” Garman told him, lying in the room they shared. “My fault.”

She told him where she had hidden all of the cash she’d been able to save. “If I die,” she said on the worst day, “your grandma must call my friend, and she is going to take care of you.”

Garman was still aching and exhausted on May 6, the day before she was supposed to return to work. She asked for more time. She said she was told she could take the days off, but she wouldn’t get paid.

She stayed home on May 7, but felt as guilty as she felt sick. To persuade workers to come in, National Beef had increased its hourly rate by $2 and, Garman said, was offering $500 bonuses to anyone who worked six days in a week. The next day, she reported for duty at 5:30 a.m.

By then, the steer had arrived in fabrication, where it was sliced down to 30- and 40-pound slabs of beef. That beef was loaded into temperature-controlled tractor-trailers that fanned out across the Midwest, where statehouses had become the scenes of protests demanding governors reopen businesses. One trailer’s destination was a New Jersey warehouse just across the Hudson River from New York City, an epicenter of the virus.

The warehouse belonged to Pat LaFrieda, whose name is spoken with reverence by foodies and restaurateurs. They love the lore of his origin story, a butcher’s son who went to Wall Street, quit and
came home to grow his family’s business into one of the best-known meat purveyors in the country. They love his burgers, which are the result of top-secret recipes individually concocted for each restaurant he serves, so no two establishments’ burgers taste the same.

Meat ages at Pat LaFrieda Meat Purveyors. (Pat LaFrieda Meat Purveyors)

So high was the demand for LaFrieda meat that the 49-year-old and his 73-year-old father, Pat Sr., were about to open a $20 million facility — right when all the restaurants they served started shutting down. Chefs who’d ordered thousands of pounds of beef suddenly couldn’t pay for any of it.

Those that tried to stay open for carryout faced beef prices that were at new highs. Although meatpackers were paying less for cattle, they were charging more for the beef shipped to grocery stores and butchers. LaFrieda, in turn, was charging more, too. And trying to increase his ability to ship meat directly to homes. And trying to get his employees to wear N95 respirator masks. And trying to persuade his father to stay home.
“I have never worked as hard to lose as much,” LaFrieda said.

He spent his days on the phone with chefs and restaurant owners across the country, feeling like their financial adviser, their sanitation expert and their therapist. He didn't know how many of them would still be his customers when all of this was over.

He spent his nights in a 36-degree room turning slabs of beef into steaks and burgers beside his employees. He wore a paintball mask to show them how seriously he was taking the precautions. He gave speeches about being on one of the overlooked and underappreciated front lines of this pandemic: the people ensuring Americans had food to eat.

“A virus cannot destroy civilization, but panic can,” he liked to say.

On May 21, there was another order from Le Diplomate for Burger Américain patties. Cuts of hanger and flatiron steaks, short ribs and
— secret recipes never tell — were ground down to noodle-shaped pieces, mixed and ground again before being poured into a hamburger-making machine.

By 5 a.m., hundreds of 4-ounce patties were loaded into boxes and onto another refrigerated truck, this one headed to Northwest Washington.

At 9:50 a.m. on May 22, the burger arrived on Q Street. Executive Chef Greg Lloyd, 40, watched the truck pull in, the boxes come out and the stacks of meat pile high in the walk-in refrigerators. This was one of few parts of his routine still intact.

Lloyd used to describe the kitchen as an orchestra and the customers as an audience. He got to play conductor every night. He believed that every little choice, from the dimness of the lighting to the garnish on a steak, could make a diner feel, at least for a moment, that all was right in the world.
But now the food was in plastic. Most of the customers were on their couches. The few staff members he could bring back were standing two yards apart from each other, their banter in Spanish muffled by masks.

They’d all spent five weeks out of work. Starr restaurants, a Philadelphia-based group that owns 42 restaurants across the country, completely closed Le Diplomate at the beginning of the pandemic. Lloyd, who’d cooked lobster risotto for the Bidens and steak frites for Bill Murray, was stuck at home, making meatloaf. He applied for unemployment benefits. The company still paid employees’ health insurance through April, and Lloyd had his wife's income from her government job to lean on.

Restaurateur Stephen Starr, the group's namesake, was criticized online for shuttering so quickly and not following in the footsteps of chefs who set up community kitchens and donated to food banks. Paper covered Le Diplomate’s windows, a visual reminder to the bustling neighborhood around 14th Street that all was wrong in the world.

(Video by Erin Patrick O'Connor / The Washington Post)
The paper came down on April 20. Lloyd, who’d also agreed to a pay cut, placed an order for burgers. He wound up needing three times the amount of his usual order. The burgers, he realized, were as comforting to his customers as the meatloaf was to him. Warm, juicy, reminiscent of the before times.

The patties cost the restaurant almost double what they used to. The price of beef still hadn’t come down in mid-May, and though $7 per pound seemed outrageous, Le Diplomate wouldn’t be Le Diplomate without the Burger Américain on the menu. Eventually, the restaurant group would decide it had no choice but to temporarily switch to a different supplier of Black Angus patties.

But first, the burger that had made its way from the Midwest was flipping through the air and landing on the griddle. Line cook Maximiliano Solano watched it sizzle, then layered a slice of American cheese on top.

Maximiliano Solano prepares a burger for takeout. (Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post)
Solano began working in restaurants at 16, two years after he’d immigrated from Mexico. He started as a dishwasher. Becoming a sous chef at one of the city’s most beloved restaurants and bringing home a salary of $1,700 every other week sometimes made him feel like he was living someone else’s life. This spring, with a 7-month-old baby at home, he decided to buy a Toyota Highlander, the kind of car he thought a family man should have.

Le Diplomate closed the next week. His wife lost her restaurant job at the same time. So did his sister, his brother-in-law, his cousins and so many of his friends. His family already lived so close to the margins, there was little he could cut back on. He canceled his cable and his Amazon Prime account. He refused to miss a car payment.

“I was the only one responsible for the rent, for the bills, everything,” he said.

He felt lucky to get the call in April to return to work, to take a pay cut and make $16 an hour to cook $20 burgers. Somehow the griddle felt so much hotter with the mask and gloves, which he knew he would be keeping on for a very long time. Customers starting to come back to eat at the restaurant meant that more of his co-workers would get their jobs back. But he just couldn’t shake the feeling that if things went badly, they’d all be out of work once again.

Solano popped two patties off the griddle and nestled them onto a brioche bun. Pickles and red onions topped the cheese. The sauce went into a plastic container. The fries went on the side, and then came the lid and a brown paper bag.

The burger, along with a chicken club sandwich, a half chicken, a french onion soup and trout amandine was now a part of order number 20212.
The bag was picked up by Gabriel Guevara, whose job was to hustle the orders to the delivery drivers and customers waiting outside.
As a food runner, Guevara, 33, used to make $25 an hour once the staff divvied up the tips. When he finished his shift at 11 p.m., he’d drive straight to his second job, cleaning restaurants on Capitol Hill until 3 or 4 a.m.

He slept until it was time to take his 7-year-old son to school. His wife began another day of caring for their daughter who has Rett syndrome, a rare genetic neurological disorder. At 4 years old, she can’t speak or feed herself or walk without struggling. While Guevara is working, her life is a series of medicines and doctor appointments and trying, all the time, to communicate in her own way, often through tears.

She was Guevara’s first thought when his boss at Le Diplomate called to ask whether he would come back. He said yes right away. He’d only be making $10 an hour, plus a cut of the tips that came in from customers who picked up their own meals. He wouldn’t be able start sending money to his family in El Salvador again, but his family here would find a way to get by.

Gabriel Guevara hands order number 20212 to Caviar driver Tiffany Poindexter.
(Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post)
“I thanked God for everything,” Guevara said. “I paid the rent, and we have food in the house, and my daughter needs her medicine.”

By then, both of his wife’s parents were hospitalized in the District with the virus. Only his mother-in-law would survive.

She moved into their apartment in Anacostia. Guevara and his wife gave up their bedroom so that she could have her own bathroom. She was still contagious. She’d just lost her husband, but they couldn’t hug her. They had to keep their daughter from getting the virus. And Guevara had to be able to go to work.

Outside the delivery window, a woman in a “basketball mom” T-shirt arrived asking for order number 20212. Guevara picked up the bag with the burger inside and passed it through a makeshift takeout window.

“Thank you,” Tiffany Poindexter said before turning to get back to her rental car as fast as possible. Every week of the pandemic, she has picked up a car from the Avis in Bowie, Md., to drive to the District, turn on her Caviar or Doordash app and wait for someone to decide they would like their meal brought to their door.

She is an accountant for a nonprofit research firm. She started working as a delivery courier in February, when she realized just how expensive travel basketball for her 14-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter was going to be this year.

Then basketball practices stopped, and her employer told her to work from home, and suddenly she could see the financial potential in all that new time. One of her customers left two cloth masks in a plastic bag on the doorstep. Poindexter, 48, put them on and kept driving.
The accounting of this work went like this: For each delivery she completed, she received a base rate of around $3 to $5. Sometimes Caviar offered bonuses to motivate drivers to work during busy times, like $12 for every three deliveries completed. Most tips were $4 or $5. Sometimes she would be shocked to see a $20 tip. More often, she’d be unsurprised to see no tip at all.

She drove north through Logan Circle, passing million-dollar condos and shops still shuttered by the pandemic.

If she works five hours after her accounting job, and nine or 10 hours on the weekends, she can make about $600 in five days. She subtracts around $100 for the rental car.

But then there are the other costs: losing time with her children, who were at home warming up leftovers as she drove into Petworth. She hoped ditching her clothes at the door and showering was enough, that if she was carrying the virus, it wouldn’t spread to them.
She had to stop spending time with her parents, who have heart conditions. When she stopped at their house just for a few minutes, her mother sprayed her down with Lysol.

Just before 7 p.m., she turned down a leafy street and parked in front of a rowhouse where a group of 30-somethings were on the porch. She stepped out of her car, carrying the bag with $160 worth of food inside.

Two years after a cow became pregnant in Kansas, the burger had reached its final destination.

The roommates turned away from their laptops, where they were in the middle of a Zoom happy hour.

“Be safe,” Poindexter told them through her mask. She hurried back to her rental car, on her way to pick up another delivery from another restaurant.
The roommates went inside, where a candlelit table was set with blue china and wineglasses beside a game of Scrabble they’d been playing on and off since the pandemic began. Marcus Bagnell, 34, transferred the burger from its plastic container to his plate.

He’d been to Le Diplomate before but never ordered the burger. On this Friday night, his roommates suggested they order French food and watch “Casablanca.” Bagnell dressed in a striped shirt, leaning into the theme.

This was how much of the pandemic had been for him. Board games, Zoom calls, ordering from restaurants fancier than he would usually frequent. Back in March, he was spending hours on the coronavirus subreddit and taking his temperature every day. But his laser engineering job transitioned easily to work-from-home. His employer paid for him to order two monitors, a headset and a keyboard. He didn’t get sick, and neither did anyone in his family. He didn’t know anyone who had lost their jobs.

His roommate poured glasses of red wine. Someone shut off the Zoom call, setting the laptop beside a sourdough loaf rising on the counter.

In Kansas, Shawn Tiffany was preparing dinner with his children on his ranch, where the cattle were still backed up for weeks. Marisela Garman was getting ready for her sixth shift of the week at the meatpacking plant. In the kitchen of Le Diplomate, Maximiliano Solano was dropping more beef patties on the griddle, with two hours to go in his shift.

Bagnell picked up the burger with both hands. He took a bite.

“It’s pretty good,” he said. A few minutes later, the burger was gone.
Bagnell enjoys his Le Diplomate dinner with his housemates. (Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post)

*Samantha Schmidt and Tom Sietsema contributed to this report.*