

Takeout Taxi

Chef Shuttle drivers zip around LR, placing to-go orders from popular restaurants and delivering the hot food to hungry customers

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In a Hillcrest parking lot, Harris Corley, 23, slaps magnetic labels on both sides of his gray, late-model Nissan Maxima. It's 5:10 on a Wednesday evening. He's fresh from class at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, but he has already changed into a white chef's jacket. "I forgot my OX cord," he says, settling into the driver's seat. That means he won't be able to use his iPod tonight.

He pushes a programmed button, and Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" fills the car. He checks his phone: "Now we wait for orders." Corley is one of a dozen Chef Shuttle drivers, half of whom are on the road this shift. He has worked for the company he calls "2.0" for nearly two months. That's because co-owners Wes Kirtley, Kyle Crossland and Ryan Herget, all in their early 20s, debuted the second version of Chef Shuttle on Feb. 3. Corley also drove for the first incarnation from early 2012 to August 2013, under its original owner, Alex Kreth. (Kreth, well beyond his 20s, still owns 1 percent of the company.)

Chef Shuttle works like this: Clients use the website to order at least \$15 of food (lunch or dinner daily) from one of 25 restaurants. Chef Shuttle buys the food at a 25 percent discount and sells it at menu price. Drivers, called "mobile waiters," deliver the food almost anywhere in Little Rock, usually in under an hour. Tipping the driver is optional but encouraged, since their compensation is otherwise limited to a portion of the \$5 delivery fee. Corley says the company averages about 30 to 40 orders a night, but the goal is to reach 150 soon. He majors in small-business entrepreneurship and hopes to be a branch manager one day. "We're trying to grow and maybe in the near future, get branches set up in Conway, Hot Springs, Northwest Arkansas - any town that could accommodate something like this," Corley says.

He pulls onto Interstate 630, because many Chef Shuttle restaurants are on the west side of town. At 5:30 p.m., he's in bumper-to-bumper traffic when he gets a text with the evening's first order. Now there is an actual destination: Taj Mahal, in a strip mall off Shackelford Road. "It usually takes Taj Mahal a full 20 minutes to make the food," he says. "We'll get there in time."

Timing is important. Timing is the difference between hot and lukewarm food. Chef Shuttle 1.0 offered six restaurants. Corley says a busy night was 15 orders, usually handled by a single driver. Then Kreth got sick, Chef Shuttle shut down, and Corley found a job as runner at a law firm. It paid well, he drove a company car and had all the free coffee he could drink. Sometimes he misses that job.

He passes Shorty Small's - "probably our most popular restaurant," he says - and turns into Market Street Plaza shopping center. Taj Mahal is an oasis of neutral tones, dim lights, smooth arches and soothing sitar tracks. Corley packs \$50 worth of steaming rice and vegetables into an insulated duffel and rejoins the traffic. When he arrives at a townhouse a few miles east, he glances at the receipt on his phone - \$4.58 in tip. Not even a tenth of the order. Even so, he grins at the client and wishes him a nice evening. It's 6:10, and the order wasn't due till 6:25. At least he's off to a good start, timewise.

ON TO CORKY'S

"I've got to talk to those people at Corky's, because they wait for me to get there to prepare the food. The last cook that I talked to, he said, 'man, you shouldn't have to wait more than 10 minutes,' and I was like, 'OK, just, when we place the order, why not just go ahead and make it?'"

Corley parks by the drive-thru and enters the pungent chaos of the Corky's Ribs & BBQ kitchen. Cooks dunk wire baskets in hot oil and fold sandwiches in foil. "Hot tray, watch your neck," a man calls. He moves briskly, rows of dinner rolls glistening at shoulder level. Corley presses his back against the door and waits for someone to notice him. A fry cook spots him. "How ya doing, sweetie?" she calls.

Eight minutes later, he is back in the car, punching an address into his phone. The order is due at 6:45, and it's 6:30. "Hopefully it's close," he says. For Chef Shuttle drivers, there's no such thing as mileage or a phone stipend. "If you're part time, which means you work less than four shifts, we'll make sure you make \$150 a week. If you're full time, you should at least make \$250. If you don't quite get up to that point, we go ahead and give you a bonus to get you to that point," Corley says.

Corley is on call 45 hours, but he probably works between 30 to 35 hours a week. Thirty-two hours at \$250 is \$7.80 an hour, minus whatever the driver spends on gas and cellphone service. (Drivers work as independent contractors, so minimum wage laws don't apply.) It's 6:42. A man stands near a glass door, keeping an eye out for his barbecue in a neighborhood of modest, well-kept houses. He already tipped Corley when he ordered the food - \$5.43 on \$32. "Right on time," Corley says.

He texts "4" to Kirtley and Crossland, working as dispatchers in the closet-size office downtown. (It's "1" when he receives an order, "2" when he reaches the restaurant, "3" when he leaves with food and "4" upon completion.) Then he heads back to Corky's, because another order has come in. Of course, the order isn't ready.

THE RANCH AND ASSORTED JOURNEYS

"Oh, Mylanta!" Corley groans, squinting at his phone. "That's in The Ranch!" A large neighborhood in Pinnacle Valley, The Ranch is as far northwest as one can go and still be in city limits. Corley is 7 miles away. He speeds along Cantrell Road and manages to get the food to The Ranch's Stonebridge Apartments just in time. The barefoot, bespectacled young man pre-tipped \$5.87 on a \$35.

"There's uncertainty with it being a small business, and there's no guarantee of how much I'll make per shift," Corley says. He blows through at least two tanks of gas a week, at \$60 a tank, and works more than any other Chef Shuttle driver – five lunches (11 a.m.-3 p.m.) and five dinners (5-10 p.m.) weekly. But lunches are slow. Today, he only had two runs. He doesn't work at all on Tuesdays and Thursdays, because he has classes from 9:25 a.m. to 8 p.m. He's a sophomore, and he just wants to "get it done."

Corley graduated from Little Rock Christian Academy in 2008 and headed to Ouachita Baptist University to play soccer. But the tiny college seemed as claustrophobic as high school. So he returned to Little Rock, worked as a valet, picked up classes at Pulaski Tech and eventually transferred to UALR. His grandfather foots the tuition bill, but Corley has other bills - living expenses, car payments. That's why, for the past few years, he has done school part time and work full time. This is his first semester as a full-time student in more than five years. "I'm the black sheep of my family," he says. "My brother goes to Baylor. My sister goes to Sewanee. My cousins are all in nice schools on the East Coast. I want to do things with my life. I just wasn't making the best decisions."

He breezes through the next pickup, El Porton, and heads east, to the Heights. It's a house he knows, a repeat client, and the tip's just shy of \$4. Corley apologizes for being late. The client shrugs. "You're doing fine, man," he says.

Chef Shuttle's website advertises food in under an hour. Corley considers himself late if it takes more than 45 minutes. This order has taken 47. It's 8:30 and two new orders are in, so he heads west again, picking up food from Little Greek and J. Gumbo.

"I've had people order, and I'll get to their house and they're not even there yet," he says. Once, an acquaintance ordered food for his girlfriend. When Corley arrived, the apartment was empty but unlocked. He tried calling, but no one answered. He left the food inside the front door. As he finishes this story, he parks in a cul-de-sac atop a hill and rings the doorbell of a large house - destination of the J. Gumbo order.

DARK HOUSES AND OTHER PHENOMENA

He waits. He takes in the splay of city, 10 miles east. He lifts his head to the sky, heavy with stars. He rings again. Somewhere in the recesses of the house, a light is on. He waits some more. Then he walks down the hill and puts the food in the car. It's about 30 degrees, and he knows the food will chill quickly. He calls the office and asks for Kirtley. Crossland says Kirtley has run out. Destination J. Gumbo is actually Kirtley's father's house. Corley hangs up and punches the next address into GPS.

He talks about how, when he needs to clear his head, he'll bow-hunt by himself in Ouachita National Forest, how his social life is beer and late-night television at friends' houses, how he likes to celebrate a dinner shift's end with sushi from the Kroger on Chenal.

He calls Crossland back. Should he run the Little Greek? He's already seven minutes late. Crossland says to wait, and that he'll call the Little Greek customer. A truck lumbers up the hill and turns into the garage. Kirtley's father putters around a bit, then finally gets out, takes the J. Gumbo and gives Corley \$7 in cash. This will tie for Corley's best tip of the night.

Corley drives fast, taking a shortcut that involves nine streets, a New Orleans thoroughfare and a jaunt through northern California. (Right on St. Charles, left on Napa Valley.) The house, a proverbial "McMansion," is in a sparsely populated subdivision just beyond the fancy shopping centers. It's the part of town where lots are sold, but trees remain thick, protesting their imminent death-by-development. Steep

stairs lead to a tight, towering stoop, and an etched glass door offers a straight shot to the kitchen - the only lighted room in the house.

A woman in blue scrubs appears. "I'm sorry I'm late," Corley says. "Did someone call and tell you I would be late?" No one called, and the woman appears exhausted. She accepts her carry-out boxes without emotion (prepaid tip, \$7), seeming neither upset about the tardiness nor excited about her dinner. As she turns away, a wan, wide-eyed face floats toward the glass at waist level. Apparently this child, a girl with impossibly pale hair and skin, has been cowering behind the woman for the entire exchange. But Corley is too annoyed to notice any horror-movie vibe.

"Man, I'm going to have to crack down on these guys back at the office," he grumbles. "It makes me look bad. It makes them look bad."

It's 9:15. His shift is nearly over, and he hasn't visited Shorty Small's once tonight. But he still has a final delivery to make. He drops off Lilly's Dim Sum at an apartment complex (\$4.27 on \$46.96 - second-to-worst tip of the night) and, because he has forgotten to set his mileage app, parks at a grocery store and does the math. Total deliveries: 7. Total miles: something north of 60. Total income: in the neighborhood of \$40. He admits that he's "not doing so great" financially, but he's accepting of what he calls Chef Shuttle's "growing pains."

"Right now I don't have any money tied up in this company," he says. "I've got some interest in this company. I would like to be a part of it. But if things don't pan out, it'll be a good learning experience."

It's not the law firm. It may not even be minimum wage. But he believes it has potential, and he's willing to go along for the ride.