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Utah Restaurant Bets on Honesty

PAUL FOY
 Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY - One World Cafe owner/chef Denise Cerreta ditched fixed prices for the honor system a year ago, and her social experiment is on the verge of showing a profit.

"It's between you and the box," Cerreta said of a money chest that sits next to a water jug and mugs on a serving table. "We continue to grow. We continue to make money."

Melva Sine, president of the Utah Restaurant Association, said many restaurants are moving to a menu-free, size-optional format. But she knows of none that have experimented with the honor system.

The One World Cafe depends on the kindness of strangers, rich and poor.

Take the landlord, who lets Cerreta determine her rent: \$1,650 a month for a two-story brownstone, where she lives upstairs. Or "Farmer John" Norborg, a 53-year-old self-employed gardener who tends a spice garden in back of the cafe in exchange for meals.

Another regular donated a quarter-acre lot for a vegetable garden three blocks away; retired oil-and-gas engineer Bill Wood picks up the water bill.

"I eat here all the time. Best place in the world," said Wood, 70, who favors the fruit salad.

Some customers volunteer for kitchen duty, another way to pay for meals.

Al Travland, a 66-year-old masseur, also believes honesty is both the best and most profitable policy. He, too, lets customers decide how much to pay - and insists the concept, though foreign to corporate America, brings out the best in customers, making for good business.

"Sometimes I pay less because I have less money. But I pay more when I have money. It always seems to balance out," said customer Carolyn Pryor.

Pryor contends Salt Lake City, where "you have so many honest people," is the right place for a pay-what-you-can plan. "In any other city it might not work."

There may be a subtle prod attached to Cerreta's kindness. Kitchen workers dole out itty-bitty portions of the organic meals, and hungry customers who have to ask two or three times for larger helpings may feel more generous at the money chest.

With lunchtime donations averaging \$5, Cerreta said she was happy to collect \$60 a day. But business and receipts grew to more than \$700 and as much as \$1,000 a day.

Still, the profit margin "comes and goes," she said. "It's a wash right now, but I'm committed to this working."

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Cerreta pays her 15 workers \$10 an hour; her monthly payroll is \$12,000. She often has to buy equipment on credit, but when her rice cooker burned out recently, a customer offered to fix it.

She says the cafe is worth all the effort.

For years Cerreta ran an acupuncture clinic at her brownstone building, then decided to branch out with a sandwich and coffee shop.

She grew weary of offering the same menu, however, and decided overnight to take down the menu and price board.

"I'm just sick of business as usual," she said.

Later she dropped the acupuncture business, turning spare rooms into cozy dining with an old-world decor.

Business appears to be booming at One World Cafe; the money box is stuffed with bills including one \$20 left poking out. Cerreta stuffs it back into a slot. The chest has an unlocked lid, but she doesn't seem the least bit worried.



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