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One World Cafe

By Aaron Falk

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There are only two things missing from the One World Cafe: menus and prices.

The lack of menus is easily enough explained.



Owner Denise Cerreta, left, serves Miguel Rodriguez at the cafe, which has no menu and no set prices. Customers pay as much, or as little, as they have or feel their meal was worth.

Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News

"I'm not a robot," owner and chef Denise Cerreta says. "I'm not going to cook the same thing every day."

But the cafe, 41 S. 300 East, is the only restaurant Cerreta knows of in the United States that allows customers to set the value of their meals.

There's no cash register in the store — just a money box. Patrons place as much, or as little, as they have or feel their meal was worth in the box.

If they only eat a little bit, they only pay a little bit. If they indulge in soup, salad, an entree

and dessert, they pay a little bit more.

The cafe's unique format allows everyone to eat, Cerreta says. It also eliminates waste, because customers don't feel they have to overeat to get their money's worth.

"People say I'm crazy," she says, but her idea seems to be working. While most restaurants — 80 percent by some accounts — don't survive the first year of business, One World Cafe just celebrated its second birthday. And Cerreta says by the end of the month, she'll be in the black for the first time.

Things weren't always so good, though.

Cerreta was practicing acupuncture in the same building the cafe is currently when she said she felt like she reached her "spiritual glass ceiling."

So she ditched the acupuncture gig, focusing instead on running a sandwich and coffee shop.

After a while of serving the same old thing, Cerreta said she felt

inspired to break away from the norm, ditching the menu and the price tag. And the very next customer to walk through the door paid what she thought her food was worth.

Still, Cerreta found that running a cafe with no prices had its price, at least at first.

"The first couple of months were very lean," she says. "My car got repossessed. I'd break into a cold sweat every time a power truck pulled up."

Cerreta was the only employee, and she worked long hours every day. Without a car and without enough money to buy food wholesale, she walked to a Wild Oats Marketplace to buy the organic food she used to make her dishes, which were mostly Greek and Italian. She had no real culinary training and made what she knew how to make.

Now Cerreta has nine employees, all of whom she pays a living wage. She's hired real chefs who make up the menu every morning based on what's in season and what's in the fridge. And Cerreta admits the food has gotten a little bit better.

"You fake it until you make," Cerreta says. "Those were hard times, but I learned a lot. I'd never trade that experience for anything."

Perseverance and a belief that what she was doing was important helped her stay true to her ideal, Cerreta says.

"I'm not saying single-handedly, but I believe it's my role on this Earth to eliminate world hunger," she says.

Cerreta says One World Cafe allows everyone to eat. And if customers don't have enough money for the meal, they can earn a voucher for each hour of work they put in at the cafe, doing dishes or cleaning up.

"It's a hand up, not a forced handout," she says.

On an even greater scale, Cerreta plans on opening up similar cafes in other cities and hopes her idea catches, inspiring copycats.

Cerreta says she plans to open up One World Cafes in Manhattan, Iowa City, St. Paul and Chicago.



One World Cafe, 41 S. 300 East, just celebrated its second birthday. The cafe's unique honor-system format allows everyone to eat, owner Denise Cerreta says. It also eliminates waste, because customers don't feel they have to overeat to get their money's worth.

Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News



Owner Cerreta prepares food at One World

Recently, a couple from Denver drove to Salt Lake City to see how Cerreta's cafe worked. Libby Birky and her husband, Brad Birky, say they want to open up a similar cafe in the Denver area next summer.

"We showed up unannounced," Libby Birky, an elementary school teacher, says. "We couldn't pull it all together until we saw it working for real."

Cafe. Chefs make up the menu every morning based on what's in season and what's in the fridge.

Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News

Birky said she and her husband work regularly in homeless shelters and food banks and feel the world's hunger problem is bigger than

what most people perceive it to be.

"Living in Denver, which is a pretty moderate climate, the homeless population is very high," she says. "We're kind of clouded to this thing and we start to think that this is the face of hunger. But we're missing the single moms, the low-income families with mothers who don't eat so their kids can.

"These are people who are functioning in society, but are functioning behind a screen of hunger."

Cerreta and the Birkys say they hope these types of cafes will at least make a dent in the problem.

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