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Play money works at One World Cafe

By James Thalman

Deseret News

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Having a cafe where the clientele pays what it thinks a meal is worth seems like a dicey business model, but it works — with some adjustments along the way — for Denise Cerreta, who founded the One World Cafe in Salt Lake City six years ago.

Another adjustment was implemented at the 41 S. 300 East establishment Tuesday: play money. Instead of customers being served then making their contribution to the nonprofit on their way out, diners select a small card with a number from one through 10 written on it, hand it to the server then "build" the size of their plate of food. The number corresponds with a dollar amount and portion size. They then deposit the real green through the slot of a small cash box before they sit down.

"This is more about better bookkeeping than increasing revenue," Cerreta said Wednesday. "It helps us keep better track of inventory and we believe will reduce the amount of plate waste."

One of the guiding tenets of her "one world, everybody eats" concept is that everyone literally could eat if those who live in food abundance would eat less. She said the idea shouldn't scare away potential diners who can't pay. The cafe still always has beans and rice on hand at no charge.

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Whether selecting food from grocery store shelves to choosing an entree at a restaurant to portion sizes taken at the dinner table at home, everyone can take a second and think about how much they really want, Cerreta said.

That's one of the ideas behind introducing the pre-pay tickets at the cafe. Customers have to stop and think about how much food they really want, said Cerreta, who is travelling to Highland Park, N.J., today to help charitable groups establish two cafes based on her model.

2 photos



Mike Terry, Deseret News

Chef Giovanni Bouderbala dishes up a meal at the One World Cafe where the price structure has been revamped.

GALLERY (2 PHOTOS)

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Last fall, One World Cafe went through some labor strife when the main chef was let go and some employees quit, citing a clampdown on the rather loose schedule that the staff kept but didn't allow a consistent monitoring of actual time worked or tracking food inventory.

Having a payroll and time clocks has helped the cafe get through its usual slow winter season and, given the dive in the economy, have meant survival. The business side had to stay intact if the other philanthropic side of the operation was going to stay up and running, she said, adding that although the concept might seem limiting or not workable, a few local for-profit restaurants have contacted her about setting up a modified version of the model.

"The downturn in the economy is dictating a lot of rethinking and changes across the industry," she said. "Despite what people might assume about the idea, the model can produce between 4 percent to 11 percent profit."


Somewhere around 2 percent to 3 percent is considered a working profit margin in the food preparation industry.

Although Cerreta plows all profit back into her business, "there is potential in the idea for anyone willing to try it," she said.

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