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Posted on Fri, Jul. 09, 2004

FREE LUNCH EXISTS

Customers choose their price at cafe

By PAUL FOY
Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY - At the One World Cafe, owner/chef Denise Cerreta serves up no fixed menu prices. Customers can decide the value of their own meal or pay nothing.

It sounds like a dine-and-dash opportunity for the college students next door, but Cerreta's old social experiment is on the verge of showing a profit.

"It's between you and the box," Cerreta said of her money box, next to the water jug and menu serving table. "We continue to grow. We continue to make money."

The charity of others and loyal customers, rich and poor, helps make Cerreta's business conc work.

It doesn't hurt that her landlord lets her name the price for rent -- \$1,650 a month for a two brownstone, where she lives upstairs. Out back, "Farmer John" Norborg, a 53-year-old self-employed gardener, tends a spice garden in exchange for meals, and says he doesn't eat mu

Another regular donated a quarter-acre lot for a vegetable garden three blocks away, where 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.

Al Travland, a 66-year-old masseur who also lets his customers decide how much to pay, said concept, so foreign to "corporate America," empowers and brings out the best in customers, making for good business.

Some can't afford to pay much, but others make up for it.

"Sometimes I pay less because I have less money. But I pay more when I have money. It al seems to balance out," said Carolyn Pryor, after eating a dish of Greek herb and lemon chick

The concept seems to work in smallish and neighborhood-friendly Salt Lake City, where "you so many honest people," Pryor said. "In any other city it might not work."

While many restaurants are moving to menu-free, size-optional dishes, Melva Sine, presiden Utah Restaurant Association, has said she's never heard of a restaurant ditching fixed prices

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honor system.

But there's a subtle prod to Cerreta's generosity and tolerance. Kitchen workers dole out itty portions, forcing hungrier customers to ask two or three times for larger helpings, which may them in a more generous mood at the money chest.

And when students at the next-door massage school turned into regular freeloaders, the 42-old Cerreta had to crack down. "From a business standpoint, it was really draining us," she s

She acted only after being inspired by a homeless man who insisted on giving her his last \$1 a meal. Cerreta challenged the students to devise their own solution: a punch card for \$5 lur It drove some of them away, but others volunteered for kitchen duty, another way to pay for here.

The money box's most common denomination is a \$5 bill but some customers drop \$20, mor many people would pay for lunch, although this organic meal can be ordered with desert cak good coffee.

At first, Cerreta was happy to collect \$60 a day. But business and receipts grew to more than and as much as \$1,000 a day.

She could use the money. In addition to paying 15 workers a "living wage" of \$10 an hour th adds up to a monthly payroll of \$12,000, she's still buying restaurant-quality appliances, ofte credit. When her rice cooker burned out one day recently, a customer with a voltmeter was t to fix it.

Cerreta said her profit margin "comes and goes. It's a wash right now, but I'm committed to working. I paid off my espresso machine."



For years Cerreta, who grew up in a middle-class family in Canton, Ohio, ran an acupuncture 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 th 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 ol world decor. The open kitchen lacks an exhaust vent and gets hot, but customers can take th dishes outside to front and side patios.

Business seems to be booming at One World Cafe, where a seat next to the money box reve: regular deposits, including one \$20 bill left poking out. Cerreta stuffs it back into a slot. The : chest has an unlocked lid, but she doesn't seem worried.

Cerreta made one concession to security: She replaced an open money basket, which made regulars nervous, for the box.

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