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Last modified July 11, 2004 - 3:34 am

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Nation

Pick your price: Customers decide what to pay at cafe

Associated Press

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



[click to enlarge image](#)

It sounds like a dine-and-dash opportunity for the college students next door, but Cerreta's year-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 mugs on a 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 concept work.

It doesn't hurt that her landlord lets her name the price for rent - \$1,650 a month for a two-story 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 much.

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

Al Travland, a 66-year-old masseur who also lets his customers decide how much to pay, said the 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 always seems to balance out," said Carolyn Pryor after a dish of Greek herb and lemon chicken.

The concept seems to work in smallish and neighborhood-friendly Salt Lake City, where "you have 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, president of the Utah Restaurant Association, has said she's never heard of a restaurant ditching fixed prices for the honor system.

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

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The money box's most common denomination is a \$5 bill but some customers drop \$20, more than many people would pay for lunch.

At first, Cerreta was happy to collect \$60 a day. But business and receipts grew to more than \$700 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 that adds up to a monthly payroll of \$12,000, she's still buying restaurant-quality appliances, often on credit. When her rice cooker burned out one day recently, a customer with a voltmeter was trying to fix it.

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

For years Cerreta, who grew up in a middle-class family in Canton, Ohio, 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. The open kitchen lacks an exhaust vent and gets hot, but customers can walk their dishes outside to front and side patios.

Business seems to be booming at One World Cafe, where a seat next to the money box reveals regular deposits, including one \$20 bill left poking out. Cerreta stuffs it back into a slot. The small 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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