

Volunteers serve food at Fareground, a “pop up” pay-what-you-can restaurant in Beacon, New York.



Pull Up a Chair and Pay What You Can

Working to Ease Food Insecurity and Bridge Social Divides

by Mari Rich

Georgia Bowen has come a long way since 2006, when she left an abusive marriage and entered a homeless shelter with her three children. Inspired by the philanthropic organizations that helped her during that period, she is now earning a graduate degree in nonprofit management. She is also a regular patron of F.A.R.M. Café in Boone, North Carolina. “Like many people, I struggle sometimes,” she says. “Even when I have been working 90 hours a week at three different jobs, it has happened. It still happens now that I am a graduate student dependent on fluctuating levels of financial aid. But if I have only a few dollars in my pocket—or even if I have no money at all—I know that my children and I can get a healthy, wonderful meal there.” That is because F.A.R.M., Feed All Regardless of Means, is one of a growing network of community cafés set up with the help of One World Everybody Eats (OWEE), a national organization dedicated to spreading the word about a new type of restaurant.

Diners at a community café pay whatever they can. Although the establishments usually post a suggested price—typically \$5 to \$10 for a freshly prepared multi-course meal—patrons who can afford to do so are encouraged to donate a little extra. Those strapped for money can exchange an hour of labor, such as setting tables, chopping vegetables, or an assortment of other needed tasks, in exchange for their families’ food. (For those unable to work or pay, many cafés also serve a simple daily dish that can be enjoyed with nothing expected in return.)



A 'Field of Dreams' Moment

OWEE had its genesis when Denise Cerreta, a Salt Lake City-based acupuncturist, woke up one day only to find she had hit what she terms a “spiritual glass ceiling.” Her patients, she realized, were suffering more from loneliness than from physical ailments, and in 2002 she opened a small coffee-and-sandwich shop, meant to serve as a welcoming place where community members could gather. Despite her good intentions, the venture was not an immediate success; Cerreta soon found her car repossessed and her rent in arrears. Most people would have been tempted to abandon the project at that point and go back to their former jobs. Cerreta might have considered giving up as well, had it not been for what she calls her “Field of Dreams” moment—a reference to the iconic film of that name in which an Iowa corn farmer builds a baseball diamond on his property, certain that players and spectators will come. Her notion—which seemed equally fanciful—was to let customers pay whatever they could afford for their food.

While the idea may have seemed impractical, it was unusual enough that customers and members of the media began flocking to the location, which Cerreta renamed the One World Café in 2003. Three years later she was granted nonprofit status, and as word of her venture spread, people around the country began approaching her for advice about setting up their own pay-what-you-can cafés. The first were Libby and Brad Birky, a Colorado couple who had long volunteered at local soup kitchens and food banks but wanted to do more. Their SAME (So All May Eat) Café, which has as its motto “good food for

the greater good,” opened in 2006. It was followed in later years by dozens of others across the country; there are currently some 50 cafés based on Cerreta’s model. Bob Pearson, the chairman of OWEE, estimates that at any given time there are 10 to 20 more cafés in the planning stages.

Cerreta now spends her time advising any group that requests her expertise (her original café has since closed to allow for this); she asks for no payment beyond travel expenses. “I do not own the idea of community cafés,” she says with characteristic unpretentiousness. “I do feel a deep stewardship, however, and I am thrilled that it has germinated and spread.”

Serving Up a Model Based on Experience

To help spread the idea further, One World Everybody Eats holds an annual summit with the 2016 event scheduled for January 16–18, in Denver, Colorado. OWEE also has a guide to starting a community café, “Spirit in Business,” available on its website. In it Cerreta writes, “Setting up a community café might feel to you like you are jumping off the rim of the Grand Canyon. I know that is how I felt when I first started and I was sure I would splat at the bottom. But now that I and others have done it, I suggest you take the leap. We are at the bottom looking up at you. Our experience can be your safety net. We have done it and have proved it can work.” She encourages those who are interested to build a strong team and engage with the wider community before opening. “Simply put, all roads lead to community,” she asserts, “and with strong ties in place you can overcome any obstacle or solve any problem you might face.”



SAME Café in Denver features local artwork, like this still life that also features its name, So All May Eat.



SAME Café looks like any other restaurant and even offers outside seating.

Cerreta puts forth seven key precepts that she hopes those launching community cafés will follow. In addition to allowing each customer to set his or her own price for a meal and allowing patrons to volunteer in exchange for the food (a “hand up, not a hand out,” as she says), Cerreta feels strongly that diners should be able to choose their own portion size; that everything served should be healthy and seasonal; that all volunteers—both those working to pay for their meals and those who simply want to support the café’s mission—should be used to the greatest extent possible; that any paid staff should earn a living wage; and that each establishment should have at least one larger table where individuals and small groups can sit with others in order to cross social, economic, and other societal boundaries.

Admittedly, naysayers have derided some of Cerreta’s goals; ultraconservative pundit Rush Limbaugh once famously deemed the notion of pay-what-you-can cafés “stupid” and “un-American” and called Cerreta and her cohorts “liberals playing games with the reality known as life.” Still, numerous establishments following her model are successfully alleviating food insecurity in their communities. The organization estimates that the currently existing cafés serve some 1.3 million meals a year.

The phrase “food insecurity” refers to a lack of access to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. While

it is often an invisible problem, it exists in every county in America. In 2013, government data showed that almost 50 million Americans lived in food insecure households.

Carefully Chosen Locations and Carefully Controlled Waste

For a community café to remain viable, most administrators agree that about 80 percent of its patrons must be able to pay the suggested cost of a meal, allowing the other 20 percent to eat for free or at a vastly reduced cost. That is possible if the location is chosen carefully, with an eye towards diversity and balance. Cerreta’s One World Café in Salt Lake City, for example, was in a central location with a college to the east, a downtown business area to the west, a relatively wealthy neighborhood just to the north, and one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods directly to the south. F.A.R.M. Café is located directly next to both a college and a popular vacation area, but is also right on a bus line, making it readily accessible to needier inhabitants of the region.

While becoming a self-sustaining enterprise is exponentially easier for cafés in thoughtfully chosen locations, those that are partnered with other organizations, such as churches or already established community groups, also tend to fare well. Mosaics Community Café, a soon-to-open café in Bartow, Florida, for example, is affiliated with Leland Family Ministries, a group that provides addiction counseling, job training for former inmates, nutrition education, and a host of other services.



Community cafés, like JBJ Soul Kitchen, are regular restaurants with different pricing models. The innovative template has spread, with some 50 cafés operating based on the mission-driven, pay-what-you-can principles.

A pay-what-you-can eatery seemed like a natural fit to founder Libbie Combee, who struggled with addiction in her own past. “We can help someone kick a methamphetamine habit, get a job, and find housing,” she says, “and it is equally important to make sure they have access to healthy, satisfying food served in a dignified environment.” Because her group has been around for almost two decades and has deep roots in the community, Combee was able to call on a host of local resources—including a newly formed advisory board comprised of skilled chefs—for help.

Cerreta firmly believes in mining the community for such help. “It is funny that some people have extra money, some have

extra property, some have skills, and some have good noses for great stuff. We value everything we get,” she says. “And reaching out to others reinforces our interconnectedness in a meaningful way.”

Successful cafés not only make use of everything they are offered, whether it is surplus tomatoes from a friendly purveyor or chairs from a local restaurant that is being remodeled—they aggressively cut waste wherever possible. At One World Café, Cerreta recalls, she served approximately 150 meals a day, yet all of her food waste could fit into half of a five-gallon bucket—and even that ended up in the compost bin rather than a landfill. That type of efficiency, she points out, can be achieved, in part, by allowing diners to choose portion sizes right for them. By broad consensus, it also takes a great deal of creativity on the part of those planning the meals. At SAME, according to Libby and Brad Birky, if a farmer donates a supply of greens, Brad, who runs the kitchen, will find a way to use those greens in one of the week’s soups, salads, or pizzas.

Healthy and Tasty Food

Whether it is soups, salads, pizzas, savory entrees, or elaborate desserts, it is undeniably the food that draws most patrons to community cafés. “One of our biggest hurdles as an organization has been to convince people that these cafés are very, very different from soup kitchens,” Bob Pearson explains, pointing to the fact that soup kitchens, while performing a valuable function, are sometimes forced to rely on food donations of dubious nutritional merit and taste. “Community cafés are *real* restaurants, simply with a different pricing model.”

Beth Davison, a professor of sociology at Appalachian State University, volunteers at F.A.R.M. (she jokes that washing dishes takes her back to her work-study days as a college student) and eats there frequently. She concurs with Pearson that a community café can provide as fine a dining experience as any restaurant. “Renee Boughman, the executive chef at F.A.R.M., cooked at some of the most exclusive places in the region before coming here,” Davison says. “And she could easily work anywhere she chooses.” Along with all the other community café chefs, Boughman tries to use as many local and organic products as possible to make her meals both healthy and appealing.

Another chef, Robert DeVito, affectionately known as Vito to those he works with at A Better World Café in Highland Park, New Jersey, explains, “Everyone, no matter what their circumstances, absolutely deserves to have delicious, healthy food. I love knowing that I am feeding people things that not only taste great but are good for them.” A Better World Café is affiliated with a nonprofit called Elijah’s Promise, which runs a catering company; a small market with to-go meals, gelato, and gourmet products; a traditional soup kitchen; and a highly regarded culinary school. DeVito, whose specialty is Italian cuisine, is himself a graduate of the school. “You might not get rich cooking at a community café,” he says, “but I cannot think of anything more rewarding.”

As befits food prepared so artfully, most of the cafés are decorated in exceptionally appealing ways, with colorful murals or framed prints on the walls and tables set with real dinnerware, rather than disposable. It is a far cry, as Pearson asserted, from the sometimes bleak and institutional atmosphere of soup kitchens.

Rolling Up Their Sleeves

Washing all that dinnerware takes manpower, however, as do prepping the dozens of pounds of vegetables a chef might go through during a lunch service, weeding the gardens many cafés maintain, explaining the pay-what-you-can system to first-time diners, and a host of other vital tasks, both large and small. Luckily, volunteers are rarely in short supply. Cafés located near schools with culinary programs or degree offerings in nonprofit management and related fields can count on a steady stream of eager, young interns. Most cafés also boast a roster of devoted community members happy to roll up their sleeves even if they are able to cover the cost of their own meals. So vital is the role of the volunteer coordinator that in many cafés, it is one of the few paid positions.

Christina M. May is a public/nonprofit management expert and the author of the doctoral thesis *The Pay-What-You-Can Nonprofit Restaurant Model: A Case Study*. She points out that scheduling volunteer shifts and planning for back-up can be a complex task and that all volunteers require a certain amount of training. (Some show up figuring that anyone can wash dishes or chop vegetables and are surprised to find that they, like workers in any commercial kitchen, must learn about food safety practices and procedures.) Still, May writes in her dissertation, volunteerism is an important part of the community café ethos. In the course of conducting her research, she spoke to one manager who told her, “People want to participate, but they want to do it in a short period of time and they do not want the politics that come with some nonprofits. The purpose of pay-what-you-

can cafés is broad enough that you do not have to stand for any philosophy. You do not have to believe in any doctrine. It does not matter what you think about the president or about Republicans or Democrats. You can just come and work with people, side by side, so that everyone can have enough to eat. It is so simple.” When new volunteers assert that they are joining in because they admire the pay-what-you-can “concept,” the manager has a ready response: “I always tell them, ‘It is not a concept. It is real. Look. It is happening. And you are participating.’”

‘Pop-Up Cafés’

It is easy to understand the enthusiasm surrounding the pay-what-you-can model, but equally easy to see how daunting the task of launching a community café can be. Cerreta asserts that no one has to dive off the edge of the proverbial Grand Canyon right away. She points to Fareground, an operation in Beacon, New York, where a reported half of all school children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, but where artist lofts rent for well over \$1,000 a month. Fareground’s founders, who come from social work, nutrition, and public administration backgrounds, are not yet ready to open a permanent location. Instead, they mount a “pop-up” event once a month, using the kitchen and auditorium of a local community center. “While our aim is to find a permanent space and become a full-time operation in the future, this is providing us with a great trial run,” Tara Bernstein, one of the founders, says. “Besides, it is like having a wonderful party every month because in addition to serving great food, we plan fun activities like crafts for the kids and African drumming.”

The café gardens, such as the one at JBJ Soul Kitchen, are often tended, harvested, and pruned by volunteers, delivering fresh and healthy ingredients to the kitchen. The gardens offer a unique volunteer opportunity, allowing patrons to contribute, regardless of their ability to pay.



A far cry from the sometimes bleak layout and design of soup kitchens, community cafés are designed with the look and feel of typical restaurants. Some, like SAME Café, feature communal seating to foster conversation and discussion among patrons.



Everyone Wants to Contribute Something

A local journalist once referred to Fareground as “occupy[ing] a joyful front line in the Food Revolution,” but it does not take hosting a pay-what-you-can meal even once a month to help fight for the same cause. Sometimes all it takes is planting a single row of potatoes.

Evenlight Eagles, a North Carolina-based leather artisan, is the primary caregiver for her 87-year-old grandfather. A long-time farmer, he taught her how to garden from an early age, and she used those skills to grow food for F.A.R.M. Café. “Everyone wants to contribute something,” she says. “Tending the café’s garden allowed me to do that even when I had no money to give.” Eagles’ daughter, now 10, has eagerly pitched in with her mother, proving, it seems, that even the youngest person can harbor a similar desire to be of service. At the other end of the age spectrum is her grandfather, who has worked the soil of Appalachia for more than half a century. Last year he planted an extra row of potatoes to donate to the café.

Even high-profile organizations such as the Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation want to contribute. JBJ Soul Kitchen, in the town of Red Bank, New Jersey was launched in 2009. Housed in a remodeled automotive shop, the cheerfully decorated spot, fronted by a thriving garden of herbs and vegetables, draws constant crowds.

Linda Pacotti, a retired government affairs specialist from the nearby town of Neptune, admits that she ate at Soul Kitchen for the first time hoping that the musician might be in attendance.

Although he is known to visit on occasion, she has not yet caught a glimpse of him. “That quickly ceased to be important though,” she says, explaining that she immediately became taken with the idea of community cafés and now patronizes Soul Kitchen regularly. She often brings friends along, seeking to introduce them to the pay-what-you-can movement. “I tell them that although the suggested price is \$10, I am not letting them up from the table unless they leave *at least* \$15 or \$20.”

A National Chain Gets Involved

Could the pay-what-you-can model be enacted on a wider scale? Walk into one of the four Panera Cares locations—in Clayton, Missouri; Dearborn, Michigan; Portland, Oregon; and Boston—and you would be hard-pressed to distinguish it from any of the company’s usual Panera Bread outposts. The soothing color scheme, the panoply of homey baked goods and creative sandwiches, and the appealing aromas are exactly the same as you would find at the more than 1,600 other Paneras. The big difference is that the Panera Cares locations, the first of which opened in 2010, operate according to the pay-what-you-can model. With half of all patrons paying the suggested amount, a quarter paying less or none, and a quarter paying more than suggested, the locations have proven workable and self-sustaining. Panera CEO Ron Shaich has called food insecurity “a really serious problem in this country” and has said, “I am a business person [doing what I can]. But what are we going to do as a society?”

Founding new cafés, patronizing existing ones, and telling others about the pay-what-you-can movement might provide part of the answer to his question. ■