

## SMART MOUTH

# Pay-what-you-can cafes let diners pay it forward

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

On a recent morning in York, Pa., walking to a volunteer job, I exchanged pleasantries with a man on the sidewalk. He looked as though he held the weight of the world on his shoulders, and our short conversation confirmed he was feeling down and out. A couple of hours hence, I was rolling dough while he played the piano. We were surrounded by a bustle of lunchers and nourishing, locally sourced food while immersed in the riches of a community cafe.

I first encountered the concept of pay-what-you-can cafes last summer in Boone, N.C., where I ate at F.A.R.M. (Feed All Regardless of Means) Cafe. You can volunteer to earn your meal, pay the suggested price (\$10) or less, or you can overpay — paying it forward for a future patron's meal. My only regret after eating there was not having a chance to give my time as well as my money. So as soon as Healthy World Cafe opened in York in April, I signed up for a volunteer shift and planned my visit.

F.A.R.M. and Healthy World are part of a growing trend of community cafes. In 2003, Denise Cerreta opened the first in Salt Lake City and subsequently helped a couple in Denver open S.A.M.E. (So All May Eat) Cafe. Cerreta eventually closed her cafe and now runs the One World Everybody Eats Foundation, helping others replicate her pay-what-you-can model.

Most of the nonprofit, volunteer-run cafes are started by individuals or groups, but Panera Bread and the Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation also have opened cafes with Cerreta's guidance. The foundation holds free annual summits at which start-ups can learn best practices and network with other organizers. To date, nearly 60 have opened across the country, and another 20 are in the planning stages. Generally, 80 percent of customers pay the suggested price or more, and the remainder pay less or volunteer for meals.

"I think the community cafe is truly a hand up, not a handout," Cerreta said. She acknowledged that soup kitchens have a place in



MELANIE KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**The nonprofit Healthy World Cafe in York, Pa., uses a model that accepts volunteer kitchen labor in exchange for a nutritious meal. People can also overpay so that a future patron can eat.**

society, but people typically don't feel good about going there.

"One of the values of the community cafe is that we have another approach," she said. "Everyone eats there, no one needs to know whether you volunteered, underpaid or overpaid. You can maintain your dignity and eat organic, healthy, local food."

The successful cafes not only address hunger and food insecurity but also become integral parts of their neighborhoods—whether it's a place to learn skills or hear live music. Some enlist culinary school students as volunteers, some teach cooking to seniors, some offer free used books. Eating or working there is a reminder that we're all in this world together; the cafes seem to provide a much-needed glue in the communities they call home.

In York, a longtime resident who works for an international relief organization — where he learned firsthand the truth behind the proverb "If you give a man a fish . . ." — spearheaded the effort to open Healthy World Cafe. It operated for a few years as a monthly pop-up in a church before it opened in a renovated building downtown. A small group of volunteers raised more than \$100,000 from foundations, companies and individuals. Stu-

dents from vocational schools donated their trade and art skills, and a fire department donated industrial kitchen equipment.

My 10 a.m.-to-1 p.m. shift began with the cafe manager — one of only two paid staff members — running through an orientation. As she talked about food safety, we passed one regular volunteer, mincing ginger, who works other days as a personal chef.

I donned a name tag and ballcap, clipped my hair above the nape of my neck (per health code) and started my first job: weighing 1½-ounce balls of dough and rolling them out for chapatis (a flatbread cousin of pita and naan). The man I'd met that morning — Tony, who I'd learned had been unemployed and homeless — came in and played the piano, which he does daily to earn his lunch.

Behind the counter, the scene was part camp kitchen, part speedy cooking class. Our volunteer crew wasn't the most orderly, but we managed to prepare and serve meals with a lot of laughs in between. I began flipping bread on the 500-degree grill (after separating all my rolled-out dough that had stuck together); a physical therapist served orders such as a salad with lentils, chickpeas and wheatberries; a tattooed

If you go

**WHERE TO EAT**  
**Healthy World Cafe**

24 S. George St., York, Pa.

717-814-8204

[healthyworldcafe.blogspot.com](http://healthyworldcafe.blogspot.com)

Dinner and live music every first Friday of the month. Open weekdays for lunch; menu items \$3.50 and \$5.50; sign up online for volunteer shifts.

**INFORMATION**

Find other community cafes such as F.A.R.M. Cafe ([www.farmcafe.org](http://www.farmcafe.org)) and S.A.M.E. Cafe ([www.soallmayeat.org](http://www.soallmayeat.org)) at [www.oneworldeverybodyeats.org](http://www.oneworldeverybodyeats.org).

— M.K.

man bused tables; and a graphic designer (and cafe board member) ran the register. At one point, a 90-something man walked in and began playing the harmonica with Tony.

Customers arrived, including a few in business suits, a judge and a group of volunteers from a local shelter who cleaned trash off the block in exchange for their lunches.

With lovely piano music in the background and a constant flow of orders, the hours passed quickly. At the end of my shift, I took off my name tag, unclipped my hair and ordered my earned meal at the counter. A few other volunteers and I ate together — dishes of butternut squash and red lentil curry soup (with my chapati on the side), roasted radish and house-pickled vegetables.

After lunch, I bought a few more dishes to go and called out "Bye!" to Tony at the piano.

Tony looked up from counting his tips, smiling. "Bye, sweetie," he said. Then I walked out the door, with a handful of new friends, music in my head and a satisfied belly and heart.

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