

# Honor system

Owners of an innovative restaurant invite patrons to pay what they can or volunteer their time for food. Story by Laura Dally | Recipes by Brad Birky



A MENU WITH no prices typically means only the rich can afford it. At Denver's SAME (So All May Eat) Café, no prices—and no cash register—means you pay what you can, even if the currency is a little elbow grease. That's exactly what restaurateurs Brad and Libby Birky have in mind: to make healthful fare available to all.

## Filling a need

After years of volunteering in soup kitchens, Brad, 32, a computer consultant, and Libby, 31, a school teacher, saw how few opportunities there were for homeless people to get back on their feet. And it's not just the homeless who have a hard time, says Libby. "It amazes me to see how many people have a good education and a car, and work hard but still

Brad and Libby Birky, proprietors of Denver's novel SAME Café.



“I’ve never heard of a restaurant that lets you pay what you want,” says a patron visiting from Chicago. “But this place smelled so great, we had to give it a try.”

### Watermelon Salad ▼

The Birkys sometimes serve this savory salad on a bed of greens.

- ½ cup chopped red onion
- 3 tablespoons fresh lime juice (about 2 limes)
- 4 cups cubed seeded watermelon
- ¼ cup pitted kalamata olives
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh parsley
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh mint
- ½ cup (2 ounces) feta cheese, crumbled

1 Combine onion and juice in a medium bowl; let stand 10 minutes. Add watermelon, olives, parsley, and mint. Cover and chill 1 hour. Sprinkle with cheese. Yield: 12 servings (serving size: about ½ cup salad and about 1½ teaspoons cheese).

CALORIES 46 (47% from fat); FAT 2.4g (sat 0.9g, mono 1.3g, poly 0.2g); PROTEIN 1.2g; CARB 5.5g; FIBER 0.5g; CHOL 4mg; IRON 0.3mg; SODIUM 136mg; CALC 34mg



have to decide between food or medical care. But we know that Denver, like every other city, has working poor.”

The Birkys came up with the idea for SAME Café in 2003. The concept is simple: Help yourself to a drink and utensils. Tell the server what you want from the day’s menu. Try a tablespoon or a plateful. Like it? Ask for more. After you’ve eaten, drop payment into the donation box or exchange one hour of service per meal per person. “We wanted to make healthful, organic food available to everyone, but realized that if we had set prices there would always be someone who couldn’t afford to pay,” Brad explains. By eliminating prices, patrons who could afford to leave a little extra would do so, the Birkys figured, covering for those who couldn’t pay as much. And patrons who couldn’t afford to pay could offer much-needed volunteer service.

With a to-do list in hand, they crafted a business plan that included sending Brad to culinary school at Metropolitan State College of Denver. Brad had long considered training to become a chef, and launching SAME Café gave him the impetus to do so.

But banks did not line up to finance a restaurant without prices. “Everyone turned us down,” Brad recalls. The Birkys tapped into their savings, scoured Web sites for less-expensive used restaurant equipment, and enlisted friends and family to “sponsor a spatula” by





## Everybody eats

Restaurants without set prices or that barter food for work are a rarity. But Denise Cerreta, founder of One World Everybody Eats in Salt Lake City, believes so strongly in the concept that she's crafted a how-to manual (free on her Web site, [www.oneworldeverybodyeats.org](http://www.oneworldeverybodyeats.org)). Her five-year-old community kitchen dishes out 120 meals a day to professionals, students, and street people, all paying what they can.

Cerreta is consulting with potential One World restaurateurs in San Francisco; Durham, North Carolina; and Moab, Utah. "It's our vision to help people create a similar restaurant in every city," says Cerreta.



## Southwestern Salsa

- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup fresh lime juice (about 2 limes)
- 3 tablespoons extravirgin olive oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups fresh corn kernels (about 3 ears corn)
- 1 cup grape tomatoes, halved
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup chopped fresh cilantro
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup chopped red onion
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup canned diced tomatoes and green chiles, drained
- 1 (15-ounce) can black beans, rinsed and drained

1 Combine first 4 ingredients in a medium bowl; stir with a whisk. Add corn and remaining ingredients; toss well. Cover and chill 1 hour. Yield: 12 servings (serving size: about  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup).

CALORIES 78 (47% from fat); FAT 4.1g (sat 0.6g, mono 2.8g, poly 0.5g); PROTEIN 2.1g; CARB 11.2g; FIBER 2.4g; CHOL 0mg; IRON 0.5mg; SODIUM 186mg; CALC 14mg

making a donation. After numerous interviews with skeptical landlords, they leased a tiny storefront on one of Denver's transitional avenues and opened their doors in October 2006, hoping anyone hungry would walk in.

Nearly two years later, the café is busy serving lunch Tuesday through Friday, and lunch and dinner on Saturdays. Menus change daily and typically feature two salads, two soups or chilis, two pizzas or wraps, and a dessert. Every dish is made from scratch and nearly 100 percent organic.

"We try to buy foods that are in season, at the height of their freshness, and locally grown whenever possible," says Brad. "We also keep costs low by purchasing only what we need and eliminating waste whenever possible." The café's flexible-portion policy, which allows people to order as much—or as little—as they want also minimizes waste. The Birkys even struck a deal with a





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nearby elementary school to use produce from the students' organic garden. Careful purchasing, resource management, and keeping overhead low through the use of volunteers help the Birkys stay on top of their expenses. They also have nonprofit status, which allows them to apply for grants; if those come through, Brad will be able to draw a full-time wage from the café. For now, though, he continues his work as a computer consultant, while Libby teaches full-time.

## Warm welcome and good food

SAME Café's patrons know that they can enjoy the creative cuisine in a cheerful setting. Every afternoon regulars trickle in, filling the seven tables: A woman and her priest, for example, and a couple of college students. Retirees Bob and Iris Goodrich drop by almost daily. Sometimes they pay cash; more often Bob applies his handyman skills after the restaurant closes for the evening.

"Before this, we ate burgers and salty food," Iris says.

"I do the work, and she eats," Bob laughs. "It's a great deal."

Volunteer Brennan Harris, 13, donates an hour or two when he can. "Sometimes I help assemble pizzas," he says, quietly hunched over a sink of dirty dishes. Most volunteers bus tables, wash dishes, or sweep floors in exchange for a meal. Others who volunteer more regularly perform food prep under Brad's direction, following local health department regulations.

Two women checking out a nearby boutique wander in. After Brad gives them the lowdown, they split a spinach salad and a pizza. "I've never heard of a restaurant that lets you pay what you want," says Michelle Pietras, visiting from Chicago. "But this place smelled so great, we had to give it a try," she adds while stuffing \$12 into the donation box.

About 65 percent of diners pay for their meals, while the rest trade work for food. That helps the Birkys stay afloat. And, for now, it's enough. "We know Denver isn't the only town with needs like this. Every city has the working poor," says Brad. "We're just out to quietly change the world, one meal at a time."