

Pay what you can ... or pay it forward

Café 180 turns around the restaurant business

By **PETER JONES**

From a distance, Café 180 looks like a lot of other fast-casual restaurants that line South Broadway. It shares a building with Starbucks – who doesn't? – and boasts a stylish logo and a welcoming décor of green and purple.

During the busy lunch hour, a steady queue of customers lines up to order a quick, but healthily high-quality meal. When the flatbread pizza or apple walnut salad is brought to the table a few minutes later, the food is tastefully served on square plates of white china with grapes or orange slices for good measure.

What's more, the menu gives new meaning to "reasonably priced." Customers pay what they want. Those who cannot pay at all help out in the kitchen.

True to its name, this nonprofit bistro at 3315 S. Broadway in Englewood has truly pulled a 180 on the conventions of restaurant management. In an industry known for challenging profit margins and toil, Café 180 has turned the playbook on its head by becoming a sort of "restaurant mission," a self-sustaining and quality-minded eatery for everyone – business people, the rich, middle class, the elderly, poor and homeless.

Inspired by SAME Café in central Denver, Cathy Matthews co-founded Café 180 two years ago, forging a new kind of business that has blurred the lines between charity and brasserie. Matthews says by operating as a working restaurant for anyone, the café can afford to feed everyone.

"The goal is to get people from different walks of life to feel comfortable in this space because the only way we can survive on this business model is having paying customers," said Matthews, a full-time volunteer. "Some people pay what they typically pay and other people are volunteering in exchange for meals. Some people will come in deliberately and drop \$100."

About 20 percent of Café 180's customers fall into that wide-ranging "pay it forward" category while another 50 percent pays a more typical lunch bill. The final 30 percent help out in the kitchen, bussing tables, cleaning windows or even standing guard over the Café 180 sidewalk sign. The restaurant's kitchen has even been the beneficiary of court-ordered community-service workers.

Café de difference

Although Café 180's lunch-only hours serve as many as 75 meals a day, the nonprofit's mission – coupled with its decidedly pleasant décor and menu – have confused and even scared off some potential customers.

"Most of the people who walk in here are surprised," said Matthews. "We've had a couple of people walk in and you can just tell they are completely perplexed."

The City of Englewood and local business community did not know quite what to make of the unusual concept either when Café 180 de-



Cathy Matthews opened Englewood's Café 180 two years ago as a fast-casual restaurant for everyone. Customers pay what they can, give a little bit more or work off their meal in the kitchen.

Photos by Peter Jones

buted in August 2010.

"They were kind of scared when we moved in," Matthews said. "They were worried about the people we were going to attract, whether it would really be beneficial to the property values, so our landlord kind of took a chance. Now the city loves us."

Members of the South Broadway Business Improvement District, a tax-supported entity created to improve and promote a mile of Englewood businesses, have also become some of Café 180's most loyal regulars.

"Café 180 is very close to my office, so I must have driven past this place 100 times before going inside," one reviewer wrote on the Yelp website. "I had heard of the concept, but honestly was a little nervous to try, just because I was thinking it would kinda have the soup-kitchen vibe. Boy, was I wrong."

According to Matthews, the restaurant also has a nonpartisan appeal.

"This is a concept that everyone appreciates on some level, whether you're a Republican and you really like the idea of handouts that somebody will actually work for – or you're a Democrat and you want the poor to be noticed. Food is just a vehicle to create some kind of social connection," she said.

Serving meals, changing lives

Café 180 has done more than redefine the "free lunch." It has become an important community resource for people in need. David Campos has volunteered at the eatery several times a week for the last year and a half while he has tried to find steady work and afford a place to live with his family.



The Campos family – Kim, Chelsea, Chyanne and David – eat at Café 180 several times a week. David helps bus tables to pay for the family's meals when he is not looking for work. Kim and her two daughters are currently living in Englewood's House of Hope homeless shelter for women and children.

"It's hard when you have two kids being homeless," he said of his wife and children who currently live in Englewood's House of Hope shelter. "When they told me about this place, I started coming and never stopped. My family eats here three to four times a week. This place has been awesome."

Even Chef Dirk Holmberg's life has taken a 180 since joining the café. After a period of homelessness in the late 1990s, the restaurant veteran was unemployed for years while struggling with an alcohol addiction. Two years ago as Holmberg slowly stabilized his life, he was hired as one of Café 180's two paid employees.

"It plays into my ability to work with the volunteers and the needy," he said of his personal background. "A lot of times these people get stuck in a rut where they're expecting a handout, but most of the time they're really willing to take a hand-up."

To keep food waste to a minimum, Holmberg's menu is appealing, but simple. For example, the Mediterranean salad is essentially the Mediterranean pita without the bread. Food donations are welcome, as long as they are in keeping with the actual needs of the café.

"We want quality," Matthews said. "We have a mission, but it's a very fine line because we run a restaurant."

As the holiday season continues – including Café 180's recent Thanksgiving Day feast – Matthews is hoping for continued support in food donations, monetary support and good old-fashioned consumerism.

"I think it can certainly be a sustainable business model," she said of the offbeat café. "I think that might be the wave of the future for a lot of nonprofits who are actually a self-sustaining business."



A picture is worth a thousand words. This one hangs on the wall at Café 180.



Randy Osterlund, who lives in nearby Section 8 housing, pays for his daily lunch at Englewood's Café 180 by manning the restaurant's sidewalk sign for a few hours. Those who cannot afford their meals are asked to help out around the café.