

THE PRINCETON PACKET

Eateries seek to aid needy, boost patronage

By Lauren Otis
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When Raoul Momo faced a loss of holiday business due to the poor economy at the Terra Momo Restaurant Group, which he runs with his brother Carlo, he did what any self-respecting restaurateur would do; he took lemons and made lemonade.

The Momos have enlisted the help of other Princeton restaurant owners for a holiday campaign called Princeton Restaurants Against Hunger (PRESTAH), which is intended to both boost area restaurant business and feed those in need by inspiring diners to celebrate the spirit of the holidays.

Participating restaurants will implement one of several charitable promotions, ultimately benefiting three local nonprofits: the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, HomeFront and The Crisis Ministry.

So far, restaurants that have signed up to participate in PRESTAH are: The Bent Spoon, Blue Point Grill and Witherspoon Grill run by Jack Morrison, Camillo's Café, Ichiban, JL Ivy, Main Street Euro-American Bistro & Bar, the Whole Earth Center, the Yankee Doodle Tap Room at the Nassau Inn, and the Momos' restaurants — Eno Terra, Mediterra and Teresa Caffè. The campaign's motto is: "Eat local, share local."

An initial contribution of seed money to the campaign was made by Stephen Shueh and Howard Alter of Roundview Capital in West Windsor. The goal of the campaign is to raise \$50,000 through sales and donations by the end of the month. Participating restaurants have pledged to donate a portion of their sales from operations on Sundays through Thursdays in December. Each participating restaurant is given the discretion to develop its own mechanism for raising donations.

"We are going to donate 10 percent of all gift certificates purchased for the month" to the PRESTAH cause, said John Marshall, co-owner of Main Street Euro-American Bistro in the Princeton Shopping Center. This matching gift is fitting, with gift certificates easily purchased and tracked, and becoming "the gift that gives twice," Mr. Marshall said.

"The long and short is we want people to stay out dining," Mr. Marshall said. Helping people feel good about dining out benefits everybody: food banks, diners, restaurants and those in need, Mr. Marshall said. "It's a benevolent time of year. You want to do something," he said.

The Momos' restaurants will donate 2 percent of sales for parties over five, to the three PRESTAH charities, Raoul Momo said.

In addition to its charitable mission, the campaign, which runs through the month of December, seeks to draw attention to the fact that diners' dollars go to support a large network of restaurant employees, including those who are economically vulnerable, said Mr. Momo.

Although Fridays and Saturdays are still busy at their restaurants, Mr. Momo said on other nights "we have seen a big drop off since the (financial) crash."

In a well-to-do community like Princeton “it’s not that people are canceling because they can’t afford it, they are not coming out because they don’t feel good about it,” Mr. Momo said.

Mr. Momo said the genesis of the campaign came when his friend Mr. Shueh, managing partner at Roundview Capital, said his firm was considering canceling its holiday party at one of the Momos’ restaurants because clients and staff didn’t feel a celebration was appropriate given the tough economic times.

”I was like, oh man, please don’t do this to me,” Mr. Momo said. He described how “our industry employs a very vulnerable group of people” to Mr. Shueh, Mr. Momo said, and out of their conversation the concept of PRESTAH emerged with Roundview Capital providing an initial donation to seed the campaign.

With tough economic times and soup kitchens and food banks receiving fewer donations at a peak time, Mr. Shueh said he and the Momos collectively were trying to find “some way to give to the community, while having the community involved and make it fun as well.”

The campaign benefits local charities, restaurants and the community itself, said Mr. Shueh, who noted he is a part owner of the restaurant Ichiban. “What better way to get people out,” than through such an effort, he said.

Not only did his conversation with Mr. Shueh result in the PRESTAH campaign, Mr. Momo said, but after telling Mr. Shueh that the holidays are a special time of year and celebrating them, along with generosity to those less fortunate, “is all a part of life,” Mr. Shueh decided to hold Roundview Capital’s holiday party after all.

”Roundview’s coming. It’s a smaller party but they’re coming out,” Mr. Momo said.