

Restaurants cook up new models for giving

Fundraising and volunteering have become essential ingredients for some restaurateurs



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San Francisco Business Times

Restaurants are moving beyond the tired model of big charity galas and celebrity chef endorsements by baking charity into their business models.

From growing chains such as Patxi’s Pizza, which aims to give nearly 1 percent of its revenue to nonprofits, to smaller shops such as Stones Throw and Commonwealth, restaurants across the city

are stepping up their dollar contributions and visibility within the philanthropic community.

“It’s not just about raising money anymore — it’s about raising awareness, too,” said [Ryan Cole](#), co-owner and general manager of Stones Throw, the Russian Hill restaurant, which holds “which holds charity dinners the last Monday of every month to support the S.F.-Marin Food Bank.

Unlike grand galas with \$500 dinners where many chefs donate their time to help, Stones Throw’s charity dinners, hosted by a new chef each month, cost \$75 per person, plus \$50 for wine pairing. All the funds raised go directly to nonprofits.

“You’d be surprised how many people want to give back, but don’t have the means,” he said. “Mostly anyone who is considering coming to our restaurant can come and spend \$75.”

Cole added that since the restaurant is closed on Mondays anyway, the business loses no time or money from holding the event.

“We work with food every day, we’re in a business where cash comes in fast and we’re lucky,” he said. “There are so many people who don’t have that option in this city. The extremes are so drastic. Even though we’re a small restaurant, if you have an opportunity, you might as well do something.”

Sense of responsibility

[Paul Ash](#), executive director of the S.F.-Marin Food Bank, said this sentiment has started resonating with more chefs and owners in the industry.

“Restaurants have always done a lot to support charities, like cooking great meals for expensive fundraisers, but there is something different going on now — charities are actually becoming a significant part of what they do,” he said, adding that the organization has seen a recent influx of restaurant workers volunteering. The Food Bank also has received significant contributions from a few restaurants in the city.

San Francisco’s Mission Chinese has been among the biggest contributors to the Food Bank, raising more than \$275,000 for the nonprofit since 2010. Co-owner [Anthony Myint](#) said that he got into the food industry with a goal of opening charitable restaurants. “I

stopped working my other full-time job and my wife and I took a salary from the pop-up and we committed all of the profit to local charities,” he said. “This was motivated by a sense of humility and as a way to create goodwill.”

Since then, Myint and his group have sought to raise money from a variety of other outlets, including the restaurant’s cookbook, which sends \$1 to charity for every book purchased. So far, about 20,000 copies have been sold.

Additionally, Myint has helped Linea Cafe set up a giving program that has raised around \$2,000 for a climate change organization called 350.org. He’s also trying to help other restaurants by setting up a charitable gift certificate platform called sharetable.org. That has raised about \$4,000 so far.

The benefits of running such a program are that the restaurant’s customers — as well as the staff — notice the goodwill. “It is great for staff to know that, while they’re doing their regular old service industry grunt work, they are also doing something good for the community.”

Building into the business model

Along with Myint, [Jason Fox](#), executive chef of San Francisco’s Commonwealth in the Mission District, built charity into the restaurant’s business model from the start by committing to donate \$10 from every tasting menu to a nonprofit. Since opening four years ago, the restaurant has raised \$230,000 for 30 charities.

“When we were working out our business plan, we had a vision of what we wanted the restaurant to be, and philanthropy was a big part of it for everyone involved,” Fox said.

Fox said the restaurant averages about \$6,000 a month in donations, with some months topping \$8,000. While that money would be straight profit for the restaurant every month, Fox said supporting the community is a priority. Causes range from food-related nonprofits to pancreatic cancer research, which affected a friend of the staff.

Such charitable programs could also help the restaurant retain staff and boost its image within the community, Fox said.

“There is a bit of a marketing aspect to it,” he added. “But it also just helps to let people know that there is goodwill out there.”