



Loaves and Fishes: A Miracle a Day

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By Josh Brokaw

There's this cool place to eat in Ithaca that you might not have heard about. It's got no reviews on Yelp or TripAdvisor. They don't take reservations. It's all first-come, first-served. Lots of their food is locally sourced, fresh produce and meat, that whole bit. The menu is prix fixe—whatever they make that day is what you get, so you know this place is cool. And the price for eating from this menu is zero dollars, every day.

There aren't many business school graduates who would pitch such a plan to investors, no matter how subversively hip the model sounds. And there aren't many restaurateurs anywhere who have achieved the longevity of Loaves and Fishes, the community kitchen that has served free meals at St. John's Episcopal Church on Cayuga Street since 1983.

The first-time diner at Loaves can come in a few minutes before meals are served and catch announcements of upcoming community events, hear the chef describe the dishes on the menu, and have a prayer before eating. Or come in sometime during the hour that meals are served and check the lovingly illustrated board for the menu before getting in line. Or just get in line—the volunteers will ask your preferences, dish by dish, as they fill your plate with hot food. Then back in the dining hall there's a table full of bread, pastries, peanut butter, salad, and sauces. Sometimes there are big chocolate chip cookies, gooey in the middle, sometimes a chocolate mousse pie, or trays full of little tarts and cupcakes and other unnamed sweets. Boutique berry-habañero hot sauces might be available in abundance for a week, and then Sriracha makes its return for those who like more heat in their vegan stir-fry or bacon mac 'n cheese. Take it easy on the coffee, because Gimme! delivers 15 pounds of their strong stuff per week, and it's a cause for hopping by the time it percolates down the urn into your mug.

Take a seat, any unused seat, and eat. Some days, depending on your tablemates, the conversations are minimal: a nod, a hello, "please pass the salt," a "have a nice day" when someone gets up to leave. Other days, a table might have more conversations going than any one person could follow at once. Someone is singing the praises of the poetess Adrienne Rich. There is talk of an upcoming rally, a concert, progress on the Commons reconstruction. Tales are told of a hitchhiking expedition to L.A. made in the '70s, years spent in South America, happenings in Ithaca from days gone by. Couples make plans for who's picking up which kid today. A phone rings and its owner tells his friend, "Yeah, I'm at Loaves for lunch. Come by." Sometimes you even hear people talking about a story printed in the newspaper. Lots of times, you'll hear diners singing the praises of the meal.

"I've been to a lot of free meals in different places," one young woman said, unprompted, one day at table. "And this one is definitely the best."

Feed the Belly, Feed the Soul

The Loaves mission was written like this 32 years ago: Loaves and Fishes is a "Christian ministry which provides a place for free meals, hospitality, companionship, and advocacy for those in need, regardless of their faith, beliefs, or circumstances."

“The people who came up with that mission were incredibly wise—it encompassed everything,” Culver said. “Thirty-two years later there’s nothing missing. We’ve never had to adjust the mission. We’ve been aware from Day One that if you’re needing and wanting a free meal, you probably have other unmet basic needs, and we want to do our best to help people meet those.”

In early days, Loaves had a cadre of reliable kitchen volunteers who might help someone by accompanying them to an appointment, directing them to different services or shelters, or helping somebody move. The organization has always had emergency funds for things like gas, bus passes, or doing laundry, and can usually round up a tent, or a blanket, or clothing, things a person in a life crisis might need.

In 2008, the advocacy mission was formalized under a coordinator. Today, the Advocacy Coordinator, J.R. Clairborne schedules local social service agencies to staff a table on a regular basis “to connect agencies with people.” Some regular tablers include Cornell law professors; the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which provides referrals for veterans; Catholic Charities; and a nurse from the county health department who provides basic health education and screenings. When the new health care exchange was rolled out, health care navigators who made themselves available during mealtimes signed up about 20 people.

Clairborne also oversees 17 volunteer advocates who, he explains, “listen well to our guests and offer compassionate, nonjudgmental support. Sometimes people just need to process their day. They might have a problem that has them confused, and talking with someone helps them find their own answers. And they can say ‘I need help with this,’ and we’re here to empower them.”

According to Culver, the fact that Loaves always needs volunteers allows them to serve people who need a place to work and something to do. Volunteers through the Learning Web and people in recovery often find themselves cooking at Loaves as a way of getting back into the workforce swing. And people from Challenge Industries, the Racker Center, and Unity House all serve as staffers.

More important than perhaps anything else, Culver says, is that Loaves and Fishes provides a place where people can have a conversation, where they can really be heard by others.

“So many of us take for granted that we have family, even extended family, or close friends that can help during a time of crisis. Many of our guests don’t have that for various reasons,” Culver said. “People might come in the door first for the meal, but fairly quickly they start to appreciate they’re also part of a sweet community. It ends up filling a huge void and an emptiness in so many.”

Culver has stories—that she could tell for days but can’t be printed—about people hitting bottom and starting their climb out of the hole when they find a meal at Loaves and Fishes. They find help getting an apartment, a job, a phone, or something as simple as a haircut. And Culver knows that she can’t account for the generosity of those who give their food, their money, their time to keep this communal kitchen going. She’s the only full-time employee, along with six part-timers who are paid—and then the whole host of volunteers, who help for a day, or a year, or a decade or two.

“Every time we serve a meal, it’s a miracle,” Culver said. “Every day.”