

Dine out and donate

Restaurant gift certificates that give back to the community

By Rachel Forrest

November 18, 2009 - There are plenty of strategies for getting diners through the restaurant door during a stumbling economy — coupons, specials, drink deals, restaurant owners dressed as lobsters handing out fliers.

And there are a few companies that offer gift certificates for half price. Buy one for \$25, get a certificate for \$50. Restaurant.com does it, TasteoftheSeacoast.com has them too. It's a deal for sure and it does get folks into the restaurants where they will probably just spend the money they saved on more food or cocktails anyway.

Well, now there's a new kid on the block in the gift certificate world and now that we're going into the season of giving, this one gives back to the tune of 30 percent of the cost of each certificate to a new charity in our community each month.

The new program and its Web site is called I Eat Locally (www.ieatlocally.com) and it's the "brainchild" of a local man who is very familiar with our restaurant scene. Nick Diana now works in Radici and Ri Ra but he's been a fixture on the restaurant staff scene for more than eight years. Now, he's using his connections and his desire to help the community with the gift of gift certificates to local restaurants. "Making Diners into Donors" is his clever tagline.

"I saw Restaurant.com was doing it and at Radici we were getting an enormous amount of gift certificates from them. I thought, 'This is not doing anything for the community really.' I just thought someone should give something back to the community and I decided to give a really large chunk to a charity."

That "chunk" is not a mere 10 percent, it's a whopping 30 percent. Here's how it works. Go the Web site (www.ieatlocally.com) and buy a certificate from one of our fine restaurants. Some are worth \$25 and cost \$12.50, some are worth \$15 and cost \$7.50. You can print out your certificate right then or e-mail it to a friend as a gift. Each month, 30 percent of the purchase price (\$3.75 for the \$12.50; \$2.25 from the \$7.50) goes to the chosen charity. This month it's **The Housing Partnership**, next month Cross Roads House, in January it's Seacoast Family Food Pantry and so on.

"It says right on the gift certificate what the money is going to," says Diana. "I chose local charities everyone would know and people on the e-mail list or who come to the site can also nominate future charities. They can encourage their friends to vote on the next charity. It's about continual community involvement. The people who buy the gift certificates should have a say in where the money is going."

Unlike some restaurant certificate programs, I Eat Locally doesn't require a time commitment from the restaurant. They can try it out and stop at any time. Right now each restaurant offers 25 certificates and Diana hopes to sell out all of them each month. Each certificate is good for one per visit, per party, per month and some restrictions apply.

"There's no contract for time commitment so it's easy for the restaurant to just say, 'I'll give it a try' and if it doesn't work out, I just take their name off. One of the things I try to tell the restaurants is if you're skeptical about coming on board, make the certificate for a day you're not busy. It's about making money but it's not all about making money. I'm going to get the normal reaction, 'What do I get out of this?' and the attitude changes when they find out 30 percent goes to a charity. It's all local. Local restaurants and local charities. They love it. These restaurants are giving back."

In addition, Diana features one restaurant each month, which you can only find out about if you're on the mailing list. Each month you might win a free \$50 gift certificate (Which comes right out of Nick Diana's pocket — it's not even donated) and if you sign up for the e-mail list, you can vote on the upcoming beneficiaries. He'll also be adding a restaurant review function and a calendar for upcoming foodie events along with some other great features. He's also moving into Portland and signing up some restaurants there beginning in January with that month's beneficiary, Wayside Soup Kitchen and Food Rescue, and might move the idea to other cities but for right now, it's all about Portsmouth.

"I want to make sure this model works. It's about the charities. I'm local. I work in restaurants. I get it."

Go to www.ieatlocally.com to buy certificates and to sign up if you are a restaurant owner who wants to help the cause.