





SCENES FROM
BIG BIG TABLE



PAY WHAT YOU CAN

THESE SPECIAL EATERIES HAVE TAKEN A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO CARING FOR THEIR COMMUNITIES. HERE'S HOW THEY DO IT.

by Krista White
portrait by Tash Davrados

Picture this: you walk into a cafe in your neighborhood, where all the staff knows you by name. They're serving a hot lunch from their rotating menu and likely have something vegan on offer. When you check out, you're asked, "How would you like to participate today?" That's what it's like at Big Big Table, one of a growing number of community cafes that employs a pay-what-you-can model. (Big Big Table uses the terminology *pay-as-you-can*, meaning participation can be either financial or contributory via goods or services.) Part of a nationwide network of 50 similar cafes called One World Everybody Eats, Big Big Table was founded by Mandy Bailey and opened in October 2021 on the lower west side of Buffalo, New York. Their goal is to help address food insecurity in their community by offering lunch to everyone, regardless of how much they can pay. Diners are presented with a sliding scale and they can also participate by volunteering their time or using one of the wooden tokens that other diners have pre-purchased. Big Big Table Director of Operations and Community Engagement Heather McCarthy told me that this model of feeding people (versus traditional options like food pantries and soup kitchens) can feel more accessible to all people who need something to eat. "If we can feed each other with the big three—dignity, kindness, and respect—we can make sure that everybody who needs something to eat can eat," Heather said via Google Meet, her passion apparent through the computer screen. Centering equity is key to making all of this work. The pay-what-you-can model requires a mindset shift; you can't slip them extra cash to get more cookies. "Cash can't be king if you want to serve everybody," Heather noted. Everyone gets the same meal, regardless of how they participate (financially or otherwise).

The community cafe is a noble mission in and of itself, but they also don't skimp on taste. In fact, Heather started working for Big Big Table because of their Chef Theresa Dempster's legendary soups. "I came in and got lunch and the soup was so good I was like, 'How else can I help?'" Heather said, laughing.

Laura Malm, the executive director of NEST (Nourish Everyone Sustainably Together) Cafe in Rock Island, Illinois, also expressed how impressed she's been with their food. Laura, who had front-of-house and nonprofit experience, didn't fully realize the extent of what they were asking of a chef. Between the rotating menu and finding ways to incorporate donated produce, NEST had challenges not faced by other restaurants. But their head chef, Elly Vos, was up for the task. "She has been magical," Laura said. Trained as a soul food chef, Elly creates different menus every day that include such dishes as smoked corned beef-and-potato hash, vegan watermelon poke, and zucchini pancakes. The menu is generally plant-forward and they always have vegetarian and gluten-free options, which are popular among folks who often don't have access to fresh, veggie-filled food.

Laura said one of the challenges of running a community cafe has been building the trust of a key demographic: folks who aren't necessarily unhoused but who live below the poverty line and who face food insecurity. These are often people with families. Laura said some people hear "pay-what-you-can" and think "soup kitchen," so she hopes that people will begin to realize that a pay-what-you-can restaurant is just a regular restaurant with a different payment structure. NEST is working with schools and other community organizations to get the word out. Another challenge? In the One World Everybody Eats model, you're running two businesses at once: a restaurant and a nonprofit. Laura recommended that people interested in this model bone up on both sides of the equation and suggests that they don't go it alone. It's likely there are people in your community doing this work around food insecurity and there's no need to reinvent the wheel when you could instead amplify each other's work, she said.

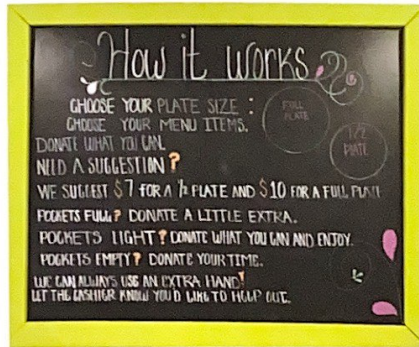
"HOW DO WE
FEED PEOPLE
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FINANCIALLY?"

TELLY JUSTICE, HAGS

While Big Big Table and NEST Cafe are nonprofits, for-profit restaurants are also finding similar ways to engage with their communities. HAGS, one of the hottest new restaurants in New York City, offers pay-what-you-can Sunday dinners at its East Village location. Most days, they offer a tasting menu with the option of wine pairings. But on Sundays, the vibe at the chic restaurant, which is "by queer people for all people," transforms and they have a pay-what-you-can menu. It's become co-owners Telly Justice and Camille Lindsley's favorite night of the week. These community dinners were built into their business model, Telly told me. "The thing that was most significant to us was Sunday," she explained. "The whole idea of HAGS from seed phase was, 'How do we feed people free food every week and how do we sustain that financially?' So that's where the tasting menu fine dining concept came from." They could charge a little bit more during the week, and subsidize Sunday nights. Telly and Camille's advice for people looking to take up a pay-what-you-can model? "You have to start with wanting to do this. It has to come from a legitimate place of genuine care," Telly said. The rewards of engaging with the community far outweigh the logistical difficulties, and Telly said she would like to encourage all the restaurants on the block to take up this mantle so that everyone in the East Village could eventually get a free meal any day of the week. Unfortunately, they'll have to wait a while to have that HAGS Sunday dinner. Telly and Camille are not immune to the usual woes of running a restaurant and at press time HAGS was temporarily closed due to structural and plumbing issues. They will be doing pop-ups and collaborations until their highly anticipated reopening.

Other people in the food and beverage space have their own takes on the food insecurity issue. Another queer-owned establishment, Principles GI Coffee House in Gowanus, Brooklyn, run by Katie Bishop, offers pay-what-you-can drip coffee. Katie was inspired by a movement started in the late 1960s, when Vietnam War protesters opened egalitarian cafes near military bases to offer a space for increasingly disillusioned soldiers. Like others at the intersection of food and social justice, Katie, a veteran herself, is driven by sustainability and plans to reach zero coffee cup waste by 2023, as she told *The New York Times* in a recent story. And similar to Big Big Table's token system, Bonbon Lakay in Park Slope, Brooklyn, started a pay-it-forward board over the summer of 2022, allowing people to pre-pay for others' meals. Establishments like these speak to Telly and Camille's desire to see everyone pitching in. Food is one of the great equalizing forces—everyone has to eat. As the restaurant industry reforms itself, it has an opportunity to transform its relationship with the communities it serves.

NEST CAFE
BLACKBOARD



ELLY VOS,
GRECIA LOPEZ
& LAURA MAHN
OF NEST CAFE



HAGS FRONT
DOOR. PHOTO
BY SETH CAPLAN



TELLY JUSTICE & CAMILLE
LINDSLEY OF HAGS.
PHOTO BY SETH CAPLAN



HEATHER MCCARTHY.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL NIMAN



PASTA SALAD AT BIG BIG TABLE.
PHOTO BY RACHEL WOOD