

To Pay or Not to Pay...

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Deal alert! There is such a thing as a free lunch after all, and it's not just at Occupy Wall Street.

All month you can head to the Santorini Grill in Williamsburg and pay nothing at all. Or a whole lot. Or something in between.

"Pay what you feel the food is worth," says a sign outside.

Gimmick, interesting experiment, craziness: Call it what you want, but for cheapskates like me, pay-what-you-want is a no-brainer. Because, really, what do I want to pay? Nothing. I'll take the freebie, thank you very much.

I guess not everyone is this way, because there are a number of pay-what-you-want businesses and institutions in this ridiculously expensive city, most notably museums and yoga studios.

Some take the passive-aggressive stance of telling us the "suggested" donation.

No one does this better than the esteemed Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has continually increased its "suggested" donation to the point where it's now a galling \$25.

And the Met, it's sneaky. If you try to buy a ticket online, you have only one option: the full "suggested" price.

My best friend went to the Met during the Alexander McQueen exhibit (before the insanity of the last week) and paid virtually nothing. The woman manning the ticket booth openly admonished him, pointing out the suggested price.

I tested the museum this week by pulling out my wrinkled dollar bills -- all three of them. I didn't get a "thank you" or a "you're welcome" in response, but there were no snide comments, either.

If you're wondering what the average donation is at the Met, you're out of luck: The institution's communications people don't divulge such personal information.

Harold Holzer, senior vice president of external affairs, did say that since the museum upped its "suggested" donation the average offering has "hearteningly" gone up \$2 to \$3, depending on the day.

Mr. Holzer also noted that those people who tend to pay the full amount are tourists. (Read: New Yorkers are cheap.)

A survey of 10 people at the Met this week found that about half paid the full suggested price. And those who paid in full tended to be tourists. But they didn't always pay so much knowingly.

"Oh, it's just suggested?" remarked Julia Renate, a 26-year-old visiting from Germany with her mother. "Oh, we didn't even know."

The Brooklyn Museum of Art -- which just last month increased its "suggested" price to \$12 from \$10 -- is a little more forthcoming with information. A museum spokeswoman disclosed that 65% of visitors donate the full amount.

As far as restaurants go, pay-as-you-go is not unprecedented. Tierra Sana, a vegetarian place in Forest Hills, used to offer patrons a pay-what-you-want option once a week. It closed.

Around the U.S., the most successful such ventures are nonprofits. One World Cafe in Salt Lake City opened in 2003 as a pay-what-you-want cafe. Several years later, founder Denise Cerreta created a nonprofit that has helped launch more than a dozen similar operations, including one in Red Bank, N.J., opened last month by rocker Jon Bon Jovi.

And Panera (yes, that Panera) created a nonprofit that now has three pay-what-you-want locations, in Detroit, Portland and St. Louis.

Ron Shaich, founder of Panera, gushed about the experiment in a recent interview and said there are plans to open more. The nonprofit carries the same menu and includes suggested prices, but customers pay in a donation box rather than a cash register. He said the average person leaves about 80% of the retail price.

As much as he favors the concept, he stresses that for a for-profit business it is more difficult "because it introduces a third question into the discussion... 'What's the profit?'"

So what exactly is Paula Dourales, owner of the Santorini Grill, thinking?

Well, she says her restaurant isn't doing so great. It's a neighborhood place with a core clientele, but business is fickle. So she figured, why not? She'll do it for a month and see how she fares. If it works, she may continue.

The concept doesn't apply to take-out or delivery (about 30% of her business) or drinks. And the restaurant doesn't list suggested prices. The menu is the same, except it says, "Pay As You Feel Menu."

"All my customers, the regulars, they know the prices and they leave more," she said. "They want to counter the ones who are leaving less."

I came alone and ordered a lot of food (to the point that I overheard the women at a nearby table commenting on my feast for one). A Greek salad, taramosalata spread with pita and Saganaki rounded out my meal.

"Extra pita," I asked, the waitress eyeballing me like I was a real freeloader.

When it came time to ask for the check, the waitress instructed me to fill in whatever amount I wanted. It was a guessing game of sorts.

By this time, the owner had asked me how my meal was and I started to melt. How could I leave a couple of crumpled bills with any conscious?

So I decided to make an educated guess, paying \$5 to \$6 for each of the items.

Whoops! Turns out I wouldn't be such a good candidate for "The Price Is Right." The salad was \$7 and the Saganaki \$12 (That imported cheese). So I had stiffed poor Santorini by about \$9.

I attribute the poor estimation to the fact that I was thinking this was a lunch menu and therefore prices and portions would be smaller, when in fact Santorini's lunch and dinner menus are the same.

The ladies next to me fared better, paying \$5 for their sandwiches, which are normally \$6. The menus are at the front for reference, Ms. Dourales informed me later, but none of us knew that.

So far, the experiment is working, by at least one count. Business is up, though it's only been about a week. "We had double the amount of people" over the weekend, she said.

In terms of pricing, she said it's been evening out.

Only one person, who appeared to be a tourist, didn't leave a dime.

But one young woman left a whopping \$80 for just two glasses of wine (which were priced at \$6 each), a calamari and an eggplant salad.

"I know now that people aren't going to abuse it," said Ms. Dourales. "And if I can pay

the bills and make a living on it and people are happy, I will not stop."

Outside the restaurant, a sign perhaps says it best: "The Bailout starts November 4."
