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BY: ZACHARY D. LYONS



Photo - Zachary D. Lyons
 Chef Steven Obranovich passing my (author Zach Lyons') finished steak, which came from Snug Valley Farm, through the kitchen window to the server.

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED RESTAURANT

Citizens of Hardwick, Vermont re-define economics and food by working together to create a community restaurant.

The small Vermont town of Hardwick seemed all but asleep as I wandered into it on the evening of Memorial Day. It was just after 7 p.m., and most of the shops were closed. I had been sent to Hardwick to find myself some dinner by my bed and breakfast host in nearby Greensboro, as that town lacked a restaurant.

In Hardwick, the options were few. The Chinese restaurant barely looked open, let alone welcoming. The Village Diner was getting ready to close up shop, and after a long day on the road, it wasn't really the food I was looking for anyway. Then I walked up to Claire's. Its sign read, "Local Ingredients. Open to the World," and indeed, amidst its sleepy surroundings, it looked like the world was in there.

Claire's Restaurant had just opened two days earlier, with the stated mission:

- To offer expertly prepared and affordable meals.
- Utilizing the best local ingredients direct from the growers and artisans.
- In a comfortable and convivial setting with attentive service.
- Supporting local farming and the rural economy.

It is named for the late local artist and host, Claire Fern, who "brought great food and great people together in Hardwick," said Linda Ramsdell, owner of Hardwick's Galaxy Bookshop, and one of four partners in the new restaurant. And in the restaurant's name lies an additional mission, to create a community-gathering place – a "third place," as Ramsdell put it.

"For a long time, I wanted a third place that was not home and not work," Ramsdell said. "I have been feeling the need for a restaurant for a long time. When my store has a reading, people ask, 'where can I eat?' Folks might want to come up from Montpelier, half an hour away, to go to the art house or a reading at the bookstore, and they would want to get dinner or a drink afterwards. They would want to make an evening of it. We had no place for them to go, so they might not come."

Well, they were certainly there on Memorial Day — from Montpelier and from the surrounding community and from as far away as Seattle. I was one of three patrons from Seattle that night.

Ramsdell, who greeted me, in what she said was her first, and hopefully last, night of hostessing, reviewed for me not only a menu filled with the products of local farmers, but she was able to point out many of them dining in the restaurant. She seated me next to two of them, Bruce Kaufman and Judy Jarvis, owners of Riverside Organic Farm. So I had to try Cream of Sunchoke and Caramelized Onion Soup, made from Riverside's produce. It came with bread baked by Patchwork, next door to Riverside, using grain Riverside had grown for the bakery right in the bakery's front yard. And it was all very good.

Chatting with Kaufman and Jarvis, I began to get a picture of how special Claire's was. They told me how the community financed the restaurant using "community supported restaurant" coupons. They pointed out other members of the community throughout the restaurant and introduced me to Nancy Nottermann of Snug Valley Farm, another neighbor of Riverside, and producer of the beef on the menu that night. Having ordered the chicken, I realized now that I was obligated to return the next night for a steak. A strong community can have that effect on people. ▶



Photo - Zachary D. Lyons

Chef Steven Obranovich and Christina Michelsen, two of Claire's Restaurant's four partners.

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Claire's was born of its community. In 2003, Ramsdell started planning the idea. She called an open meeting at her bookstore that September to explore the idea. Promoted by word of mouth, 55 people showed up to the meeting. The community agreed with Ramsdell. But it took almost five more years for Ramsdell's dream to come to fruition, and a lot of creativity.

To ensure its survival to serve the community, the restaurant became the collaboration of three separate entities. The Hardwick Restaurant Group was created to lease the restaurant space and build out the restaurant. Claire's Restaurant is the business entity that actually operates the restaurant. The Preservation Trust of Vermont, a nonprofit organization, maintains a stake in the restaurant's furnishings and equipment as a condition of the grant funds it provided to purchase them.

The Hardwick Restaurant Group is comprised of eight investors, all with ties to Hardwick, who put in anywhere from \$5,000 to \$150,000. The Restaurant Group pre-leased a space in the historic Bemis Building for 12 years, built out the space into a restaurant, and purchased furnishings and equipment.

"This allowed Claire's to open without a huge amount of debt," said Paul Bruhn, executive director of the Preservation Trust of Vermont. "With a restaurant space already equipped and furnished, those were expenses Claire's would not have to shoulder. It also meant that regardless of the ability of Claire's to succeed as a business over time, Hardwick would still have a space ready to house another restaurant."

"The Preservation Trust of Vermont (PTV) works throughout the state, helping communities save and use historic buildings, and revitalize downtowns," Bruhn said. "If you are going to have a downtown revitalization, you need to have a good restaurant and pub as a gathering place. Hardwick was struggling. Even the Town



Photo - Zachary D. Lyons

Salad Chef Charles Lee prepares the salad that author Zach Lyons enjoyed for dinner.

House was struggling for musical performances, because people didn't have a place to go before or after the show."

The Hardwick Restaurant Group connected with Housing Vermont and Lamoille County Housing, which were working to save the Bemis Block.

"The two housing agencies were restoring the building to provide affordable housing in the upper floors, said Bruhn, so PTV worked with the Restaurant Group to negotiate a long-term lease for the street-level space for the restaurant."

With contributions from two donors, PTV also purchased \$45,000 worth of equipment and furnishings for the Restaurant Group, but with a fascinating caveat. The PTV set a condition on its grant that ensured that if the Restaurant Group ceased business for any reason, the equipment and furnishings purchased with the grant would revert to the ownership of PTV.

"While, technically, these items are owned by the Restaurant Group, it is not theirs to sell," Bruhn said.

"The problem with many restaurants is when they open they go into debt buying equipment to build out the restaurant space," Bruhn said. "Then, laden with debt, it is harder for them to survive, and when they fail, their equipment gets sold off for 10 cents on the dollar, leaving the space devoid again of restaurant equipment and furnishings, the restaurateur broke and the community without a restaurant. By PTV maintaining a stake in the furnishings and equipment in the Hardwick restaurant project, they ensure that those furnishings and equipment are still available for another community restaurant, even if not still in Hardwick, thus fulfilling its mission to continue to work to revitalize Vermont communities."

Claire's, the business entity whose function is to operate the restaurant, raised \$115,000 for startup and initial operating expenses from four sources: 1) The four partners put in \$10,000. 2) The PTV provided \$15,000, earmarked to pay Claire's first year of rent. 3) \$40,000 was borrowed from eight community members. 4) 50 community members purchased "community supported restaurant" coupons of \$1,000 each raising \$50,000.

The "community supported restaurant" coupons are perhaps the most interesting component of Claire's financing package. The ▶



Photo - Zachary D. Lyons

Judy Jarvis & Bruce Kaufman from Riverside Organic Farm on either side of Nancy Nottermann from Snug Valley Ranch at Claire's Restaurant on Memorial Day.

concept is borrowed from the nationally popular community supported agriculture model. Members of the community purchased a CSR coupon for \$1,000 in cash or contribution of product worth \$1,000. This money is being repaid by Claire's with food at the restaurant. The coupon purchasers are entitled to \$25 worth of food for 10 monthly visits per year for four years - which totals \$1,000.

Like a CSA subscription, the CSR coupon purchasers shared in the risk of Claire's success or failure. Should Claire's close before a subscriber redeemed all of their coupon value, the subscriber would lose any unredeemed value. On the flip side, 50 members of the community will be coming to the restaurant regularly for four years, bringing family and friends. They have an incentive to talk Claire's up to other people to ensure its success.

While 47 of the CSR purchasers paid for their coupons with cash, three paid with product, explained Ramsdell. Vermont Glass Studio made wine glasses and table oil lamps in exchange for its coupon. Riverside Organic Farm and Bonnieview Farm, a sheep cheese and dairy producer, are providing their products to the kitchen.

"Besides sharing risk with Claire's, it is up to CSR purchasers to be sure to actually use their coupon each month, said Ramsdell. They can choose which 10 months out of the year they wish to use it (the year runs from June to May), but if they fail to use all 10 credits during a given year, they lose the unused credits for that year. The coupons are also transferable, meaning a subscriber can allow a cat-sitter or a friend having a birthday to use any given month's credit simply by letting them use their coupon card."

"Putting Claire's financing structure together took a lot of time and networking," said Michelsen, an attorney, musician and a partner in Claire's. "The key, was that the four partners were part of a community where people knew them, trusted them, and believed that they would deliver.

"The result of all of this smart, community-minded business planning is that the joint (Claire's) has been hopping since it opened," Michelsen said. "People come to see people they know, and the food is great. Many are shocked when I ask if they have a reservation. We are not just seeing locals, but also out-of-towners."

"The restaurant has only picked up in flair, atmosphere and energy since it opened. It is somewhere you want to be," said Andrew Meyer, president and founder of Vermont Natural Coatings and co-owner of Vermont Soy. "The more people talk about what is going on at Claire's, the more it drives the mission of developing a healthy, local food system for Hardwick. A place for neighbors to meet and talk over good food is only going to help that development."

Nancy Nottermann, who owns Snug Valley Farm with her husband, Helm, and son Ben, has eaten at Claire's seven times in its first two months. Snug Valley, a CSR coupon purchaser, raises beef that Claire's features on its menu.

"I do have faith in the restaurant," Nottermann said. "They are packed almost every night. We always know people who are there. It's not stuffy. You can drift around. We have introduced a lot of people to it - even people from Manhattan."

Nottermann was part of that original group that met at the bookstore five years ago.

"It is a nice thing now for me to say, 'I'm not cooking tonight,' and we can go out nearby and get a good meal," she said, adding with a chuckle, "I just can't wait until I can get one of my own burgers there."

It is difficult to achieve community food security without a sense of community. And it is difficult to achieve a sense of community without a gathering place. A natural place for community to gather is over food and drink, such as in a restaurant. While Hardwick, Vermont and its surrounding communities may be especially endowed with a strong sense of community, the Claire's model has now been created and is one that can be replicated anywhere. ■

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