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Unchain My Heart: A Restaurant Does the Right Thing and Rides Out the Recession

Mid-priced chain restaurants are the latest collateral victims of the money guys and gals who never would have deigned to set foot in one. Customers who used to dine out once a week are cutting back to once a month, if that, and chains that expanded too fast now tally their empty tables and wonder if they, or one of their competitors down the street, will blink first. This is not the kind of chicken they had in mind.

High-end restaurants took a high-profile hit first, but the bad news has trickled down -- except in a particular corner of a mini-mall in Santa Monica, California. No, this is not one more sad story about firings and closings and an entire generation of would-be actors with no waiter jobs to subsidize their art. This is a survivor's story, a tale of karma payback, because I'm starting to think that the only effective antidote to big bad news is small good news.

Six years ago, a group of secretaries and assistants who worked in a business park asked the owner of the little Italian restaurant across the street if he could come up with some cheaper dishes for them. Their bosses ate at Il Forno five days a week, but a secretary's salary didn't stretch that far.

So Joseph Suceveanu and his chef partner, Domenico Salvatore, created the Power Lunch, a choice of ten pastas and salads, \$5 apiece, cash and carry only, which instantly became about twenty percent of the restaurant's lunch business.

Flash-forward: Frugal is the new black, and not even the lawyers and insurance executives who still have their jobs can afford to eat at Il Forno five days a week.

But everybody appreciates the power meals, which at \$6 are still a steal and are available for an hour before dinner service as well. And everybody appreciates the extra tables Joseph bought for the courtyard, so that they could eat their lunch outside on a nice day, which almost all of them are, instead of scurrying back to their desks. A favor remembered, a favor repaid: Loyal customers' power meals now make up sixty percent of Il Forno's lunch business, and have helped to keep it afloat during the recession.

Joseph has yet to fire a single one of his thirty-two employees, which is a good thing, since most of them have worked for him since he opened twenty-two years ago. "How can you fire a guy with two kids who you've known since before he was married?" he asks, not expecting an answer.

It would be a nice irony, you must admit, if one of the unexpected consequences of the recession was a resurgence of the mom'n'pop, a renaissance of site-specific casual dining, because the restaurateur who limits him or herself to a single restaurant, or even to a single city, has a better chance of being responsive to his customers than does a lowest-common-denominator chain. Joseph helped his customers, and in return his customers helped him. The Goliath chains that manage to survive might do well to study Il Forno's David-sized corporate model.