

Pay or not at the FoCo Café in Fort Collins

FoCo Café in north Fort Collins looks like most other eateries. Approaching the building I saw people eating on the patio. Inside, the clean restaurant has a sprinkling of tables with the kitchen viewable by the patrons.

The word unique is used a lot in the restaurant industry. In the case of FoCo Café, I think the title is warranted. It has all the trimmings of any restaurant, but lacks one thing — a cash register.

Surveyor
Columnist



**Bob
McDonnell**

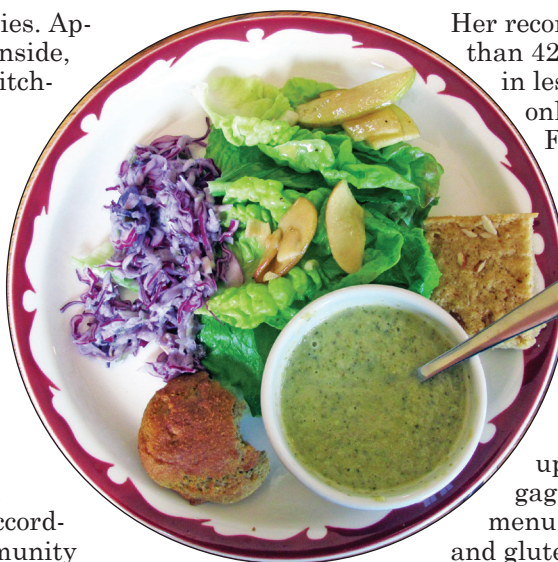
The brainchild of Jeff and Kathleen Baumgardner, the restaurant is set up as a nonprofit organization — the first of its kind in Fort Collins. There are no prices listed on menu items, patrons pay what they can for the food.

FoCo Café has been around since Thanksgiving of 2014. It was not started without a lot of thought and planning, according to the Baumgardners. They did community networking and fundraising before opening the doors at 225 Maple St. in Fort Collins.

Jeff said about 60 percent of the people who eat at FoCo pay for their meals. The other 40 percent can contribute their time or talent to gain a meal. A small, slotted wooden box on the counter accepts money. A keypad next to it allows people to pay by credit card.

The restaurant's website, www.fococafe.org states, "If you have a little less, pay what you can. If your pockets are empty, participate in community with your time and talent in exchange for a mouth-watering meal."

"We are serving more meals than we ever imagined," Kathleen said.



Her records show as of the first part of September 2016 more than 42,000 meals had been served. That's a lot of people in less than two years, considering the restaurant is only open from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. from Monday through Friday.

The location on Maple Street was chosen purposefully, according to Kathleen. The old industrial building, built in 1913, once was an oil-distribution company and is strategically placed. A large number of people live and work in the vicinity, and many of the homeless population are in the area too. It is located between College Avenue and Meldrum Street, south of the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery.

The food at FoCo is good and healthy. Jeff serves up salads, soups, muffins and sweet treats, while engaging with the customers at the serving window. The menu choices rotate daily, always containing many vegan and gluten-free choices. Local, organic and sustainably-grown ingredients are used whenever possible. Jeff plated my fresh salad, asking if I wanted more.

The Baumgardners are aware of food waste, so they encourage people to take less at first and come back for seconds.

We enjoyed the meal, listening to a man play the guitar and harmonica as we ate. The people around us were from all walks of life. Some looked to be college students, some retirees and some who just wandered by.

FoCo Café lives by these values: Every human innately has dignity and should be treated as such; every duty, volunteer or otherwise, has value, participating in a community nourishes the soul and everyone deserves to eat nutritional food.

Both Jeff and Kathleen enjoy what they do. They envision other "pay what you can" restaurants in Northern Colorado. They hope to be an example to others to show it can happen.



Photos by Bob McDonnell

Above top: Soup, salad and muffins on a rotating basis are the mainstay of the FoCo Café's menu.

Above: Foco founder Jeff Baumgardner serves one of his health soups to Rhonda McDonnell.

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