

COMMUNITY

'Dine and dash' hurts restaurants



By Jeremy Kemp
Emerald Contributor

Some customers do it as a prank. Others do it just to get a free meal.

Campus-area restaurant owners say some of their customers turn out to be crooks. Restaurant owners call the crime "dine-and-dash." Police call it "theft of service."

Whatever you call it, it's a crime police say has caused the price of retail services to rise by an estimated 5 percent.

Customers who eat then leave without picking up the tab often leave the restaurant's owner in a touchy situation.

"It really puts us in a bind," said Tim Wolfe, a three-year employee of Bubba's Place, 1248 Alder St. "We call the police, but they can't do anything about it unless they see it. What can we do?"

Wolfe addressed an issue on which many restaurant owners are unclear. What can be done when a customer leaves the bill for the owner?

"We had this one guy, he was dressed a little on the ragged side, who said he didn't have enough money to pay for his meal," Wolfe said. "He and his friends ordered a lot of food and beer. We kept his social security card — he finally did come back and pay a few days later."

On another occasion, an employee at Bubba's Place followed two thieves to a local fraternity house.

"Our guy followed them right up to the door," Wolfe said. "He didn't go in, he just shouted and made a lot of noise saying 'You didn't pay your bill at Bubba's Place!' over and over again until they came out and paid."

Other local restaurant workers tell sadder tales.

"Two ladies came in and ate a lot," said Chiu Yee Lee, a manager at China Blue Restaurant, 879 East 13th St. "Their bill was over \$20. One pretended to go to the bathroom and left. The other waited until no one was at the register, then left."

On another occasion, Chiu was simply robbed of money by a customer.

The boy seemed innocent enough.

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He asked the Chinese waitress for a glass of water to fight the summer heat. When she went to the back of the restaurant he went to every empty table and shoved the tips into his pocket.

"I called the police," said Chiu. "They came and questioned the boy, he was only 16. When they asked me if I wanted him to go to jail, I said 'no.'"

Another customer was almost finished with a meal when she complained about a hair on her plate and threatened not to pay for the meal, according to Chiu.

"We are smart. I showed her that the hair in her food was brown," said Chiu with a twinkle in her eye. Chiu's restaurant employs a Chinese cook and Chinese waitresses, all with black hair.

Chiu said she is cheated by these food thieves about once every two months.

Lyon's Restaurant, 1933 Franklin Blvd., is hit more often.

"We have dashers come here and leave without paying just about every weekend," said Donni LaGrone, a server at the 24-hour restaurant.

"They usually come during the graveyard shift," she said. "We can spot them most of the time. They look suspicious when they come in. Some of them even ask for a table by the door."

LaGrone identified one man to police in a theft of services case.

"The guy sat at the counter, he was well dressed," she said. "When he left without paying, another customer followed him and called us from the other side of campus. We called the police and pressed charges."

According to Eugene police, prosecution is a rarity in cases involving theft of services.

"We receive two or three calls a week concerning theft of service at restaurants," said Beverly Collins, public education officer for Eugene police.

"I suspect it happens way more often than it's reported," she said. "Some restaurant owners feel that it's a monumental hassle to go to court and prosecute the thieves."

When the thieves are brought to justice, they could face stiff fines.

For thefts of less than \$50, Collins says that maximum punishment is a \$500 fine and 30 days in jail.

If the crook manages to get away with a meal worth more than \$50, then he can expect to pay \$1000 and spend up to six months in jail.

Collins estimates that 95 percent of all people that dine-and-dash have the money to pay for the meal.

What actions do police suggest to prevent this crime?

Owners need to train new workers to be aware of store procedures in case a customer runs and should always staff their restaurants with enough workers to ensure security.

Police say that restaurant workers should never chase thieves outside the building — that may lead to possible injury and lawsuits.

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