

Instant cafe

With a clever line and a Ulysses S. Grant, you can win yourself a ready-made restaurant

by Inga Sorensen

Feeling crafty? Got 50 bucks? Looking for an interesting career? How about a new life?

If you find yourself nodding affirmatively, you may want to consider Robert Lowe's invite.

Lowe, the owner of San Francisco's Korso Cafe, says he's ready to reward a little ingenuity in a big way.

He's launched the Korso Cafe Dream Restaurant Contest. The winner receives, well, the Korso Cafe. All it takes is \$50 and a clever essay outlining a nifty concept for what the South of Market haunt could evolve into.

"If you could forget about the red tape of owning a restaurant and just focus on the fun, what comes to mind?" ask contest promotional materials. "What would the decor look like? What would it feel like? Now's your chance to do it your way! Take a moment to imagine the possibilities, and ask yourself, 'What would I do?'"

Come up with a snappy idea, send in your green, and you may be the one to find out. Nab the big prize and you get the whole shebang—everything from the stereo to the furniture to the full kitchen to the lease, which runs to 2007.

According to Lowe, Korso Cafe grossed more than \$200,000 last year. The fully equipped restaurant is approximately 2,400 square feet, seats 60-plus, and is zoned for beer and wine, outdoor seating and acoustic music.

"After a few years of doing this, my [business] partner and I have decided to move on," explains the spirited Lowe, 29, who along with Ursula Jost opened the pasta/sandwich shop three years ago. "We've had a successful go of it, but we're now a little tired."

Lowe admits he hadn't even worked in a restaurant prior to owning one.

"But Ursula did have an extensive background in the food and wine industry," he says.

According to Lowe, Switzerland native Jost, also 29, had worked in Michelin-starred restaurants to casual tea rooms before joining forces with him to establish Korso Cafe.

But now the vibrant duo say they are hungry for new challenges.

"We first tried to sell Korso, but we were really put off by the types of people we were dealing with—rude—as well as the process," explains Lowe, who was a business and economics major at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

"It was a very unappealing experience," says Lowe.

So the two decided to scrap that conventional plan for this *Spitfire Grillish* formula, which he hopes will attract inspired and creative contestants as opposed to stodgy suits.

"There are people out there who may have lots of desire and imagination but not the capital to start something," he says. "This is an opportunity for those people. I've had opportunities in my life, and I like to be able to do that for others."

A desire which seems to be his nature. Lowe has vowed to donate at least \$5,000 from his entry fees to Project Open Hand, a San Francisco group that prepares and delivers food to people with HIV and AIDS. Since April 1996, Korso Cafe has made as many as four donations each month to supplement Project Open Hand's nutritional services.

According to Lowe, Korso Cafe draws a large queer clientele.

"Not that that's hard in San Francisco," he laughs, "but I think we do get even more gay and lesbian people here because of our location."

Situated at Bryant between Ninth and 10th streets, Korso Cafe is a skip away from the where the famous Dore Alley (i.e. leather) festival is held. Gay bars, most notably the Eagle, are nearby.

Lowe says he's received "under one thousand" entries thus far. "But there are some interesting ideas," he says. Among them a cyber cafe, an acoustic jazz club, even a proposal to transform the cafe into a site housing a juvenile outreach program.



Robert Lowe and his dream restaurant, the Korso Cafe

"That sounds like a cool idea," he chirps.

And since the contest runs through July 31, there's still time to get more ideas into the hopper. (The top 25 applicants will be interviewed by a panel of judges representing the city's entertainment, media and restaurant industries. A winner will then be selected.)

Entries will be judged equally on the "basis of originality, appeal of concept and enthusiasm." The competition is open to anyone 18 and older.

Essays should be no longer than 500 words, and typed or printed neatly on an 8 1/2-by-11-inch piece of paper. Include your name, complete address, telephone number and confirmation that you are 18 or older.

Mail the essay and a \$50 check or money order, payable to Korso Cafe, to: San Francisco Dream Restaurant, PO Box 41-1406, San Francisco, CA 94141.

Entries must be postmarked no later than July 31. For further details, call (415) 522-8787 or visit the cafe's Web site (www.korso.com).



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