

During the course of a week in October, business at Northeast Portland's Counter Culture restaurant plunged to its nadir. A 45-minute wait quickly dissolved into a spare two or three tables a night. And a No on 9 Campaign fund-raiser appeared to be the vegan restaurant's farewell dinner.

"Other restaurant owners were experiencing the same thing, but we weren't prepared for it," chef-owner Matthew Melendez recalls. "After a few weeks of dead business, it didn't take a math scientist to see that we were in trouble."

But Counter Culture's employees rallied, suggesting the restaurant turn to its customers and ask for help. With nothing to lose, the restaurant sent out an electronic SOS to its e-mail list. In the end, the response was so overwhelming, October ended up being the company's second best month of the year.

"It was a Jimmy Stewart *It's a Wonderful Life* experience," Melendez acknowledges. "Having survived the winter with the support of our terrific customers, we decided that the best way to show our gratitude was simply to give something back."

Inspired by October's fund-raiser, Counter Culture will donate the proceeds from each Sunday evening in April and May to one of nine charitable organizations chosen by its customers.

"Our motivator for getting into the restaurant business has never been financial," partner Eric Blegen notes. "So, it makes us feel good to support these organizations."

Counter Culture asked customers to suggest nonprofits that promote animal rights, ecological sustainability or cultural diversity. Six have been scheduled so far. The remaining three will be announced later this month.

The restaurant hopes the fund-raising dinners will showcase its spring menu. The new bill of fare continues to feature original items all made on site from scratch. Dishes range from an appetizer of grilled radicchio with herbed tofu cream cheese to entrées of potato chana curry and nasi goreng, among others.

"If you're a vegan, you don't have to ask about the menu," Blegen says with pride. "You can eat anything."

That's a big deal to those who often must seek out footnotes in a menu to find a vegetarian item, these two say. Because Counter Culture is fully vegan, vegetarians don't have to worry

CHARITY A LA CARTE

Vegan restaurateurs break bread with community nonprofits

by Timothy Krause

about kitchen procedures, such as separate cutting boards for meat and produce.

Nothing comes into the restaurant that isn't plant-based. Thus, Counter Culture has become a "lowest common denominator" among those with special dietary needs. This includes not only vegetarians but also individuals seeking wheat-free, dairy-free or low-cholesterol foods.

Life partners as well as business partners, this gay couple admit they weren't always vegans but adopted the diet along with the restaurant. Blegen, 35, and Melendez, 33, indicate that, for them personally, veganism is a lifestyle that's easier on the planet and a more sustainable approach to cuisine.

"Everyone here is passionate about a vegan lifestyle, but for different reasons," Melendez says. "A couple are vegans because of animal rights. Another couple think it's healthier. Everyone's passionate, but everyone's really diverse."

Their customers are equally diverse. "Only about 40 to 50 percent of our customers are actually vegans," Melendez observes. "So, we keep our parents in mind when we're coming up with dishes. Like, would Eric's dad eat this? Yeah, I think he would."

Because of this, the men point out a significant shift in the context of their work. Public perception last summer was "it's vegan—and it's good."

Now, they say, the message is "it's good—and it's vegan." The quality of the cuisine has surpassed its novelty and practicality, but it's been a

long journey to this identity for Counter Culture. Melendez and his friend Lillian Gilliken opened the restaurant in January 1998 as a general takeout counter, offering only one vegan item. With a background in marketing and public relations, he initially was in charge of the office, while she managed the kitchen.

That is, until she left the business in late 1999. This was when Melendez and then-bookkeeper Blegen committed themselves to carving out a special niche in Portland's dining scene.

"We had a growing repertoire of vegan stuff. It seemed to be what we were doing best and what was attracting the most people," Melendez relates. "So, we decided to specialize in that because it was what we were most interested in as well. We knew we needed to do something that would make us more of a citywide destination."

And the more vegan the restaurant became, the more its business increased.

"It's just so satisfying to be doing what's an extension of who I am rather than something I'm

simply good at," Melendez remarks. "At the same time, it makes you a lot more vulnerable. It takes a lot of work to not take [criticism] personally. But it's really satisfying to be able to offer food grown locally, all prepared here. Being much more in touch with the seasons—there's something so much more grounding about that."

Still, criticism can be helpful feedback. Suggestions from patrons, whether regarding the food or the charitable organizations, have been taken to heart.

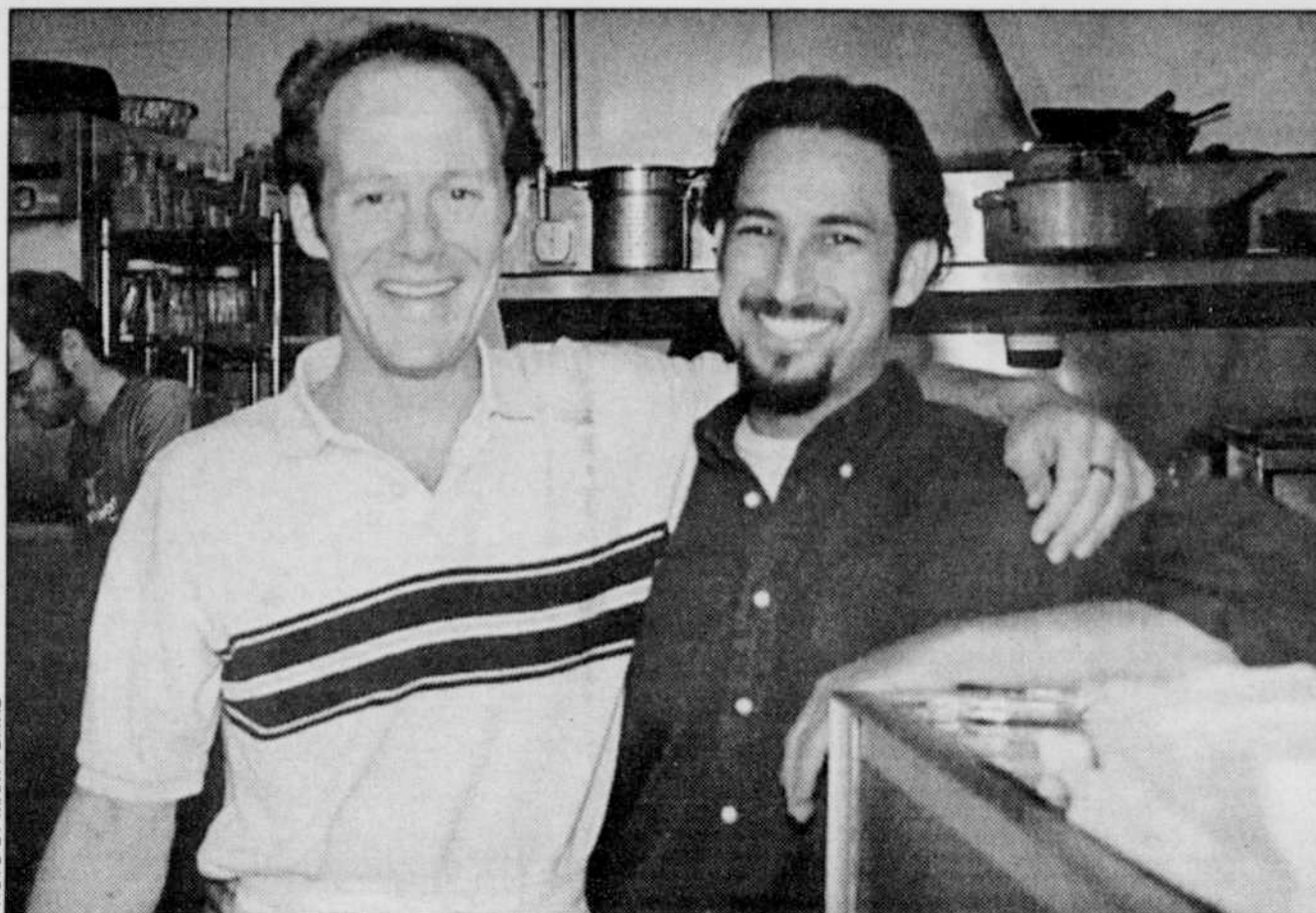
Moreover, Melendez remarks that honesty about mistakes has scored points with customers. "We've simplified a lot over the past year, focusing our energy and attention on what we do best," Blegen adds.

Although this couple say they plan simply to continue to consolidate existing operations, they aren't short of big ideas for the future. They receive inquiries that range from wedding catering to distributing desserts and baked goods.

One plan, however, seems most tangible and heartfelt. "One of our ideas always has been to eventually tie the restaurant into our original idea of an organic farm," describes Blegen, who envisions a plot in the Columbia Gorge that would supply fresh, organic herbs and produce.

Melendez says he foresees "tons of opportunities." That's pretty positive thinking for an establishment that was on its deathbed just six months ago. And the final chapter in this success story will be written this spring, when Counter Culture will be listed in the influential Zagat restaurant survey. [E]

Located at 3000 N.E. Killingsworth St., COUNTER CULTURE may be contacted at 503-247-3799. Hours, menus, recipes and information about cooking classes and veganism can be found online at www.counter-culture.com.



Eric Blegen and Matthew Melendez adopted the vegan diet along with the restaurant

GIVE AND BAKE

Every Sunday for the next two months, Counter Culture will donate dinner proceeds to the following organizations:

- April 8: U.S. Humane Society.
- April 15: KBOO-FM.
- April 22: Dove Lewis Emergency Animal Hospital.
- April 29: In Defense of Animals.
- May 6: Basic Rights Oregon.
- May 13, 20 and 27: To be announced.

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