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Business

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Trish Watlington, owner of The Red Door restaurant in Mission Hills, in her garden in Mount Helix.

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Farm to restaurant membership

The Red Door in Mission Hills selling subscriptions to further local-sourcing, sustainable principles

BY MICHELE PARENTE

The culinary buzz words "locally sourced" and "sustainable" are taking on a new meaning at The Red Door in Mission Hills, which is joining a small, but growing, national movement by farm-centric restaurants to sell annual memberships to customers.

Owner Trish Watlington said she's aiming to raise \$50,000, through one-year subscriptions for \$500 and three-year subscriptions for \$1,000, to create "an insiders dining club" that's loosely based on CSRs, or Community Supported Restaurants, around the country. The Red Door's program is believed to be the first of its kind in California.

Small, independent restaurants from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Ore., and points between have adopted the business model as a way to kickstart their eateries, make capital improvements or secure a reliable flow of cash in an industry where profit margins are notoriously challenging. In the past half decade or so, CSRs emerged as an outgrowth of the popular Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) trend, where consumers regularly buy fresh produce directly from growers.

For their money, Red Door customers will get everything from \$25 gift certificates to jam- and cheese-making classes, cocktail tastings,

SEE RED DOOR • C4



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Miguel Valdez, executive chef of The Red Door, elevates fresh garden produce. Carrots are grilled until sweet and caramelized.



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In the summer months, The Red Door's garden supplies about 70 percent of the restaurant's fresh produce.

RED DOOR

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farmers market shopping trips with executive chef Miguel Valdez, an annual members-only dinner, wine discounts and a tour of the 1/2-acre organic farm owned and tended by Watlington.

Unlike many CSRs, which used the financing to stay afloat, Watlington said the membership proceeds will mainly go toward supporting the initiative itself.

"We decided to diversify and expand by building a bigger restaurant community and giving people an experience rather than getting investors. We're just doing it in a way that's outside the box," Watlington said.

"People said we were going to be asked, 'Is the restaurant in trouble?' The restaurant is fine. This allows us to grow and ... hopefully bring along those who are food-centric culinary types who don't necessarily care if (what they eat) is from a sustainable farm community. Maybe this will help them get there."

Watlington's farm, on a former mustard field adjacent to her Mount Helix home, provides her 7-year-old Washington Street restaurant with 30 to 50 percent of the fruits and vegetables served each year; in the summer months it's about 70 percent but drops to around 20 percent in the winter. On the current menu, Valdez prepares dishes made with the garden's ball squash, arugula, Chioggia beets, blackberries, strawberries, tomatoes, squash blossoms, carrots, chard, tomatoes, sorrel, thyme and more. Soon, four young hens will start laying eggs that will be kitchen-bound.

The rest of her produce, along with her seafood, gelato, cheese and other ingredients, comes from small, like-minded, "ethically sourced" local purveyors. The membership program will bring these farmers and growers into direct contact with The Red Door's customers through classes and dinners.

This "will support the local food system ... and keep food dollars circulating in the San Diego community that grew the food in the first place," Watlington said.

Riley Davenport, publisher and executive editor of *Edible San Diego*, the unofficial bible of the region's farm-to-table community, called Watlington's plan bold, albeit in character with the restaurant's DNA.



MICHELE PARENTE U-T

Food waste is kept to a minimum at The Red Door. Override strawberries star in a sweet cobbler.

"The Red Door has been innovative from the beginning, and (Watlington) really is a standard bearer," Davenport said.

"Trish started her own farm and garden because she wanted to control the quality of what she got ... and that's pretty unique in this area. There are a lot of chefs who have herb gardens and small gardens, but she has really embraced the responsibility of ensuring the quality of her food."

That's the primary reason, Watlington said, she's moving away from beef. Her restaurant next door, The Wellington, is being transformed into Barby Red Door, which will feature craft cocktails made from herbs and syrups and produce from the farm.

'Business of pennies'

Though it may seem counter-intuitive, serving locally grown food — often from small, family-run operations — can be considerably more costly than sourcing it from national food companies. The expense is usually then passed onto the customer.

"Restaurants struggle to make a profit, it's a low-profit business, especially when you're spending more money on your food," Davenport said.

Even if The Red Door's CSR isn't a financial desperation ploy, it still offers an injection of stabilized funding, she said.

Watlington said having her own farm doesn't necessarily save her money.

"It's more costly to do what we're trying to do," she said. "It's not any less — growing organically, making everything from scratch, water is expensive, labor is expensive. It's costly to grow on a small scale, but it's worth it on so many levels."

Todd Duplechan, co-owner of Lenoir, a farm-

cused restaurant in Austin, Texas, agreed. As he and his wife were set to launch Lenoir five years ago, they funded it with what was supposed to be a one-time CSR program.

"This is a business of pennies, and the idea of being able to raise a bunch of money, we thought, 'why wouldn't we?' It's a good business move. Money is expensive to get," Duplechan said.

"We raised just enough money to open. It helped us finish out, open with capital and hopefully get us a little bit of a clientele. It jump-started a loyalty program, because before we opened, we were sure that nobody was coming."

But people did come, and after the inaugural 20 memberships expired, customers asked to re-up them. The CSR program was expanded to 32 people — one member for each of Lenoir's 32 seats — and has grown, and sold out, each year, financing various restaurant projects.

Today, it's a three-tiered plan (\$1,000, \$2,500 and \$5,000), and in exchange, customers get \$120 in food for every \$100 they spend, and preferential treatment.

"We're a very tiny place. They get first dibs on reservations, or we'll hold back tables if they forgot they had a reservation," Duplechan said.

Members also get invited to special dinners and a CSR cocktail party, but for the most part, the extra 20 percent is all the perk they need, he said.

"For most people, that's enough. They just like the restaurant."

The success of Lenoir's CSR program prompted two of Duplechan's restaurant industry buddies to approach him for his advice — and blessing.

"They said, 'hey, we're thinking about doing a CSR, but that's y'all's thing.' I told

them, 'That's not my thing. Some smart farmer came up with it a while ago; I just converted it to the restaurant business.'"

Grass roots

Memberships to The Red Door's CSR program are on sale until Aug. 30.

Susan McMillion, who frequents the restaurant about once a month, already got hers for \$500.

McMillion, owner of Bootstrap Kombucha, a San Diego company that brews the fermented beverage in small batches, said she wanted to get behind what would be a formalization of Watlington's efforts to coalesce San Diego's local food community.

"I think it's a great idea to actually show support and not just in words or money, but promoting sustainable organic food production and all the people around that," McMillion said.

"I've been involved in this world for a long time as a chef, and the more traction it can gain, the better. What Trish is doing is awesome. She puts her money where her mouth is."

The Bankers Hill resident said she's looking forward to participating in the monthly events on the CSR-member calendar.

"I'd be happy to go to a couple of tastings, but she's offering quite a bit for \$500. And I'm excited to tell other people to join up, too."

McMillion and Davenport cited Watlington's long-time involvement with the Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center, in National City, which offers environmental, gardening and healthy-eating cooking classes to students and their families.

"She's part of a larger movement that hasn't been corporatized, that's very grass roots and is growing with efforts like this," McMillion said.

Whether or not The Red Door's CSR will galvanize San Diegans to get more involved in farm-related activities, supporters think it can help the eatery thrive.

"I hope she does pull it off," Davenport said of Watlington. "It's very creative, and actually having a bit of a commitment to a restaurant and making sure it stays alive, that's a good thing."

"It makes you think about it maybe. How often do you see a restaurant curl up and die and you say, 'oh no, I loved that place.'"

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