

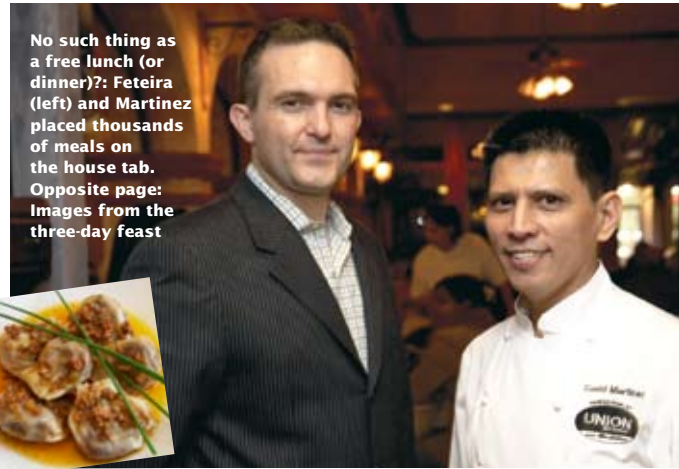
Compliments of the Chef

One upscale restaurant nourishes body and soul by feeding cash-strapped customers — for free

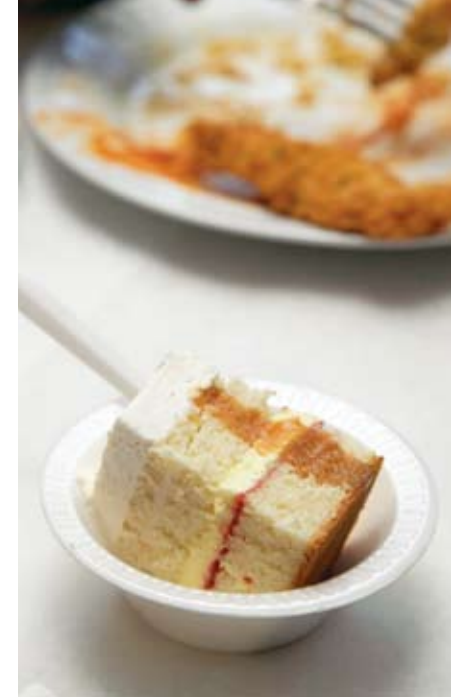
More than 3,000 free meals over three days. The profit margins must have been abysmal.

But obviously, Haverstraw's Union Restaurant & Bar Latino — named one of this magazine's seven "Best New Restaurants in the Hudson Valley" last fall — did not host its "We Care" buffet for the revenue. Manager Paulo Feteira and chef David Martinez created the event, a cost-free feast held over three evenings in February, to provide a pick-me-up to the financially down-and-out, whether they had been unemployed for years or laid off the previous day. "We didn't want to be a soup kitchen or anything like that," Feteira says. "We wanted to be a restaurant. We left the tablecloths on the table, we served everyone with our regular plates."

It wasn't long, however, before the restaurateurs were handing out plastic silverware to keep up with demand. Large families, single mothers, children from after-school programs — word of the complimentary meals spread quickly, with the number of diners tripling from 500 to 1,500 between the first day and the third. Volunteers showed up unannounced to help out the staff; area politicians bussed tables and washed dishes.



No such thing as a free lunch (or dinner)? Feteira (left) and Martinez placed thousands of meals on the house tab. Opposite page: Images from the three-day feast



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The management sent an E-mail to the restaurant's regular customers telling them to stay away for three days. "We were doing a party from them, not for them," Feteira says. "That was our way of saying thank you to our customers, by throwing a party from them to people in financial need. It's our way of giving back."

The buffet-style selection reflected Union's normally eclectic menu: The eatery served penne à la vodka; a paella dish with clams, mussels, and chorizo; grilled chicken with lemon sauce; Spanish rice; and Caesar salad; with lemon custard chocolate pudding, strawberry short cake, and vanilla genoise as the dessert options. "Some people would come twice," Feteira says. "They'd come when we opened at 3 p.m., and they'd come back in the evening, around 7:30."

Feteira hopes other Rockland restaurants join him in hosting a similar promotion next year. The manager says the outpouring of gratitude from diners — departing handshakes, letters of appreciation — was immense. "One boy came back the second day and gave me a drawing as a way of saying thank you," he says. "That brought tears to my eyes."

