

Same food, different price

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Right after college, in my first city neighborhood, there was this great restaurant I went to. The place was unusual in many ways, a labor of love by its eccentric proprietor. ([Neal Pollack profiled it way back when.](#)) But what impressed me most was the pricing structure: it was unlisted, unpredictable, and constantly changing. Not like some fancy place where the off-menu *prix fixe* is even grander than the standard one. No, this guy would serve you whatever rustic thing he had cooked-for-a-crowd that day and then name a price for your table when you were done, a price ranging from reasonable to free.

Rumor had it that this variable was determined largely on how rich a customer looked. I never confirmed this, but it certainly made sense given the radical manifesto on the wall—and the homeless people at the next table. As young adults with college degrees, cash poor but with the prospects and safety nets of comparative privilege, my friends and I had lively debates about what we should wear to that place. We were perhaps too new to town to recognize the rare gift of such a dining room: in a diverse and gentrifying neighborhood, people of widely varying means could all eat out affordably—not at a new \$\$\$ place and the old \$ one next door, but at the same place, rubbing shoulders and eating the same food.

I thought of this restaurant over the years whenever I encountered a business with a pay-what-you-want model (most famously, [Panera Cares](#)). Here it's the buyer, not the seller, determining the price, but with a similar goal: affordability for all, gathered in one place.

And I thought of it again this week when [I read about Everytable](#), a new takeout place in L.A. Everytable's model is to open locations in different neighborhoods—with identical food but at different prices. Now, fast food chains already vary prices from place to place, if [somewhat haphazardly](#). Everytable adds a focus on health, sustainability, low overhead, and value: good and affordable food for rich neighborhoods and poor ones alike.

There's a lot to admire here. Like the place in my old neighborhood, Everytable is promoting the notion that poor people should have access to the same good things the rest of us do—and subsidized by us. Unlike that place, it appears to have a sustainable and scalable business model. (The place I described above folded long ago; Panera Cares is gone, too.) It takes the subjectivity out—what should I charge, or pay?—and with it the strangeness of eating somewhere that's as much a social experiment as a restaurant.

Yet the idea of using a neighborhood as a proxy for class is also limiting in its imaginative scope. It takes as given that people will be segregated by class, that the people who come into one location will have more money than those at another. I wish we didn't see this separation as inevitable.

To be sure, this is a complicated problem, and not one a restaurant startup should be expected to tackle. Still, reading about Everytable makes me miss the place in my old neighborhood, a room that existed to show hospitality to a cross-section of a diverse and changing community, a destination for adventurous diners and an oasis for the poorest people on the block.