



Chef Giacomo Pasquini pours tomatoes into a tomato-crushing machine while preparing tomato sauce with the help of his customers from Vertical Restaurant in Toronto.

The Globe and Mail

## Free labour: Diners line up to volunteer at restaurants

SARAH ELTON

Published Tuesday, Sep. 25, 2012 01:40PM EDT

Last updated Wednesday, Sep. 26, 2012 11:18AM EDT

On Labour Day in Toronto's Financial District, a couple dozen people gathered on the patio of Vertical restaurant, not to enjoy a meal, but to help with the onerous task of canning tomatoes. There were hours of work to do, peeling, seeding, crushing and boiling – their job was to turn 30 cases of tomatoes into more than 300 jars of sauce. They were regulars of the restaurant who work on Bay Street, as well as food-industry types and chefs – people who wanted to spend their day off helping out. In return, they got a free lunch and a few jars to take home.

“It’s like a nice family,” executive chef Giacomo Pasquini says. He came up with the idea to host the culinary equivalent of a quilting bee four years ago, inspired by his family’s own traditions in Italy. The allure of helping with the canning has been so strong that some years he has had up to 50 pairs of willing hands.

It may seem surprising that people want to volunteer for a business rather than a charity or community group. Yet all along the food chain, people are being enamoured by the idea of connecting with the producers who grow the food and the chefs who prepare it.

Lauren Rathmell, greenhouse director for Montreal’s Lufa Farms, a for-profit urban farm that sells

vegetables by subscription to the public, has received about two dozen requests in the past year from people who would like to volunteer – though they do not actually have a volunteer program. “There are a lot of people who are passionate about what we are working toward with urban agriculture and sustainability,” Rathmell says.

The public was so interested in heading to Toronto’s Local Kitchen & Wine Bar to help make pasta on weekend afternoons that the restaurant has since turned the hands-on sessions, in which people learned to make noodles from scratch while preparing what is to be served to customers, into a revenue stream. It now charges \$100 for the privilege.

Volunteers also flock to the small, family-run organic farms that are beloved by the local food movement.

At The Cutting Veg, an organic farm based in Brampton, Ont., that runs a Community Supported Agriculture program, about seven volunteers work six days a week (some days there are as many as 18) and are integral to every aspect of the farm, from planting and weeding to harvesting. If they did not help, founder Daniel Hoffman says, the farm would not exist because, even with just three paid employees, the labour costs would be too high and the returns on sustainable farming too low. “It takes a community to run a farm,” he says.

In the United States, a widespread passion for local food production has led to what is called a crop mob, whereby a large group of people donate their time and muscle for one day to help a family farm, often with labour-intensive projects such as digging soil beds and erecting fences. This idea has become so popular that there are now more than 50 crop-mob chapters across the country organizing day-long work brigades.

While the idea of free labour sounds great from a business perspective, inviting volunteers to help out does have its challenges. “Sometimes, they don’t show up, and they are constantly changing so you have to re-teach the same stuff,” Hoffman says.

At Local Kitchen & Wine Bar, people were not skilled at forming the pasta shapes with the dough and this ate into the restaurant’s budget. “After 50 shapes, they’d get one right,” chef and owner Fabio Bondi says. “The first 50 would be scrap. Basically it just goes in the garbage.” Now that the restaurant is collecting a fee, the waste is no longer driving up costs.

There is also the question of food safety. In Halifax, volunteers for a for-profit fishers co-operative called Off the Hook manage distribution and some even take a food-handling course. At Vertical, where the public helps with canning, Pasquini says his staff keeps a close watch on the process to avoid mistakes.

So why do the volunteers come?

Typically, the time and effort people are offering far outweighs what they get in return (often a free lunch or, in the case of Off the Hook, fresh fish). But the volunteers believe so deeply in an alternative food system that they are willing to work to make it possible.

“It makes me feel really rich,” says Theresa Voorsluys, a mother of two young children who works in university administration and volunteers on Tuesday nights at Urban Digs, a Vancouver-area farm. “I could be paying lots of money to go to school and learn this stuff. I get a lot out of it.”

The Cutting Veg’s Hoffman finds the volunteer program at his farm rewarding. “One of our mottoes is, Growing people, growing veggies,” he says. “We touch people’s lives.”