

Student Life

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Panera Bread opens pay-as-you-wish franchise in Clayton

June 21, 2010 | [Eliza Adelson](#) Staff reporter

One of St. Louis's most popular local lunch destinations has a new business model. At one St. Louis Bread Co. in Clayton, customers now take as much as they need and pay what they can afford.

The bakery, which is known nationally as Panera and specializes in pastries, coffee and salads, is offering all items on the menu free of charge (although alongside a suggested donation). The concept isn't new for local cafes, but Panera Bread is the first national restaurant chain to implement this system.

The restaurant itself is run by the nonprofit Panera Foundation and goes by "Saint Louis Bread Company Cares Café." A sign at the entrance says: "Take what you need, leave your fair share." Customers who cannot pay the "suggested donation" are asked—though not required—to donate their time through a volunteer system. They are expected to volunteer an hour of their time to help clean the restaurant, and some volunteer even if they do pay for their food. The café is open from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days a week.

Though the idea seems novel, the location of the bakery—one of the more affluent locations in the area—is key to making the system work.

"We know that a lot of the people who work in Clayton have a little bit of extra money in their pocket, and they will hopefully step up and take some shared responsibility and give a little bit more for those that live and work in the area and are a little less fortunate," Don Hutcheson, Area Director of Panera Bread in St. Louis, said.

Although the program has just started, Hutcheson said that it has been successful, and that if it continues to grow the company is hoping to open two more community cafes by the end of the year.

The clientele at the café formerly consisted primarily of Clayton-area businesspeople, but since the implementation of the new program has attracted a diverse array of people from varying socio-economic backgrounds—made possible, according to Hutcheson, because of the location's proximity to the MetroLink.

Kate Konkel, a weekly volunteer at the café, approximates that one-third of the customers cannot pay, another third pay the suggested price and another third pay more than is expected.

Eva Shumpert chose to eat at Bread Co. because of the new concept.

“It’s great because it gives people the chance who don’t really have the money to eat here, especially because it can be expensive. People do need help, and I think it’s a good thing all around,” she said.

Bill and Michelle Crebbim, two Clayton residents, had been coming to Bread Co. for several years.

“It’s a nice idea, we paid what we would normally pay anyway,” Bill said.

“It seems too early to decide if it will work. But I think the intention is good, and I think that it will,” Michelle added.

Hutcheson said that as a part of the expansion process, Panera could be reaching out to organizations at Washington University in pursuit of future partnerships.

“It’s really about doing the right thing. This is not about us being a free café. It’s about us being a café of shared responsibility, where everyone takes their own responsibility to do the right thing.”