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'Life's-a-Dish'

**Bendigo restaurateurs
City of Great Bendigo**

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Anyone working in the tourism industry knows that one of the hardest sectors to involve and to get to work together is restaurants. The highly competitive nature of the industry and its working hours usually mitigates collaboration and networking.

However, a chance encounter by the former CEO of The City of Greater Bendigo on a trip to Italy introduced an idea that has not only created a new tourism product to highlight the region's burgeoning food and wine industry, but has also got its restaurateurs enthusiastically cross-promoting each other.

'Life's-a-Dish' is both a marketing and an industry collaboration concept that was launched in December 2006. It is based on the Buon Ricordo concept that began with 12 Northern Italian restaurants in 1964, but which now embraces 120 venues.

"Bendigo's version of the Buon Ricordo idea was to get visitors and locals to explore our fantastic dining experiences", says the City's Industry Marketing Coordinator, Glenn Harvey.

The Bendigo program currently features 12 of the City's leading dining establishments. Each of the 12 restaurants was invited to participate based on their quality of their food, dining experience and service standards, as well as the restaurant's point of difference.

The City of Greater Bendigo provides the administrative arms and legs for the program and jointly produces marketing collateral material, but it is the enthusiasm of the restaurateurs that has brought the program to life.

The famous Bendigo Pottery produces high quality ceramic plates, which are individually hand-painted by a local artist, Faye Brady, to reflect the style, ambience, speciality and experience of each restaurant.



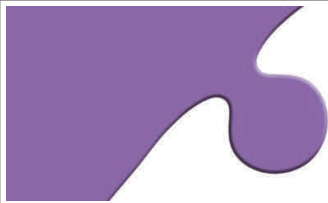
After enjoying a meal at the establishment, diners are able to purchase the souvenir plate for \$19.95.

So far, several thousand of the distinctive souvenir plates have been sold to customers, as tangible reminders of their gastronomic experiences.

Each restaurant receives a supply of their own branded, hand-painted plates, plus point-of-sale material to promote the program's concept to their customers. It has generated a network of restaurants who, rather than competing with one another, realise that the promotion of the gastronomic delights of Greater Bendigo will generate more business for everyone through repeat patronage and word of mouth endorsement.

Glenn Harvey says that rather than seeking monetary 'buy-in' for each initiative, the restaurants contribute to the program through in-kind involvement and marketing membership of Bendigo Tourism. Most importantly, he says, it's about getting each operator to provide an experience that promotes Bendigo in a positive light.

Phase 2 of the program, titled "The Next Course", extended the program in 2008. Several new restaurants joined, signature dishes, using local produce, were created by each participant, and larger hand plates were used to serve the food. Local wine was also introduced into the experience. Restaurants package the signature meal, local wine and souvenir plate for a fixed price.



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A major industry highlight of the program is the annual dinner, featuring a showcase of local food and wine producers. The dinner sees restaurateurs work alongside apprentice chefs at BRIT TAFE in Bendigo to produce three courses of local food and wine on the gala night. A celebrity chef addresses the industry and discusses ideas and new concepts with them.

“Life’s a Dish” has been taken each year to the Good Food and Wine Show in Melbourne, where, over four days, network participants team with local winegrowers to produce samples and tastings to promote the program.

Glenn says the novelty of the ‘Life’s-a-Dish’ program has generated a lot of positive PR, including coverage in mainstream publications and online forums.

“ We have to deal with the challenges of the industry, like turn-over of chefs, closure of some restaurants, and maintaining a high quality of product, but it has identified those restaurants that can champion the local food industry and it is getting them to invest in not only their own future, but also in growing the brand for the region.

“ We were careful to choose 12 restaurants of similar quality, but it’s not about saying one is better than the other. It’s also a mechanism for raising the bar in service skills and a willingness to try new things.

“Above all, it’s about creating an understanding that so much more can be achieved by working together with other industry sectors and sharing a bigger picture. The program has helped them to broaden their focus. It has provided real motivation”.

