

## IT'S A GENTLE LENTIL THING

BY ZOE ANNABEL

You won't choose your meal from a florescent board with a pimply teenager in an over-pressed shirt squeakily repeating your order and asking if you would like to upsize for an extra fifty-five cents. In fact, at community friendly co-operative café *Lentil as Anything* you won't be asked for any of your hard-earned in exchange for the delightful vegetarian and vegan creations you put in your gob. Known by frequenters simply as 'Lentils', this bohemian style series of cafés exudes a unique laissez-faire style 'pay as you feel' philosophy placing human dignity above profit. Payments for meals are decided by the customer and placed in an anonymous donation box that remains unmonitored, strengthening the aura of trust and social inclusion which is reminiscent of that found in a communal family home. Hang on, rewind...you don't *have* to pay? That seems crazy right, in *this* day and age isn't the idea of not demanding money an airy-fairy hippie concept which will see its founders left penniless? Well, clearly not - Lentils is now a fully established haunt for the frugal foodie with three cafés operating in Melbourne. Each has its own solid team of passionate volunteers from a wonderfully diverse medley of backgrounds who are committed to serving up renditions of dishes from their homelands and their own personal 'specialities' which are unlike many of the gentrified 'versions' available in the themed eateries of today. Lentils emits this incredible aura which I can only describe as one of goodness and unity, the staff are perpetually smiling, the food is wholesome and healthy and you feel as though you have contributed to a cause rather than the back pocket of faceless entrepreneurs.

Lentils serves up an eclectic composition of vibrant vegetable curries, tantalising tofu and lentil burgers, Japanese style pancakes, Sri Lankan platters and Moroccan style hotpots. The mixed curry plate for two is a lavish feast accompanied by the perfect condiments of salad, bread and yoghurt and delectable pea rice cooked in secret spices. The portions are generous and leave you feeling the love invested in the food. Amit, the exceedingly hospitable manager of St Kilda Lentils comes over and sits at my table. He is a modest man who can't hide his broad smile when I ask about his café ... "Lentils gives rights to the customer...it's kind of like credit, sometimes they can afford to pay more than other times, but we have to support something. We promote trust and fairness and freedom for everyone." Here lies another little charm of Lentils and another shining example of their absolute refusal to centre their focus on money. If you can't afford to pay for your meal, you have the option to exchange goods for nosh. Signs hang precariously from the walls calling for all kinds of donations, anything from fresh produce (which goes straight on your plate), to furniture for the cafés, light-bulbs, blankets and clothes, cooking utensils, instruments – even timber supplies. This kind of assembly of donated materials gives *Lentils* its

distinctive interior which has that undeniable share-house vibe with a sparkling bead curtain adorning the window, bohemian cushions sprawled in the corners, rickety painted tables flanked by chairs representing each era of furniture design and a diverse range of local art, fabric shawls and ethnic tapestries covering the walls. It's no surprise that the communal style of eating and chilled out atmosphere attracts students and backpackers alike – however there is no 'target client' at *Lentils*, and one of it's incredible attractions is the diversity of humanity it attracts.

The best way to experience *Lentil as Anything* is to roll with their style of relaxed communal dining, so assemble your herd and gather round the slightly dog eared and curry stained menu, choose a dish each then share it all round. Customers who choose to view *Lentils* as a place to score a free lunch are overshadowed by those who relish the experience it provides. Lethargic freeloaders are quickly converted into participants in the colourful variety of activities and characters the Lentil experience provides. Don't get me wrong though, *Lentils* isn't run on guilt trips or held up by the pity vote. The food is downright delicious and you won't feel any kind of guilt about not paying enough because it's all worth however much you can offer. *Lentils* is a non-profit organisation and after running costs are covered, the rest of the proceeds contribute to funding training programs for new migrants, refugees, the long term unemployed and people with disabilities to help increase their employment prospects. As a creative hub for people to freely express their creativity through food, music and art, *Lentils* funds numerous community events which aim to raise awareness on issues surrounding racism, refugee rights and advocacy, multiculturalism and host countless fundraisers annually.

As I dropped my donation into the jewel-embellished wooden box, my eyes flicked across a handwritten card reading '*When you pay MAKE A WISH because you will be surprised with a little lentil love what happens!*' But I had a feeling I already knew what happens when good hearted people band together powered by the love of lentils; community is reignited, a sense of belonging is harvested and joy extends to every dish of food that is served, every massive pot scrubbed and every drum beat in time with the music of diners and waiters alike. So go on, try it out, you may too be surprised by the feeling in your stomach; it won't feel anything like boredom, self loathing, or the dreaded 'McRegret' you may experience if you opt for the safe route of overly processed, monotonous, nutritionally barren fast food. You might feel a sense of belonging; a sense of pride and most importantly, you'll be left with a longing to again experience a little bit of Lentil loving.

*Lentil As Anything* is located in Abbotsford, Footscray and St Kilda, visit the website

[www.lentilasanything.com.au](http://www.lentilasanything.com.au) for details about your nearest haunt!