

CALGARY INC

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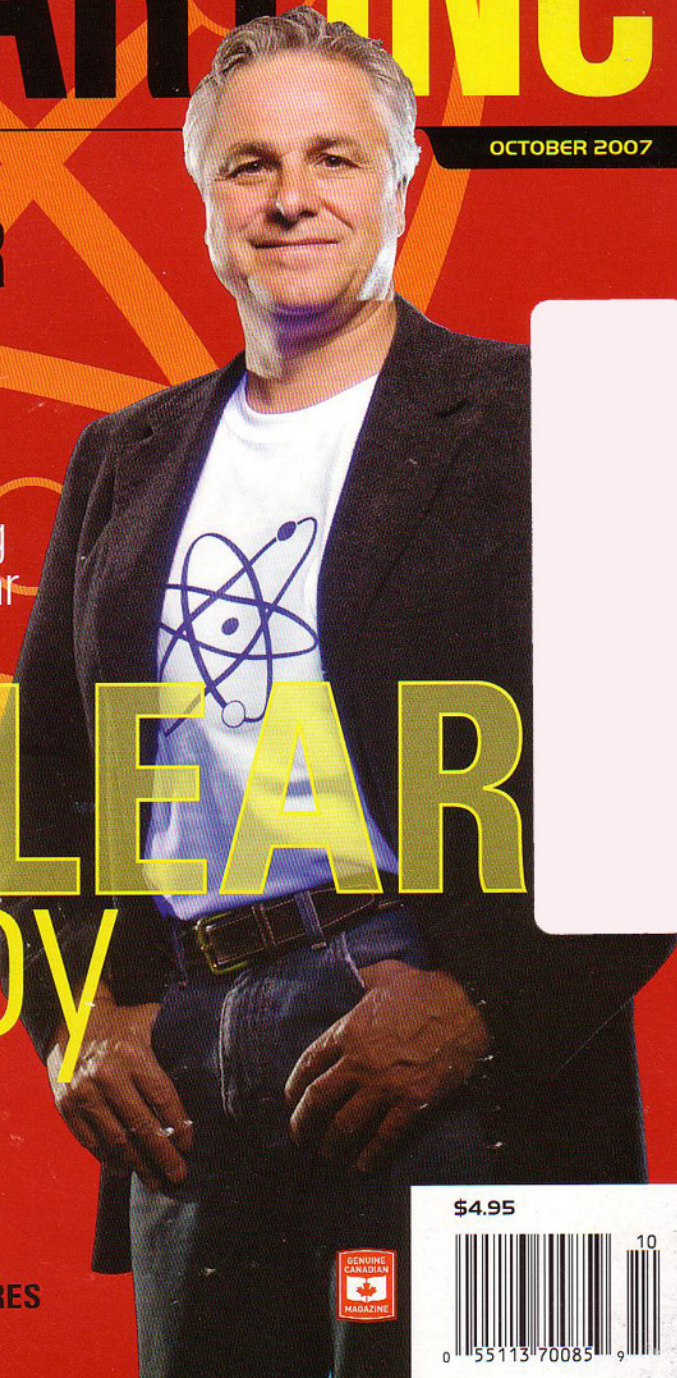
Calgary entrepreneur Wayne Henuset is leading the charge to bring nuclear power to Alberta

NUCLEAR cowboy

CALGARY'S TOP ENTREPRENEURS share their best advice

ARLENE DICKINSON enters the Dragons' Den

HOW TO MAKE SIX FIGURES through direct selling



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FOODBUSINESS

By Anthony Charron • Photography by Jared Sych



Rewarding restaurants

Alberta Ennest, right, and her husband Dwayne have instituted a Palate Passport program to reward their loyal customers.

Two local restaurants are giving back to loyal customers and their bottom line by offering creative rewards programs

Walking through the doors of Diner Deluxe is like stepping into your grandmother's kitchen. The retro-styled décor and smell of comfort food — home-cooked breakfasts and macaroni and cheese — fills the air. Patrons seated around Formica-topped tables chat over cups of coffee warmed up by smiling servers. It's the kind of place that keeps you coming back for more. And rewarding people who are repeat customers is something that any decent restaurant owner does, including Alberta Ennest of Diner Deluxe on Edmonton Trail.

"How do you make people feel continually happy that they are your regulars?" she asks. "That's the real ticket these days, because you need to get new customers, but the most lucrative clientele you have are the ones that are already coming."

Many companies, from large grocery chains

to coffee franchises, reward repeat customers. But smaller independent restaurant owners often lack the same resources and manpower to keep their customers loyal. This was the quandary facing Ennest, half of the inventive culinary couple behind Cuisine Concepts, founded in 2001, which owns eateries such as Diner Deluxe, Open Range, and Vue Café. The couple also owns Big Fish and is a part-owner in Urban Baker.

For Ennest and her husband Dwayne, the goal has been to entice clientele to eat at all of their restaurants. After a brainstorming session, they implemented the Palate Passport program in October 2006.

The passport contains a page for each of their restaurants. The idea is simple: ask for a Palate Passport at any of Cuisine Concepts' five restaurants, dine at each, and get a stamp. When the passport is full, patrons hand it in to receive a gift basket and the chance to enter a draw for a unique culinary experience: a multi-

course meal in your home, prepared by Dwayne and Alberta.

"If somebody has gone to all of the restaurants, they've spent a considerable amount of money and there should be something for that," says Ennest, who's been surprised by the roughly 400 gift baskets that have been handed out since the program began.

"Some people do this over and over again. There's a family that's gone through the passport process four times, which is phenomenal to me. I think it's fantastic," she says.

The cost for the passports — essentially the price of copying and staples — is not high, but Ennest admits it has taken quite a bit of work to put together 400 baskets filled with unique products from each restaurant. But the reward system is an effective, lucrative business tool. "The best and only way to really measure your marketing is to have something tangible that someone brings to you," Ennest says.

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Keeping customers loyal is something that Linda Crossley and Gerrit Visser, the mother and son owners and general managers of Inglewood's Village Cantina, take to heart.

At the Village Cantina, which serves up high-quality tropical and island-inspired food from its 9th Avenue locale, the rewards program is more high tech. The restaurant opened in 1995 when owner Crossley started a wholesale pie business at the kitchen of Village Cantina.

Over time it evolved from a dessert and coffee shop into the full-menu restaurant it is today. Village Cantina uses a Washington state-based company called Royalty Rewards to manage their rewards program. Royalty Rewards president Rory Fatt calls the service a "turn-key automated loyalty program, integrated with direct marketing."

Patrons join free of charge and swipe a plastic loyalty card when they make a purchase, earning a point for every dollar spent. When they reach 200 points, they receive a certificate for \$10 off their next purchase. They also receive birthday and anniversary cards as well as e-mail notices, such as a joke of the week.

While the database management program costs the restaurant \$250 a month, plus mail-out costs, it is a comprehensive way to keep track of the 1,000 people who have so far signed up. Customers can see how close they are to their next reward on the Royalty Rewards website.

Royalty Rewards formed in May 2005 and offers its program to any small business in North America, including Guest House Inn in Lethbridge and Raybold Automative in Spruce Grove, as well as menswear, furniture and bookstores in the U.S. In Calgary, the program is also being used by O'Sullivan's Bar and Grill on Macleod Trail.

Village Cantina's Crossley says the service is a time saver for her because "in a small restaurant, we're so busy just doing the day-to-day stuff."

Cantina general manager Visser says feedback from customers has been very good since the program began a 18 months ago. "I think it's the best way to keep in touch with your regulars and get new ones as well," he says. ■

REWARD PROGRAMS:

- Cuisine Concepts restaurants, cuisineconcepts.ca
- Village Cantina, villagecantina.ca
- For more information on Royalty Rewards, visit royaltyrewards.com