



# Lentil as anything

An eatery where customers pay whatever they think the meal is worth may seem like a crazy plan - but the concept's runaway success has vindicated its founder's belief







**M**ohammed, Allah and God come to Earth looking for freedom, right? So they ask for directions and they end up at a furniture store. That's possibly how the story goes, but it's hard to be sure because the teller, Shanaka Fernando, founder of community restaurant Lentil as Anything, is cracking up. Sitting in one of his Melbourne canteens, he's recounting a routine he delivered at the Comedy Festival. It turns out that founding a revolutionary food movement isn't Fernando's only major accomplishment. He's also a comic.

## Good value

Freedom fascinates Fernando, and so does dignity. Opening his first canteen in the inner-city suburb of St Kilda, his dream was to provide the community with a restaurant "where the dignity of the individual is not compromised, even if they don't have any money to eat". Also, he wanted to test the concept of freedom.

Lentil as Anything opened with a 'pay what you think it's worth' policy. Diners are encouraged to pay whatever they like for their meal, in the knowledge that it will subsidise the meals of others who are less well-off, or unable to pay.

"People will go to great lengths to protect this idea of freedom," explains Fernando. "I was curious to see if, given sufficient freedom, people would act in a way that was responsible and would help sustain the community."

And they did. Eight years later, Lentil as Anything has expanded to five locations in Victoria. Diners know that the money they pay now funds migrant training, an emergency housing centre and initiatives such as a pilot-school canteen program.

"The students are also paying what they think it's worth," says Fernando. "They have really taken ownership of what they need to provide for each other."

At the Abbotsford canteen, around 2,000 meals are prepared by 70 trainees, mostly migrants. The workers receive training in commercial kitchen operation, as well as community support, which provides them with a sense of validation and personal contribution.

## From humble beginnings

Fernando grew up in Sri Lanka, quite literally next door to extreme poverty. "I came from a reasonably wealthy family - we had servants and all that - but next door to my house was one of the biggest slums in Colombo." This made a deep impression. "People were starving to death and we were throwing food in the bin!"

After migrating to Australia, Fernando worked in the kitchen of St Kilda Meals on Wheels before using his own funds to open the first Lentil as Anything.


Although the food served there is vegetarian, Fernando says he's not pushing a nutritional agenda, just making the menu accessible to all. "We wanted to be inclusive - Jewish people, Muslims, anyone can have a vegetarian meal."

There have been hurdles to overcome, including a five-year battle with the tax

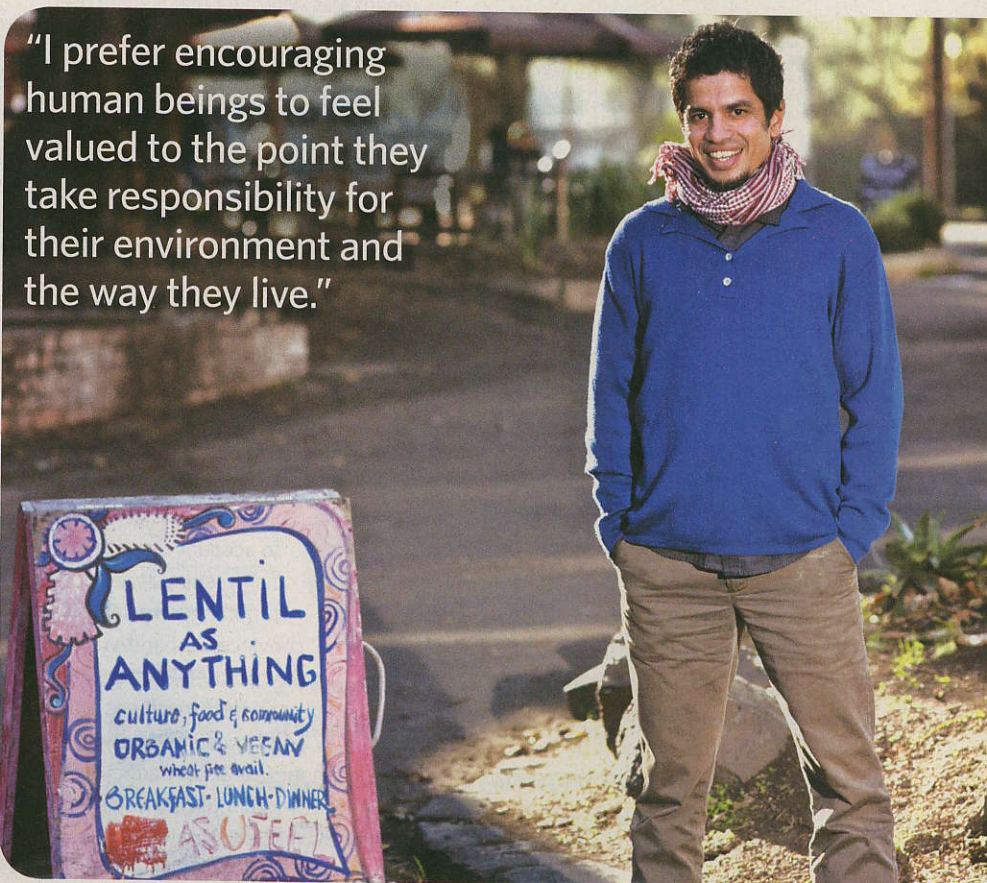
department. "They thought we were some kind of renegade organisation. It took many court battles to convince them that we are a *positive* renegade organisation."

Last year, Fernando was recognised for his work when he was presented with the Local Hero Award, one of the four Australian of the Year awards. During the year he was able to share ideas on environmental sustainability with 2007 Australian of the Year, Tim Flannery.

"Tim comes from a science-based focus. I prefer encouraging human beings to feel valued to the point they take responsibility for their environment and the way they live. Look at the cultures that survived and sustained themselves for many thousands of years. People didn't feel removed from the environment."

As part of the celebrations, Fernando attended a breakfast with then-Prime Minister John Howard. "He promised to come here and cook a meal, and I asked him, 'Is that a core promise or a non-core promise?' I slipped my mobile number into his pocket, but he hasn't called ..." 

**MARGARET AMBROSE** is a writer based in Melbourne.



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