



A Taste of Sustainability



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A TASTE OF SUSTAINABILITY:
CASE STUDIES OF SUSTAINABLE CAFÉS IN AUSTRALIA

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Lentil as Anything, Melbourne and Sydney: Believing in “the power of humanity to create stupendous change”

Providing a wholesome and nutritious meal where money is not a concern that is centered on mutual trust, generosity, and respect. (Lentil as Anything, 2015a)

Lentil as Anything is a “pay what you can”, not-for-profit chain of popular vegetarian restaurants. The unique character of this restaurant chain is that whilst the menu contains no set prices, an unlimited choice of eight buffet trays containing premium organic food, hot beverages, and dessert, and a-la-carte breakfasts are all served on a donation basis. Patrons



Signage at the entrance to the Abbotsford restaurant. (Photo G. Wijesinghe)

donate what they can afford and feel the experience is worth (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009:26). Its first restaurant was established in St Kilda, Melbourne in 2000, and the most recent in Newtown, Sydney in 2014, and there are plans to expand to Adelaide. Melbourne is its largest operation with venues in Abbotsford, St Kilda, Footscray and Preston. Lentil as Anything’s philosophy is based on giving a “wholesome and nutritious meal where money is not a concern” (Lentil as Anything, 2015a). This social enterprise operates on a financial model involving donations and volunteering. Their values are centered on mutual respect, generosity, trust, equality, freedom and kindness (Lentil as Anything, 2015a). It is a social experiment that involves reciprocity – demonstrating that both “giving” as well as “receiving” generosity can be a successful model for economic sustainability. The concept encourages people to “think carefully about their own values and ethics” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009:26). The founder,

Shanaka Fernando, says that he wants to “communicate to people that this is their space, there is no owner, there is no businessman making a profit out of it. It is our own space and we make of it, what we give to it, and we imperil it by what we take out of it – when we don’t regard our contribution in the right context” (per. comm. 23 July 2014). This has led, for example, to a sense of ownership and solidarity, even to the extent that when the restaurants are short-staffed customers have been known to volunteer their services. In this

aspect, both the customers and staff have a role in contributing to the kind of culture the restaurants promote. Lentil as Anything model the fact that a “commercial business can be financially successful and popular with the public while being operated on a socially responsible basis where the main priority is not profit” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009:26).



Promotion of cookbook at the restaurant. (Photo G. Wijesinghe)

Shanaka Fernando hopes this concept will inspire other restaurateurs and lead to a global movement (Fernando & Hill, 2012:175). He says that there are signs of this already happening with the openings of similar restaurants such as, “Pay as You Please” in Killarney, Ireland, “Kyneton as Anything” (now called Food Bowl), Bon Jovi’s series of restaurants in America called “Soul Kitchen”, and Radiohead’s album released online with the same pay-as-you-feel philosophy (Valentish, 2012). Perhaps this model can be an antidote to the culminating factors of the global financial crisis: “hubris, greed and heedlessness” (Fernando & Hill, 2012; Kakutani, 2009). The restaurants have a growing involvement in education, are involved in ongoing community projects to promote education on social sustainability issues, and have been used as a case study in primary schools in a module about

values (Lentil as Anything, 2015a; Valentish, 2012). Shanaka has also published a book in 2013, *Lentil as Anything: Food, Culture, Community*, to celebrate food, stories, and the cultural diversity of the Lentil as Anything community. It includes recipes and profiles of key chefs at the Lentil as Anything restaurants, interviews with staff members and friends of Lentil as Anything, and articles from highly esteemed Australian authors Arnold Zable, Alice Pung, and Tara June Winch.

Shanaka Fernando is a modern-day social revolutionist who has achieved celebrity status through the success of the Lentil as Anything popular restaurant chain. He was invited to appear on the *MasterChef* show and his life work is featured throughout the media, for example see:

- SBS documentary TV series Naked Lentil: <http://www.sbs.com.au/shows/nakedlentil>)
- TED talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jodpW59On7g>)

In recognition of his contribution to the betterment of humanity, Shanaka was given the “Australian of the Year – Local Hero” award in 2007 (Senaratne, 2014). He has received numerous other accolades including an Australian postage stamp in his honour, and a listing in *Who’s Who in Australia*, 2008 Edition (Wikipedia, 2015). Even though he was born to a privileged family in Sri Lanka, he was attuned to the poverty of his fellow citizens. His

biography *Lentil as Anything: Everybody deserves a place at the table*, articulates how the experiences in his life led to an early awakening to social division and inequality (Fernando & Hill, 2012). Later on in life, travelling and interacting with remote and indigenous communities in Asia and South America he came to understand how the sharing of a simple meal could bond people together in kinship (Senaratne, 2014). With this experience came the realisation that “food seemed the obvious vehicle” for bringing about social change (Senaratne, 2014). This was the catalyst for opening his first Lentil As Anything restaurant in St Kilda, Melbourne, as a cooperative and youth training centre (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009:26). Since then the restaurant has expanded into five outlets. The restaurant’s name rhymes with the Australian rock group “Mental as Anything” (Wikipedia, 2015), and correlates with the fact that lentil was a vital source of nutrition to our ancestors and brought cultures together (Kight, 2012). This underlines the mission of the restaurant – a commitment to bring people from all cultures, age groups and social status together in a spirit of community. Shanaka is cynical of the ways in which laws of society divide people rather than unite and empower (Fernando & Hill, 2012; Wikipedia, 2015). This challenging of the status quo has created many road blocks in the execution of the restaurants’ practices, but Shanaka says that he has been able to overcome them with the solidarity and support given by the community (as cited in Valentish, 2012). The restaurant maintains good supportive relationships with their customers, employees, suppliers, government agencies and local community which accounts for its success (Shanaka Fernando per. comm. 23 July 2014).

Shanaka’s way of life is to live by example and his social enterprise models this philosophy (Fernando & Hill, 2012). Shanaka says that sustainability is about maintaining an open and “curious” attitude and learning from the voice of fellow humans (per. comm. 23 July 2014). Shanaka believes that the progression of social sustainability is achieved through betterment of humanity, and there is a spiritual quality to his life work: “Lentil as Anything recognises the cause and effect otherwise known as karma, what we are all willing to contribute nourishes the continual evolution of conscious awareness and the Lentil As Anything experience” (Bolt, 2007). Providing a space for healing and finding out what people can give back to society is a quality that the restaurants want to model:

The unseen aspects of Lentil, I think, are its strongest contribution to sustainability and that is the fact that people who feel that they haven’t had an opportunity to share themselves to, examine their nature and ideas in a social context, find that opportunity in that [restaurant’s] space. And I think that the healing that happens ... we would struggle to quantify it. (Shanaka Fernando per. comm. 23 July 2014)

Shanaka believes that we live in a society where social isolation and loss of identity is leading, for example, to obesity through comfort eating and other mental health conditions. He uses his restaurants as a social forum to create an atmosphere for social bonding and the

intermingling: “people feel a strong sense of family and connection having entered this space as strangers and then being drawn to this space to become regulars”, says Shanaka (per. comm. 23 July 2014). For example, social connections have led to people getting employment opportunities, forming bands and theatre groups, sharing houses, and even getting married. The restaurant provides an inclusive space for artists, musicians, and writers, etc., and other such groups to congregate (for example, vegan club). Their Preston branch which opened *Lentil on the Rocks* provides an environment where non-alcohol drinkers, especially teenagers, could socialise (Fotiadis, 2014).

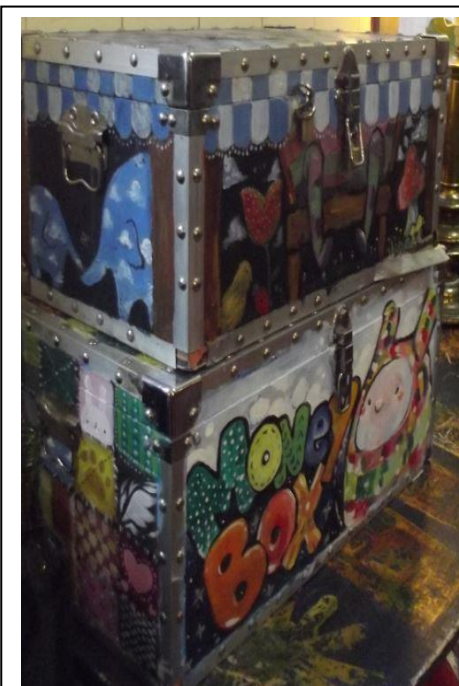
Each restaurant is embedded into the social fabric of the local community, culture and environment (Shanaka Fernando per. comm. 23 July 2014) and creates a “sense of place” for the local residents, as well as the visitors to the locality. The restaurants are a cultural melting-pot, and regular community events are organised to facilitate respect and trust between cultures. Shanaka works at humanising people to be inclusive and accepting by facilitating cultural awareness. For example, every year in country Victoria the restaurants organise a tree planting event and takes 100 refugees as well as volunteer staff to spend quality time with the farmers, school children and local community, and this gathering is catered for by the restaurants’ chefs. Working with refugees and other disadvantaged groups is an important part of the restaurant’s practices. They provide certified training for people on the “work for the dole” scheme, long-term unemployed, refugees and others seeking assistance (Not Quite Nigella, 2014). Shanaka says that it is about giving people respect and dignity – to help them feel like they’re not a burden on society (per. comm. 23 July 2014). Proceeds remaining after the overheads from the restaurants are used for certified hospitality training for this purpose (Shanaka Fernando per. comm. 23 July 2014).

The restaurants also make a significant contribution to environmental sustainability, in addition to the annual 6000 to 10,000 trees planted in country Victoria (Shanaka Fernando per. comm. 23 July 2014). They not only source seasonal, local and organic produce, but also grow their own. They are part of an “urban garden collective” community venture:

Our philosophy is based upon the underlying values of food security, self-sufficiency, reclaiming community dynamics, and growing food using natural methods for Lentils’ kitchens and the neighbourhood. We believe in a basic human right to have access to safe and nutritious food ... Through the creation of these gardens, Lentils will have a deepened sense of food security to continue feeding the community. (Lentil as Anything, 2015b)

The décor of the restaurants is kept simple using environmental “outcasts” in creative ways. A recent campaign was run to educate customers about food waste: “generosity and abundance shouldn’t be confused with irresponsibility” says Shanaka (per. comm. 23 July 2014).

Shanaka says that the restaurants need to be self-sustaining economically and that their restaurant model is overall successful – they have been operating for 15 years and serve one million meals a year across its outlets (Worrall, 2015). This has been made possible by generous donations by customers worth approximately \$3 million a year, and volunteer labour worth \$7 million (Shanaka Fernando per. comm. 23 July 2014). On average, a donation of about \$12 would cover the costs of a meal and overheads (Worrall, 2015). Those who are unable to pay are encouraged to volunteer. However, this model of not-for-profit business operated on generosity is not without its impediments. For example, some customers come for a “free feed”; after a recent festival event it was reported that despite the long line of crowds that was catered for, a significant loss was made with an average of about \$2.75 per head received for a meal (Worrall, 2015). This resulted in staff educating the public about the costs of running each restaurant and the significance of customer



**Donation boxes for payments.
(Photo G. Wijesinghe)**

contribution towards a good cause. Shanaka says that it is important “not to reach beyond their means” and keep a close eye on the finances, especially as they had a substantial financial loss in previous years due to mismanagement. They are becoming more vigilant after an accumulated debt of \$170,000 that is now being paid off gradually (per. comm. 23 July 2014). However, he says for him, it is not about profit-driven success: “we’re not too reliant on results other than what we do on a daily basis which is just make food available and see what happens around that and it’s quite a nice adventure” (per. comm. 23 July 2014).

Lentil receives many good reviews. Outside the restaurant a pin board displays some very moving letters of gratitude and commendation. Some examples of reviews from the social media are as follows:

Everything about this place is amazing. the concept of it is amazing. the staff have always been amazing. non for profit, volunteers working, pay what you think it’s worth, and the food is so delicious!!!! (Urbanspoon, 2014a)

Lentils is a very special place. The unique concept attracts all kinds of people and the food is always filling and nourishing... (Urbanspoon, 2015)

I love Lentils & have been a volunteer for approx. 12mths & still love it. I work thru the week in Sales, & volunteer in the kitchen every Sunday, helping the paid staff, as a Kitchen hand... I must admit I did not know what I was getting myself into, because I used to be so critical about people coming to

Australia, thinking that all people who came into Australia were lazy, until I met some of the kitchen staff at lentils. How wrong I was to judge!!! Most of the people at Lentils are hardworking individuals contributing to the community, & working in the kitchen, I have not heard once any complaints about how hard they work, they just do it, even in the extreme heat!!! I am so proud of being a volunteer, & do wish that more volunteers would give Lentils a hand, even if it is a few hours per week. The Chefs are absolutely amazing at how creative they make the meals, & I am still learning such invaluable skills in the kitchen... Like I said before, I am only a volunteer, only a kitchen hand, but love to help out as much as I can. At the end of the day, I wish all people were hard working as Lentils, with the same attitude, and maybe if people were, what a difference it would make this country. I urge you all, please give Lentils a hand, make a difference, you will learn a lot of various skills, & also develop friendships along the way as well. You certainly will not regret it!!! (Urbanspoon, 2014b).

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