

dogooders: The front range opens its arms and lends a hand

by Paula Pant

Rhumba | www.rhumbarestaurant.com

At Boulder hotspot Rhumba, the New Year is celebrated with service and style. For every \$10 gift certificate to Rhumba, \$1 is donated to the Davis Phinney Foundation to support its fight against Parkinson's disease. Those who purchase the gift certificate are also eligible to win several prizes, including the grand prize—a private New Year's Eve party at the restaurant for up to 100 guests.

Jax | www.jaxfishhousedenver.com

March is official Oyster Month at Jax: Five cents for every oyster eaten at Jax Boulder is donated to the Imagine! Foundation, a Lafayette-based nonprofit which supports people with cognitive disabilities. A nickel for each oyster eaten at Jax Denver goes to the Young Fund, a branch of The (Denver) Children's Hospital Foundation. The month culminates with an Oyster Eating Contest, from which all proceeds go to the two organizations. Last year, Jax raised \$5,000 for the Imagine! Foundation and \$4,000 for the Young Fund.

Panzano | www.panzano-denver.com

Last year several of Denver's best chefs came together to serve a sold-out six-course dinner at Panzano with all proceeds benefiting the Rocky Mountain Cancer Center Foundation. Panzano's Executive Chef Elise Wiggins has also served up dishes at benefits including Flavors of Denver benefiting the American Liver Foundation and Chefs Up Front aiding Operation Frontline.

Solera | www.solerarestaurant.com

Colorado's neighboring state to the north has a special place in Solera's heart—the restaurant's beneficiaries include the Wyoming Historic Trails Society and the Cowboy Joe Club, the fundraising arm of the University of Wyoming's Intercollegiate Athletic Program. Solera also gives to larger nonprofits, like The National Liver Foundation and Project Angel Heart.

ChopHouse | www.chophouse.com

The annual highlight for the Denver and Boulder ChopHouse is its Christmas Day Miracle, when about 4,000 local homeless, displaced and hungry families enjoy the full ChopHouse dining experience, down to the white linen tablecloths. The Denver ChopHouse extended the event last year with its first annual Thanksgiving Day Gathering.

Strings | www.stringsrestaurant.com

Each year, about 40 to 50 children with cancer and terminal illnesses gather at Strings for a meal before being taken to Aspen for a vacation week organized by small grassroots nonprofit Shining Stars. Strings also hosts a Mother's Day brunch with Volunteers of America and throws fundraising cocktail parties for Project Mercy, a nonprofit focused on community development worldwide.

Café Star | www.cafestardenver.com

While the café has filled stomachs for many fundraisers, including a Call of the Wild benefit for the Wild Animal Sanctuary, its donations aren't limited to what's edible: Last year the restaurant gave items for a silent auction at Denver's East High School. Café Star also hosted a fundraiser for Operation Smile, a nonprofit that repairs childhood facial deformities around the globe. Chef Rebecca Weitzman serves up dishes for a variety of causes, including a Hurricane Katrina fundraiser and African AIDS charity.

nine75 | www.nine75-restaurant.com

Normally closed on Sundays, nine75 opened its doors to host a fundraiser for the American Transplant Foundation, a charity for which owner Jim Sullivan sits on the board. The restaurant also provided food for the Mutts and Models fashion show benefiting Harrison Memorial Animal Hospital, Denver's only nonprofit animal hospital. And nine75 celebrated its one-year anniversary by throwing a benefit for Judi's House, a charity for children who've lost a parent.

Ocean | www.ocean-restaurant.com

In its previous incarnation as Mao Asian Bistro, the restaurant hosted a monthly fashion event benefiting charities like the Matthew Shepherd Foundation, Susan G. Koman Foundation and Colorado AIDS Project. When Mao closed its doors and reopened on May 12 as Ocean, its unveiling—the opening before the grand opening—was a benefit for the American Transplant Foundation. This past August, Ocean teamed up with nine75 and emogene to provide food for the Celebration of Hope Gala, a Huntington's disease benefit at the Denver Center's Sewall Ballroom at which actress Jessica Biel was honored.

Vesta Grill | www.vestagrill.com

Vesta's largest annual fundraiser is the all-you-can-eat, all-you-can-drink January 22 Plates for the Peak dinner. Now in its fifth year, the meal benefits Urban Peak, a Denver nonprofit that provides shelter, education, and health care for runaway and homeless youth. Last year, Vesta raised between \$15,000 and \$20,000 for the organization.

The high level and variety of involvement is confirmed by the National Restaurant Association. Through its Cornerstone Initiative, the NRA tracks the philanthropic activity of restaurants around the country and provides advice on how to give back. "People are largely unaware of all that restaurants do," says Alyssa Prince, Director of Community Relations at the NRA. "Part of our mission is to educate people about how involved and philanthropic restaurants really are." Indeed, nine out of ten respondents to the NRA's 2000 survey reported donating cash or in-kind services to charitable organizations.

Antihunger causes are a logical fit for people with a passion for food. Washington, DC-based Share Our Strength is one shining success story of harnessing chefs' power. SOS coordinates a bevy of culinary events to benefit antihunger causes, resulting in more than \$200 million raised since the organization began in 1984. Co-Founder Debbie Shore has noticed some changes since she and her staff first began this work. "Chefs and restaurants have more of a celebrity element now," says Shore. "Everybody wants something from them and consequently there are more demands on their time." The celebrity element, of course, is also a blessing. When well-known chefs cook for or lend their names to large events, hundreds of thousands—sometimes one million dollars—can be raised in a single evening.

Share Our Strength is also the creator of Operation Frontline, an innovative program through which chefs volunteer their time to teach nutrition, cooking, budgeting and healthful shopping to low-income adults and children. The idea for the program was borne out of the realization that chefs want to have more direct contact with the people they help, and the fact that it "takes more than food to fight hunger," Shore says. Share Our Strength has found willing chefs in 14 states to participate.

Given the generosity that seems intrinsic to the personalities of many chefs and owners, it's unlikely that restaurants will scale back their efforts to improve communities. Debbie Shore notes that even after Hurricane Katrina, many local restaurants in Louisiana that had themselves sustained major damage called Share Our Strength to see what they could do.

Prince says she hears stories every day of restaurants helping out. There's the one about a sick child in small-town Washington and the restaurant that raised enough money for her family to rent an apartment closer to her treatment center. Then there's the restaurant in Bedford, New Hampshire that donated ongoing meals for an injured elderly woman.

And then there's the one about the pumpkins. 