

Menu Concept

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Welcome to Pantoufle, a restaurant where you come to gather to meet strangers, to reconnect with friends, and to eat a transformative meal. No private conversations, no business deals, but instead a large social event.

Pantoufle is open to all guests. No age or income levels factor into the dining experience. Our community is made up of people of all levels of both those factors. The only requirement is that guests who come are open to socializing and strengthening our local collective.

The dining room is filled with local items. Discarded bicycles, bins, and park benches of the town line the walls; it is likely a guest will see something that they owned at one time or have seen about the town. String lights crossing the ceiling and wall sconces burn bright and cheery, and the music is low and familiar. Tunes that play out around the town are incorporated into the dining experience.

There are two dining tables, each holding place for 20 members. The chairs are mismatched, and some might require extra padding to make comfortable. The table itself has a slapped-together look, filled with community knickknacks such as a replica of the town statue and old copies of the church hymnal. Each table has unique items on it, and they will eventually be part of the dining experience.

When guests arrive for either the 5pm or 8:30pm dinner (no reservations required, but dinner starts promptly at those times with no late arrivals), they are seated at one of the community tables. The host expertly and smoothly introduces the new arrivals to those already seated and places them strategically so that everyone is near each other, huddled around the table. Parties of two are seated next to each other, and those with large parties are encouraged to sit across the table from one another. Seated guests are served water and their choice of beverage while waiting for others to arrive. There's no forced ice breakers to do, no 'community building activity'. Instead guests are encouraged by wait staff, dressed in their own clothing, to stoke the organic conversation. Wait staff are trained to handle absorbing new arrivals into the conversation and to encourage a new line of talk when one has dried up.

The menu is simple and of the town. We use local ingredients as much as possible. Though some of the locals are probably great cooks, food and beverage safe-handling procedures limit us from using what they have cooked. Instead we take their raw ingredients and make a community meal out of them. For those items not available locally, we procure them the traditional ways.

The dinner starts out with a simple item. Our amuse-bouche is harsh and plain. It reminds us of the old ways before we were a community. I see this as a plain biscuit or piece of hard jerky. Something boring. Next, however, comes the transformation. Our staff distributes a small piece of chocolate (each guest's favorite). As one, the members of the table consume it and become transformed. Following that "palette-exciter", is the family style meal. It consists of warm and hearty foods such as roast chicken, roast beef, salad, soup, and tons of sides. Finally, as a caper on the event, we will all retire to the houseboat docked down at the pond for coffee and dessert!

Because of this food set up, we have to observe tips for ensuring no cross contamination. We will use the following, as discussed in the blog post *What is Family Dining?* (The Fork Manager, 2022). Everyone will use hand sanitizer as they sit down, and our trained staff will explain, possibly breaking the mood of the experience, the importance of keeping utensils of eating and serving separate.

This unique set up (and indeed the name of the restaurant) is inspired from the 2000 film *Chocolat*. The story of outsiders transforming a town through their use of chocolate, inviting others to experience the benefits of a community, and finding a home is one I love.

This movie features chocolate as the hook that brings people in to cast off their old and strict ways and embrace a more community-based lifestyle. The fictional people in the film are transformed by the taste of chocolate, and the patisserie, played by Juliette Binoche, has a gift for finding the favorite morsels of all residents of the town who stop into her shop. In the end residents come together and are a better community.

I can see this as the main theme of a dining experience. I am all about community, and, though it stretches me, the prospect of meeting new people in a social setting, a controlled one, is exciting.

References

Chocolat. Directed by Lasse Hallström. Miramax, 2000. Available on Amazon Prime Video

What is Family Style Dining? The Fork Manager. <https://www.theforkmanager.com/blog/marketing/what-family-style-dining>