

Food for thought

Weekly's Holiday Fund donations matched, then matched again at Milk Pail Market

by Alexander Papoulias

Heading to the Sierras for a weekend in the snow, most people think about packing boots, skis and chains for the tires.

Steven Rasmussen, owner of the Milk Pail Market in Mountain View, packed cheese for a recent trip to the Sierra Club Lodge. Several large blocks of cheese, in fact, including his current favorite — Havarti with horseradish.

He's a food enthusiast.

"I've been giving out samples to customers at the Milk Pail just for the joy of seeing their reaction. The way horseradish tingles your nose is a unique sensation, and it's fun to watch the delight on people's faces after that delayed reaction and the heat kicks in. Everyone loves it," Rasmussen said.

Rasmussen's approach to community involvement is equally enthusiastic. For the second year running, the Milk Pail has collected donations for the Palo Alto Weekly's annual Holiday Fund, and has taken the idea of holiday donating one step further by offering to match each dollar donated up to \$500.

Any donation made to the Milk Pail will be doubled by the market, and doubled again by the fund's major supporters, the Hewlett and Packard foundations and the Peery and Arrillaga family foundations.

With this year's campaign in its last weeks — the deadline is Jan. 31 — 526 donors have so far donated \$145,486. With matching gifts, that number is \$237,486.

The idea to match donations by his customers and staff came to Rasmussen in 2005 after an someone left \$100 in the donation jar. That anonymous act of generosity moved Rasmussen and got him thinking about the fund's possibilities.

"At first we were getting one-dollar bills, fives, the occasional ten. Then this single hundred dollar bill," Rasmussen said.

Knowing that the \$100 would eventually be matched to make \$200, Rasmussen thought of how easy it would be to quadruple the donations by offering to match each dollar that his market generated for the fund. "A dollar donation becomes four. A \$5 donation becomes \$20. It's so simple, and it's a win-win situation," Rasmussen said.

Knowing their donations will be matched not once, but twice seems to

have given the Milk Pail's customers and staff encouragement and incentive to give during the campaign.

"It's just so heartwarming to see



the public giving and being eager to give. When we started matching donations two years ago the response was immediate and overwhelming," Rasmussen said.

Since taking over a drive-through dairy stand in 1974, Rasmussen built the Milk Pail into what loyal customers consider an institution. Described by Rasmussen as "an open-air, European style market," the Milk Pail's staple items are its cheese and its produce. But the market also specializes in unique foods, from French chocolate and locally roasted coffee to its own house-made peanut butter — all things one is not likely to find in the local mega-mart.

Rasmussen's motto is, "If you can't find it anywhere else, we've got it, and if we haven't got it, we'll try to locate it."

Over the years Rasmussen has given names to each of the four categories he sees his customers as falling into. The Bon Vivants are chefs and cooking enthusiasts who want the best raw ingredients they can find. The Thrillseekers are looking for fun and adventure — they appreciate things such as Rasmussen's horseradish Havarti and other unexpected finds.

Food Fiends want a good deal, and appreciate that the Milk Pail often has bulk foods and close-out items at bargain prices. Those who visit the Milk Pail on a Food Quest are looking for a beloved but long lost food from their childhood.

Rasmussen embodies elements of all four. Rasmussen hopes that the Milk Pail's donation program can serve as a working model for other small businesses in the area.

"It would be really neat if other businesses like ours would start doing something similar during the holidays. Everyone involved benefits when the donations get matched the way they are. "Helping those in need is really just an investment in our community and more people should get involved." ■

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