

# Gourmet lunches for \$5

## Software firms hires in-house chef 'We're healthy, more awake, less hungry'

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Although he has gourmet tastes, Michael Meltzer realized that not having a McDonald's or Tim Hortons near to his workplace was a problem. Meltzer, president and CEO of Tequila Software Inc., realized that moving his organization to the posh and often overpriced Rosedale neighbourhood from the downtown core had one major drawback — few reasonably priced lunch options for his 55 employees.

However, his new office space has something most don't.

"I inherited a kitchen," says Meltzer. "It's a beautiful space." And it is. Wood-panel doors can hide the state-of-the-art stainless steel kitchen, complete with plenty of counter space and bright lighting.

To make use of the facilities and to solve the problem about the lack of affordable meals, Meltzer considered hiring a chef to offer a subsidized meal program. He polled his staff and found out this was something they also wanted to pursue.

Three months later, chef Alison Linton was hired full-time to provide gourmet lunches to staff and to clients. The cost of the lunch program is paid equally by the employer and the employee — lunches run employees about \$5 a day.

According to Gena Katz, principal in the tax practice at Ernst & Young LLP, as a rule if an employer is paying for a meal for an employee, it is considered a taxable benefit to the employee. For instance, if an employee receives a meal allowance this would be considered a taxable benefit.

But there are exceptions, says Katz. When an employee is working at a remote site and can't get home, meals paid by the employer are not considered a taxable benefit. Similarly, if an employee is working late and the employer pays for dinner, it is not considered a taxable benefit. And Tequila's program

wouldn't be considered a taxable benefit either.

"Subsidized meals are not considered a taxable benefit," says Katz.

For their \$5 subsidized lunch, employees at Tequila get an appetizer and a choice of a hot meal, not to mention dessert and fresh fruit served throughout the day. Meals range from lasagna and crab cakes to a full-blown turkey dinner for Thanksgiving. And desserts include treats made by Linton's assistant — a pastry chef who regularly makes cheesecakes and bakes cookies for the employees.

"It's a win-win situation," says Darren Fernandes, supervisor of software initialization at Tequila and a member of the meal plan since it began. "Employees get great meals at affordable prices... we're healthy, more awake and less hungry."

Fernandes says that the chicken schnitzel is "wicked." And while having a similar program wouldn't make Fernandes' top five list of things he would look for in a future employer, it would definitely be a consideration. He says it's like an added bonus that does make a difference to the workday.

Fernandes says that even when he is under huge time constraints at work, he can quickly and conveniently grab a healthy home-cooked meal. In another workplace setting he would probably skip lunch or settle for an unhealthy option.

Barbara Parisotto, a registered dietician at the Fitness Institute says that her downtown clients tend to work long hours in stressful conditions and don't make eating healthy — or even eating at all — a priority.

For those clients who don't have the benefit of an on-site lunch program like the one at Tequila, Parisotto helps clients develop healthy eating habits during the workday. She encourages clients to keep granola bars, melba toast and canned fruit at their desk rather than



Above, Tequila Software workers Andrea King and Darren Fernandes enjoy a meal. Tequila president Michael Meltzer hired chef Alison Linton to supply gourmet

going to the vending machine for chips or a chocolate bar. If there is a fridge in the office, Parisotto suggests keeping a small supply of cheese, yogurt and fresh fruit.

She says accessibility to healthy food is key to eating well. "If (healthy) food is not close to us, we're forced to make unhealthy food choices."

At Tequila, salads, fresh fruit and other healthy food options are offered on a daily basis.

Meltzer says the program has had a positive effect on staff.

While he doesn't use any measurements to prove the effect of the program, he says his employees are more productive. Even if budgets got tight, Meltzer believes the program will continue because workers are happier when they're well fed.

"A happy employee means happy clients means happy shareholders," Meltzer says.

In the case of Meltzer, it also means putting on extra five pounds since the program began nine months ago.

