

Empty Bowls back for 13th year with welcome return to normalcy

Members of Aurora's Pine Tree Potters Guild are hard at work creating more than 500 ceramic bowls that will soon be up for grabs.

These aren't your average handmade bowls, however. They are a potent reminder that as affluent as the community might seem, there are many residents who are struggling day to day.

The empty bowl is at the centre of the Guild's 13th annual Empty Bowls event, which will raise much-needed funds for Aurora's Welcoming Arms and Inn from the Cold, which provides a hand to unhoused members of the community.

A popular event each and every year, Empty Bowls was retooled to accommodate restrictions related to the global pandemic, but with restrictions eased, the Guild is excited to welcome patrons once again to a sit-down lunch, featuring soups created by nearly 20 local eateries, under the roof of Newmarket's Old Town Hall.

"We were really fortunate to have a location that was rock-solid last year already locked in [for 2022] because [this year] the space is going to create the environment for people to come in and feel like they're part of the community again," says Guild member Lisa-Marie Oliphant, Chair of Empty Bowls 2022. "Right after our sale and the way we hosted the Empty Bowls event it was just picking up the bowl and picking up the coupon book. As of January, we really kick-started the planning with our Guild."

The whole premise of Empty Bowls, she says, is "a gentle reminder that not everyone has a bowl they can fill in their lives."

"That is why the event aligns with Welcoming Arms and Inn from the Cold. They absolutely help with the food needs in the community. They try to help break the cycle to help people get back on their feet, to understand what's available to them, and to fill their bowl."

This time around, with the opportunity for restaurateurs to ladle out their gourmet soups face-to-face rather than rely on patrons to come to them with their coupon book, as was the norm during the height of the pandemic, more restaurants than ever before have lined up to take part - including those who have never taken part before.

"It just shows you how many people want to be a part of this," says Oliphant. "This event needs them and we need that support."

And, of course, this event would not happen without the members of the Guild, who collectively take on the herculean task of making hundreds of bowls each year ahead of the main event.

"500 bowls is the target," she says. "I have been posting sneak peeks on social media and I was just [at the Guild] on Thursday and their shelf was overflowing with bowls we need to inspect and jury. Although there are a lot of bowls that are donated, we touch every single one and make sure that they are inspected fully so they are the cream of the crop. There is no sub-par bowls put into our event. There is a lot of quality control that goes into the selection."

This is the quality that keeps people coming back year after year, whether they've participated in the sit-down event before or, in 2020 and 2021 with just the bowl pick-up event that came with a coupon book for participating restaurants.

But, with the return of the sit-down event, the excitement is there and the dinner seating sold out within days of tickets going on sale - and there are just a handful of tickets remaining for each of their two luncheon sittings on November 17.

"It's a large space, lots of room for the people who are coming, and the other benefit is while they're upstairs, the whole downstairs level there's a sale going on," says Oliphant. "You're able to make a difference in the lives of less fortunate individuals and there are a lot of people struggling in our world today. That's a gentle reminder for people that you're going to come, you're going to sit, you're going to have a lovely time and every bit of money that is raised is going to go to this charity. We're not paid to be there. Our

bowls are not purchased?. Everything is donated, so there are massive benefits to coming to an event like this where when you're spending that \$50 it is being passed through to Welcoming Arms and Inn from the Cold.?

Tickets for Empty Bowls are on sale now from Meridian Credit Union on Wellington Street East at Mary Street. For more information on the event itself, visit www.pinetreepotters.ca.

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