

Dining on a dime

A foodie from Philly finds fortune feeding locals at a fraction of standard prices

BY CRISTINA OLDS

“I love to cook and it's hard not to get inspired if you look at our client list of passionate restaurateurs,” stated Brett Hills, founder and owner of 999dine.com, in a recent conversation with *Local iQ*. “I'm inspired [to make gourmet dishes at home] when I go in and take pictures and sample [my client's] food,” he said.

The year 2010 marks the 10th anniversary of 999dine.com. The online dining discount gift certificate business began as an informational site for

local restaurants and has evolved into a very successful e-commerce dining site. Essentially, this is how it works: diners/end users purchase restaurant

gift certificates online at a discounted rate (e.g. - a certificate with a value of \$50 may cost \$30 if purchased online at 999Dine.com). In turn, Hills provides eateries with a web presence that allows them to publish an extensive menu and business description at an affordable rate. The idea has proven to be a popular option for numerous New Mexican restaurants seeking to increase their share of the market, but Hills admits that maintaining his unique business model has been demanding.

“As an entrepreneur, it's easy to create something, but to keep it going is a challenge,” Hills said. “Developing [999dine.com] has been an evolution, and I'd say the most unique factor of the

PROFILE

Brett Hills

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PHOTO BY WES NAMAN

999dine.com founder Brett Hills splits time between running his unique online dining gift certificate business, now in its tenth year, and his duties as a commercial real estate advisor and a motivational speaker, and still finds time for extreme skiing.

business is that people can now purchase and immediately print dining certificates right before going out.”

The fact remains that local foodies are still dining out in steady numbers, despite economic trends. What's more, because of economic trends, many diners would likely be pleased to know that, due to concepts such as the one Hills (a Philadelphia native)

has established, it's not necessary to spend a load of cash doing so. For example, by using the 999dine.com service, users can purchase a \$15 gift certificate for just \$4.50 (plus a \$2 processing fee) at a restaurant like Downtown's Gold Street Caffe, or more than 60 other restaurants in Albuquerque or nearby cities such as Santa Fe, Taos and Durango.

However, 999dine.com is not all that Hills has simmering on his entrepreneurial stove. In addition to those duties, he is also carving a niche for himself as a motivational speaker, with bi-monthly engagements booked in both professional and educational settings, and also finds time to work as a commercial real estate adviser with Maestas & Ward (gotspaceusa.com) and maintain a hobby as an extreme skier and ski model.

Above all, Hills admitted, it's the motivational speaking that currently holds the most appeal for him. He considers it a natural next step in his path to personal development.

“I talk about success skills, things that should have been taught in school but weren't, things that [I have learned] in the last 10 years since graduating from Anderson School of Management at the University of New Mexico that have helped me be successful,” Hills said. “Speaking to large groups, to me, is a lot like skiing off a cliff: you psyche yourself up and get prepared. It's a fun rush.”

Another personal connection that fuels Hills' desire and search for an adrenaline rush is collaborating with action photographer Kevin Rebholtz (kevinrebholtzphotography.com), who captures Hills as he maneuvers down the

most treacherous ski runs at Taos Ski Valley, where Hills' parents reside.

“Preferably on powder days,” Hills noted.

Ski modeling has challenged the downhill skills of the already adept Hills, as he pushes for the perfect shot.

“All year long, I'll study a cliff,” Hills said, “and it's always in my mind as I say to myself, ‘That [jump] would look good with that background at this time of day.’”

When the conditions are just right, Hills added skier and photographer create magic.

As for the commercial real estate business, Hills informed without hesitation, “It's my calling. I'm a problem solver.” According to Hills, who unsurprisingly specializes in restaurant spaces, the real estate industry in Albuquerque is fairing better than most U.S. cities. His overall outlook on business in the city is equally positive.

“... [Albuquerque] is fertile ground for entrepreneurs,” Hills said. “It's big enough to create the momentum needed for a business to be successful, but still small enough to network yourself and get to know all the right people.”

When asked if the nation's substandard economy has been detrimental to 999Dine.com, Hills responded with characteristic positivity.

“If anything, it's bolstered our position,” Hills stated. “I get almost an e-mail a day saying ‘thank you, this allows us to try new restaurants, buy gifts for friends and save a couple bucks.’ The gift of dining is something that will always be in vogue.”

To follow the trajectory of this business-savvy shooting star, visit bretthills.com.