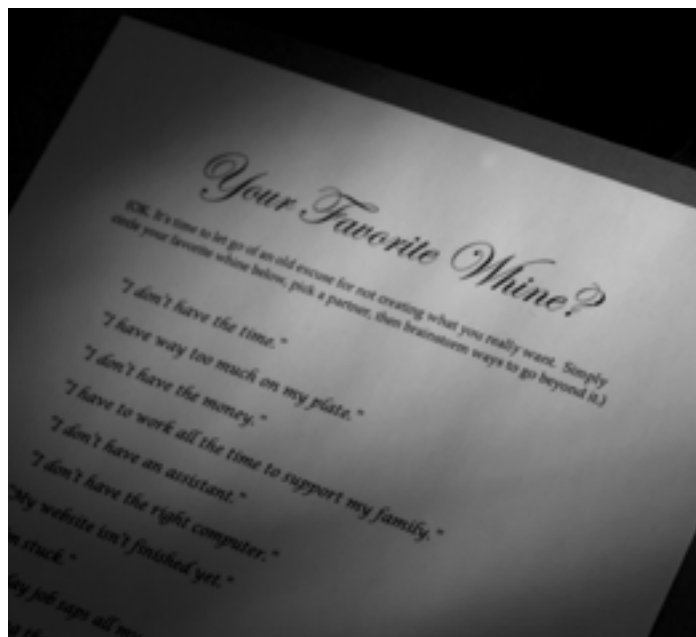


EAT, DRINK, BE CREATIVE

THE BREAKTHROUGH CAFE



Epiphanies don't happen every day. But Mitchell Ditkoff and John C. Havens, the men responsible for the Breakthrough Cafe, hope that their customers will have at least one “a-ha!” moment during the course of an evening. Their goal for this combination “party, restaurant, and brainstorming session,” as they describe it, is to help people get unstuck, to move past the obstacles that bar the way to a more ecstatic existence. The cafe is a place where procrastinators, the creatively challenged, and the eternally perplexed can get together to exchange ideas, stories, and solutions, and to support one another.

Two Breakthrough Cafes have been held at the Blue Mountain Bistro in Woodstock. Paying customers arrive with an intention or goal (usually business-related), which is spelled out on a fluorescent name badge. As hors d'oeuvres are being served, cafe-goers circulate, squint at one another's nametags, and start chatting. Each nametag begins with the same words: How can I...? At the second cafe, questions (quests) included: *How can I combine my passions (creative artistic expression, nature, and spirituality) to serve the world and earn a living? How can I get my professional catering business off the ground? How can I find strategies to enable me to move my jewelry business to the next level?*

While the questions are serious, the atmosphere is playful. The cafe promises in its promotional material to serve “great food for thought, not just great food.” Patrons don't give tips. Instead, InnoWaiters do. Men and women garbed as waiters wander

the room to stimulate conversation and facilitate brainstorming.

After a buffet dinner, each cafe-goer is given a “whine list,” a compendium of excuses for avoiding action: *I don't have the time...I don't have the money...My day job saps my energy...Mercury is in retrograde.* (In places like Woodstock, the last excuse may not be a joke.) In groups of three, each person picks their favorite whine, and the other two conjure visions of what life will be like in 10 years if the whiner doesn't get past the obstacle, and what life will be like (much rosier) if the person moves ahead and attains his or her goal.

A “reality check” is presented at the end of the evening. It arrives in the form of a card, similar to a credit-card receipt, with spaces to answer questions and fill in next steps. Attendees are asked to rate, on a scale of one to ten, how committed they are to succeeding with their project. A line for a signature is included. At the bottom of the card, in tiny type, a quote reads: “You will never find time for anything. If you want time, you must make it.”

Ditkoff, Havens, and their team of InnoWaiters and Archetypes—such as Madame Natasha (an “oracle” who helps fuel creative thinking) and the Sovereign (responsible for showing guests how to be sovereign over their own lives)—hope to expand the concept to New York City and, ultimately, to businesses that want to help employees achieve breakthroughs and results.

ANN BRAYBROOKS PHOTOS BY TERESA HORGAN



I'M SO INSPIRED

To get a full sense of the Breakthrough Cafe, I decided to participate on a Friday night in October.

As soon as I arrived at the Blue Mountain Bistro, I was ushered upstairs to meet Laurie Schwartz, the Intention Maven. Schwartz helps those people who are having trouble articulate the intention that will be written on their name badges. Since I'm on the verge of seeking a job in Manhattan, I wanted to ask how I could find a meaningful position that utilized my background in publishing and public relations.

Schwartz steered me away from the idea of simply looking for a job. She suggested that I think about the big picture. Did I want to find a job, or pursue a passion? How would my career choice fit with the rest of my life? Finally I scribbled on my nametag: *How can I balance having a fulfilling career and caring for my six-year-old?*

Downstairs, I found people excitedly reading each other's nametags and tossing out ideas. I spoke to a handful of people, one of whom deflated my fantasy of being a fundraiser for a nonprofit. (She said the bureaucracy would depress me. Still, I wasn't entirely deterred.) Another cafe-goer suggested that I become a teacher, which would allow me to spend more time with my family.

These kinds of discussions continued through dinner and during the "whine" hour. While I didn't have a breakthrough that night, I did enjoy interacting with other people and providing suggestions that might help them. It was fun.

Perhaps I was given a gift, though, by the Intention Maven. She reminded me that I don't want a job that eats up 60 hours of my week (40, maybe, but not 60). I do want to figure out how to create a great, balanced life.

Perhaps I should pull out a random card from the Genie pack and see what happens. Here's one: *Immerse. Name three ways you can immerse yourself more deeply in your most compelling project. What's the simplest way you can begin?* I'd better get started.

—AB

OPPOSITE (L-R): BARBARA CERNAK, MITCH DITKOFF, JOAN APTER, ELISE PITTLEMAN, AND LAURIE SCHWARTZ BRAINSTORMING AT THE BREAKTHROUGH CAFE; SELECTIONS FROM THE CAFE'S LIST OF CREATIVE EXCUSES; ABOVE: PITTLEMAN AND SCHWARTZ CONSULTING THE "FREE THE GENIE" CARDS.

The cafe is an extension of Idea Champions, the business that Ditkoff founded in 1986 with partner Steven McHugh. The Woodstock-based management consulting and training company specializes in creativity, innovation, team-building, leadership, and out-of-the-box product. Clients include GE, AT&T, Lucent Technologies, MTV Networks, Pfizer, and General Mills.

According to Ditkoff, the Breakthrough Cafe is "partly a result of what we've learned, and what we've discovered people need. I asked thousands of people, anecdotally and through online polls: Where do you get your best ideas? What is the catalyst—the time of day, the place—that helps you tap into your creativity? Less than one percent said that they get their ideas at work. They get their ideas when they are happy, not sad; offline, away from the office; late at night; and in the company of friends and people they trust.

"I looked at the places where I go for renewal and refreshment, and at the Left Bank in Paris, where artists and writers seek each other out in cafes. That's where they connect. They create a community, then go back to do their thinking in isolation. I wanted to find a soulful, lighthearted, organic, entertaining way to spark the best creative thinking, the inspiration, the "a-ha's." I think of the Breakthrough Cafe as an incubation chamber for great ideas. It's not a place to browse or schmooze. People come to the cafe having already identified an idea, a problem, a need. Those people may be stuck, or they may be doing fine, but they want to accelerate the process. It's not a seminar or a workshop or a lecture or a training session. It's interactive, participatory. The immersive environment increases the possibility of "a-ha" moments. Our goal is to provide as much support as we can to help people move forward."

Ditkoff envisions taking this "moveable feast" to companies in the US and beyond. "We can travel to a business and set up the Breakthrough Cafe as part of the flow of their meeting or conference. Our ultimate goal is to empower clients to do it themselves. We could offer clients half a day or a day of training to teach their team how to conduct a Breakthrough Cafe. The people who are trained, who get the message, will be capable of being a 'freelance innovation catalyst' in their organizations."

While Ditkoff acts as the *mître d'* for the Breakthrough Cafe, Havens acts as the concierge. He met Ditkoff while working for Idea Champions on the Free the Genie card deck, which features 55 playing cards that promote out-of-the-lamp thinking and commitment to a passion or project. Says Havens, "The Breakthrough Cafe brings together a lot of my skill sets: acting, teaching, writing, marketing. I love connecting people, introducing people who can help each other. After each cafe, participants can go home to their computers and access the InnoWiki, an interactive website that allows them to continue working on their ideas and goals. I hope that the InnoWiki becomes a knowledge base for innovation. If someone comes to a cafe, whether it's the second or the fiftieth down the road, they can have continued opportunities to discover the people and resources to make their goals a reality. I want the Breakthrough Cafe to give people a new tool, a new paradigm, to help them shift their ways of thinking, to help them break beyond what they know, move beyond their obstacles—the things that hold them back from living the most fulfilling life possible."

How's that for a tall order? 🍷

Information about the Breakthrough Cafe, Idea Champions, and the Free the Genie card deck can be found at www.ideachampions.com or by calling (800) 755-IDEA.