



Living

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Making Chalk Talk

With her handsome handwriting and collection of carefully curated quotes, Jane Wenger beautifies restaurant chalkboards.

Posted July 23, 2013 by [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#)

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Jane Wenger is not the handwriting police. She won't slap you with a ruler for bad penmanship.

It's just that, as she will tell you, "I have always viewed handwriting as an art form." And it pains her—as one who has taken calligraphy classes and holds a degree in art history from Boston University—to see an art form done badly.

Add to this her love of restaurants, and perhaps it was inevitable that one day this well-mannered lady would take a stand and do the write thing.

The flashpoint occurred about eight years ago. When friends "dragged" her to dinner at Charlie Brown's in Upper Montclair, Wenger scowled at the beer listings scrawled on a backlit panel behind the bar. "It wasn't written in nice handwriting," she explains. "It wasn't graphically appealing. I said to the waiter, who I happened to know, 'Why don't you let me write that? I have better handwriting.'"

It was agreed she would come back and redo the board for its next update. "They liked what I did," she says, "and I did it about three or four times after that."

Then in 2008, at another Montclair eatery, Wenger zeroed in on a chalkboard emblazoned with "a self-help kind of quote." Not liking the handwriting or the quote, she offered to do better.

Intrigued, the owner gave her a book of quotes to draw from. The contents struck her as "preachy," but she did find one she liked. Wenger went on to update the restaurant's quote and menu boards for the next four years.

In the process, she became a quote hound. She started hanging out at a Barnes & Noble, leafing through books for hours on end, copying quotes neatly by hand into note pads and unlined art notebooks.

"For me, it's like finding buried treasure," she explains. "I'm not going to put something on a board that I don't like. It's a reflection of my creativity."

Wenger has now filled about 10 pads and notebooks with meticulously lettered witticisms, poems and insights she has plucked from books, magazines, newspaper cryptograms, greeting cards, shop windows, refrigerator magnets, song lyrics—even a tattoo on someone's arm. (Her favorite source, she says, is Bob Dylan, with Shel Silverstein a close second.)

Wenger has written menu and message boards featuring her carefully culled quotes for about 30 establishments in Essex County, many on a recurring basis.

Growing up in Montclair, where she still lives, Wenger "was always very visual," she says. As a girl she did window arrangements for her mother's antique store. Other dealers in town noticed them and invited her to dress their storefronts, too.

Wenger has a day job, which she won't discuss. Some locals call her the Chalkboard Lady, but she says she considers the work a hobby, like the wedding and other invitations she has hand addressed for friends. She won't divulge what, if anything, she charges for her work.

Like a good chef, Wenger strives for seasonality. One of her regular clients is the Brazilian restaurant Samba Montclair. Shortly before Mother's Day, she embellished the large chalkboard there with a Japanese proverb: "In a child's lunch basket, a mother's thoughts." More recently, she changed it to a quote from George Eliot: "One can say everything best over a meal."

"Customers come here to take pictures of the quotes," says chef/owner Ilson Goncalves. "They post them on Facebook."

Samba Montclair's board is affixed high on a wall. Writing while standing on a ladder presents challenges that

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putting pen to paper doesn't. Wenger sometimes has to climb down every two letters "to make sure the writing is straight and the letters are the same size." Her only guides are a yardstick and, for drawing on a curve, a Frisbee.

She's doesn't use stencils. "It would be cheating," she says. Her assignments take from one to nine hours to complete, depending on the size of the board and the amount of information to be conveyed.

"For almost any chalkboard, I do them very lightly in white chalk to get the spacing right, and then I go over it in color," she says. Sometimes she goes over the letters a third time to make the colors pop.

Though sweet natured, Wenger is a stickler. When asked for some of her favorite quotes, she demurred; then, after several days, she faxed over a sheet of four, each carefully hand-lettered, and stipulated that they go in the order she wrote them:

- "A man is a success if he gets up in the morning and gets to bed at night, and in between he does what he wants to do."—**Bob Dylan**
- "A hot dog at the ball park is better than a steak at the Ritz."—**Humphrey Bogart**
- "Take only pictures and leave only footprints."—**The Backpacker's Code**
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