

NESsTER Travel Grant: Trip Summary

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NESsT, Budapest 2011

Kék Madár (Izlelő csarádbarát étterem)
Szekszárd, Hungary
August 10 2011

I wasn't sure what to expect as the red Volkswagen Golf made its way through the uphill streets of Szekszárd. I'd arrived by bus that morning on a mission to research first-hand how one of the most successful social enterprises in NESsT's portfolio planned to expand; what had already been done and what was in the works. A part of my summer research on social enterprise scaling and replication, this final stage called for interviewing selected organizations, and Kék Madár with its Izlelő csarádbarát étterem was next on the list.

Andrea Mészáros, Izlelő csarádbarát étterem's main founder and current CEO, asked questions from the driver's seat: how was my time in Hungary so far, what foods had I tried, etc. Food of course would be in the conversation, since the social enterprise is a restaurant, and one that attempts to dispel discrimination against disabled employees. Izlelő, or "Tid bit" when asked for the English name, translates directly to something along the lines of "You can find the taste here"; needless to say, the promise of lunch later on was quite appetizing.

The car pulled off the street and into an open parking area, and Kék Madár appeared on the right, with the restaurant the next door up. Shortly afterwards I'd been introduced to most of the staff and to Izlelő's mission: to overcome social bias against the disabled. Izlelő is the first restaurant of its kind in Hungary. It does its groundbreaking work through a simple restaurant, but with an emphasis on cleanness, transparency and openness between the staff and the customers. Healthy food is its specialty, along with providing a "family friendly" environment. So far the model has proven enormously popular.

Within one and a half years Izlelő reached its breakeven point, and then exceeded it, tripling the daily number of guests served from when the restaurant first opened. Given this success, and the positive social work it accomplished with its employment model for social inclusion, the next step is expansion. Andrea and the rest of the team plan to convert the current office-restaurant setup into a larger restaurant, boosting the number of seats offered from 24 to somewhere around 60 – 100, depending on the occasion. This will complement the previous kitchen expansion from two years ago.

But the real debate is on long-term growth. Can Izlelő's success be replicated elsewhere? If so, is franchising or licensing a better model? In other words, how

much control should Kék Madár have over these theoretical new restaurants? And should the growth be confided to Hungary?

After a traditional Hungarian meal of cooked liver, potatoes and ratatouille, I asked these sort of questions in a structured interview. Andrea, a co-worker and translator were all present (although Andrea's English is much better than she will admit). Once I had finished, the questions turned on me; except, what they most wanted to know about was my take on US politics. For better or worse, our political debates (and stalemates) are apparently well broadcasted for the world to see.

Apart from a bus mix-up on the way back the trip was a complete success. I used my notes from the interview as material for an analysis on how NESsT can best help its social enterprises to scale and replicate, with key suggestions directly copied from the transcript. For me, the opportunity to actually visit a social enterprise such as Izlelő is immensely rewarding; a chance to see social enterprise in action, and to see the fruit of NESsT's work.

All of this said, thank you for providing the funding for me to take this trip!