



PROJECT RUBEN

Solidarity restaurant serving up to 350 meals daily with 140 volunteers

Overview

Ristorante Ruben is a solidarity restaurant in Milan (via Gonin 52, Zone Giambellino-Lorenteggio), operated by Fondazione Ernesto Pellegrini ONLUS (FEP). It provides high-quality, nutritious meals at a symbolic cost of 1 euro (free for children under 16) to support individuals and families facing temporary economic hardship, particularly the "new poor" who fall outside traditional public aid criteria. The restaurant emphasizes dignity, social inclusion, and resilience, serving up to 350 people nightly with a varied menu prepared by professional chefs. Beyond food, it acts as an entry point for broader support, including housing assistance, financial education, legal aid, health services, and job reintegration programs. Open Monday–Saturday evenings (18:45–20:45), Ruben fosters community through volunteer interactions and has served thousands since opening, aligning with efforts to combat food poverty in Milan's peripheries.

History and Inspiration

Launched in 2015 amid Milan's Expo, Ristorante Ruben stems from the Fondazione Ernesto Pellegrini ONLUS, established in 2013 by Ernesto Pellegrini, former Inter Milan president and catering entrepreneur. Inspired by the family's legacy in food services and a commitment to social justice, it addresses post-2008 financial crisis poverty, focusing on the "new poor"—those ineligible for extreme poverty aid due to income thresholds or assets, yet struggling with basics like food. The name honors Ruben, a farmhand from Pellegrini's childhood who died in poverty, symbolizing forgotten hardships. The foundation's broader mission combines food aid with dignity, solidarity, and reintegration, evolving from family-funded projects in Italy and abroad to a structured initiative promoting resilience through quality experiences, rejecting charity models in favor of symbolic contributions.

How It Operates

Ruben serves 350 meals nightly in two shifts, with a welcoming, home-like environment equipped for families (e.g., high chairs, changing tables). Access requires referral from one of 100 partner organizations (NGOs, churches, social services) or direct FEP assessment, with eligibility reassessed every two months based on financial and personal stories. Users receive a points card for dinners (up to daily, Monday–Saturday). Meals, prepared by 6 professional chefs with nutritionist input, include a first course, second, side, fruit/dessert, bread, and beverages (eco-friendly, fair-trade, no fried foods or alcohol). Food is purchased fresh via Pellegrini Group's supply chain, avoiding donations for quality. 15 nightly staff/volunteers (140 total) focus on companionship, not service, fostering conversations. Beyond dining, Ruben connects users to FEP's integrated support: housing, job aid, financial education, legal/health services, aiming for poverty exit (resilience focus).

Costs

Operational costs, covered by the Pellegrini family group, include food purchases (high-quality ingredients via group platform), staff salaries (6 kitchen professionals), building rent, utilities, and maintenance for the welcoming space. Volunteer management adds minor expenses for training and coordination. No detailed public figures, but the symbolic 1 euro fee doesn't cover costs; the foundation subsidizes fully, rejecting food donations to ensure quality.

Funding Sources

Primarily self-funded by the Pellegrini family group through a dedicated foundation fund, covering all operational costs without relying on public subsidies or food donations. The foundation accepts general donations from agro-food companies but purchases food outright for quality. Additional support comes from partnerships with 100+ referral organizations and events like the 2024 #CISIAMO10 anniversary, which may attract contributions. No external grants detailed, but the model ensures sustainability via family commitment, with FEP's broader initiatives occasionally backed by corporate ties.

Revenue Generation

Minimal revenue from symbolic 1 euro fees per adult meal (free for children), which covers a fraction of costs but reinforces dignity over charity. The foundation reinvests any surplus into operations and support programs. No commercial sales or donations for food; sustainability relies on family funding rather than profit. Partnerships and events may generate indirect support, but Ruben operates as a non-profit tool for broader aid, not revenue-focused.

Cost categories

Assets	Operational costs	Personnel costs	Administration and management
Restaurant premises	Food purchases	Salaries (6 professional kitchen staff)	User assessments and reassessments (every 2 months)
Kitchen equipment and furnishings	Utilities (electricity, water for 350 daily meals)	Volunteer coordination (140 volunteers, 15 nightly)	Referral network management
Family-friendly amenities (high chairs, changing tables)	Menu planning and nutritionist supervision Maintenance and eco-practices		Fundraising and event organization Legal and health service coordination