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Clusters of independent Pittsburgh eateries increase optimism in business districts

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Tim Schooley](#)

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As he works to open his new restaurant, Kevin Sousa speaks proudly about the individual touches to be expected at Salt of the Earth.

He talks about large communal tables made from local wood by the nonprofit Urban Tree Forge; an emphasis on fresh, local food and Sousa's panache with contemporary American cuisine; and local beers and great mixed drinks, all offered at reasonable prices in a casual setting.

But he also speaks with a pioneer's optimism of his location and the potential of helping to attract other establishments that could help develop a restaurant row along a stretch of Penn Avenue that runs through Garfield and Friendship to Bloomfield and Lawrenceville.

"I think we're going to be an impetus for a restaurant row in this neighborhood," said Sousa, an acclaimed local chef perhaps best known for his work at Bigelow Grille, Downtown. "All it takes is one."

Throughout the city and in dynamic communities such as Mount Lebanon, Cranberry and, perhaps most dramatically, Greensburg (see Page 11), independent restaurants continue to crop up, allowing new restaurant rows to emerge and helping to draw attention to business districts working to come out on the other side of a down economy.

While causing its share of restaurant closings, the hard economy hasn't stopped many independent restaurants from pushing forward with new plans as real estate values and rents have come down, and chain operators sit pat in a country many say still faces a glut of chain restaurants.

That is allowing a variety of business districts and suburban commercial strips to grow their selection of restaurants.

Terri Sokoloff, a principal of [Specialty Group](#), a McCandless-based restaurant services firm, sees it as a continuation of a trend.

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"I think you see more restaurants because there's more chefs who have stepped outside the comfort zone of working for somebody," she said.

At the same time, she argues a difficult economy isn't just harming restaurants, but spurring new ones. After all, investing in a restaurant, considered an iffy bet in the best of times, looks better and better when the stock market swoons.

"With the economy and the climate, there's a lot of people who look at investing in a restaurant not as high risk as their stock portfolio," she said.

Bringing the buzz

Josette Fitzgibbons, the mainstreets coordinator for the city's [Urban Redevelopment Authority](#), said new restaurants have given a boost to a number of city business districts. But she cautions that restaurants have limits in how much they can help revitalize neighborhoods.

"Restaurants are difficult. They have low margins. They sometimes come and go, and sometimes come with a lot of fanfare, and then go and come again. But they help to create a buzz about a neighborhood," she said. "They're not necessarily a driver all the time for revitalization. But they're a piece of the puzzle, and they can be something that sort of starts or raises the level of buzz about the business district."

Matt Galluzzo, arts district manager for the Penn Avenue Arts Initiative, said a study his organization conducted revealed that only 77 percent of the residents within the Penn Avenue business district's service area are frequenting its restaurants, suggesting more room for growth.

His district is working to build upon the growth of arts nonprofits such as the Pittsburgh Glass Center, and the Dance Alloy and its popular Penn Avenue Unblurred events to rebuild gaps in the business district, including the Glass Lofts project working to establish a new restaurant.

"They serve a vital function in having people spend positive experiences in our district and spend time," he said.

'Transformational stage'

Dianne Porter hopes her business can see its neighborhood grow to generate such activity. She opened Cassis, an elegant contemporary restaurant at the corner of Western and Gavelston avenues in the heart of Allegheny West's business district.

Open more than seven months, Porter is seeing business gradually ramp up in a neighborhood that offers a popular Nicky's Thai Kitchen restaurant; the Modern Cafe, which recently reopened after suffering a fire a few years ago; and local lunch staples such as Peppi's and the Allegheny Sandwich Shoppe. The neighborhood was close to seeing a new Italian place open, but its status was in doubt at press time, and longtime staple Shamrock Cafe is up for sale for \$1 million.

"I think the whole of Allegheny West has recently gone through a transformational stage," said Porter, adding the neighborhood renovated the streets and sidewalks with red brick, added new lighting and planters. "As a community, they're gearing up to make this a destination street."

While Porter seeks to grow her customer base, she hopes it can develop into the kind of destination restaurant row where visitors come for the variety of restaurants they can choose from, where "people come from all over the city and say, if I can't get in here I can get in there."

For Sousa's part, he hopes Salt of the Earth can help kick-start the kind of restaurant development he's seen take off in Lawrenceville, East Liberty and elsewhere.

"I think the same thing is going to happen here," he said.

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