

THE REGION

Dining scene is really starting to cook

By China Millman
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In Garfield, drywall is going up and appliances are being installed at Salt of the Earth, chef Kevin Sousa's new casual fine dining restaurant that's slated to open this summer.

Less than a block away, another group of restaurateurs is trying to pull together financing for a dining space in the new Glass Lofts development.

Over in Shadyside, the Big Burrito group is applying for permits to convert a space for a new restaurant, while up the street in East Liberty, the former Red Room Cafe space will be transformed into a new spot for American cuisine. In Mt. Lebanon, a successful restaurateur is hoping to open another dining spot nearby.

Downtown also is seeing new dining activity. The fifth Sharp Edge, an eatery for beer lovers, will open shortly in the Cultural District. A Strip District retail shop and cafe is opening a second location near Market Square this summer, where a star chef also is scouting spots and looking for investors. Meanwhile hammers will be pounding away inside The Carlton this summer as the venerable restaurant undergoes a nearly \$900,000 face lift.

In no time since the recession in 2008 has the Pittsburgh area seen so much activity on the dining front.

Signs of growth aren't restricted to local operators. The National Restaurant Association reported that April's Restaurant Performance Index topped 100 for the first time in more than two years.

Based on a monthly survey of restaurant operators nationwide, the index found they have experienced greater same store sales and increased customer traffic compared to this time last year, and growing numbers are confident that the economy

SEE DINING, PAGE A-15

Dining scene is really starting to cook here

DINING, FROM PAGE A-1

will continue to improve over the next six months.

Some operators are cautiously optimistic, while others seem to be throwing caution to the wind. But all over Pittsburgh, deals are being done.

"We're busy. I need more listings to sell right now," said Terri Sokoloff, president of Specialty Bar & Restaurant Brokers, which helps to arrange the sale and purchase of existing restaurant space and the transfer of liquor licenses.

Kevin Joyce, owner of the Carlton, one of the city's oldest restaurants which will close late next month for renovations, said he's been encouraged by recent signs.

"Since Valentine's day, the last 10 weeks or so have been positive, 18 to 20 percent above last year," he said about customer traffic. "I think the signs are there that people are starting to find some disposable income."

While the restaurant is closed, Mr. Joyce said he and his staff will be "tweaking everything."

"A lot of restaurants face this ... when you get to a certain age, it's always a fine line to keep yourself on the cutting edge without losing the core [audience]."

He hopes to reopen Aug. 16 and anticipates a busy fall.

For those opening restaurants with new concepts, re-imagining fine dining to draw and keep patrons in a post-recession market is a consistent theme.

"People's perceptions of dining and going out are forever changed," said Brian Pekarci, most recently of the Steelhead Brasserie and Wine Bar at the Marriott City Center. He is slated to become the executive chef of Spoon, the new restaurant moving into the Red Room space at 134 S. Highland Ave.

Diners now want great food, but at reasonable prices, and they're willing to live without "white tablecloths and champagne carts," he said.

Spoon will be just that kind of restaurant, he said, with the attention to detail and level of product of a fine dining restaurant but without the pretension.

Rick Stern, who owns Spoon as well as Willow in Ohio Town-

On the menu

Restaurants in progress and their planned opening dates include:

- **Salt of the Earth**, creative American cuisine, Garfield, summer; www.saltpgn.com

- **Spoon**, refined comfort food, East Liberty, summer

- **BRGR**, high-end burger bar, East Liberty, fall

- **The Carlton**, fine dining American cuisine, Downtown, reopening Aug. 16; www.thecarlton-restaurant.com

- **Penn Avenue Fish Company**, seafood cafe and sushi bar, Downtown, summer; www.pennave-fishcompany.com

- **Sharp Edge Bistro**, Belgian beer and bar food, Cultural District, Downtown, summer; sharpedgebeer.com

- **Mad Mex**, CaliMex with global influences, Shadyside, opening TBD; www.madmex.com

- **Ciboulette**, whimsical American dining and cuisine, Mt. Lebanon, opening TBD

- **Park Brugge**, European bistro, Highland Park, opening TBD

- **Donato's**, Italian casual fine dining, O'Hara, summer

ship, is so confident it will be successful that he's already planning to open a second restaurant with Mr. Pekarci in the space occupied by 2RED, the bar and lounge next to the Red Room. They'll first use the space to serve a pared-down selection of items from Spoon's menu. This fall, they plan to convert it into BRGR, a high-end burger bar.

Just a stone's throw away at 220 Highland Ave., the Big Burrito Restaurant Group plans to open a new Mad Mex, its second in the city. The building, across from Casbah — also a Big Burrito spot — has never housed a restaurant and will require an extensive build-out, said Bill Fuller, corpo-

rate executive chef for the group. An opening date hasn't been determined because the group still must complete a long process of approvals and permits.

Uphill battles

Restaurants can face many last-minute obstacles, but securing financing is undoubtedly the linchpin of opening a new business. While it has never been easy, in the post-recession climate even some proven restaurateurs and chefs are finding that it is a bigger task than they expected.

Rodney Swartz, co-owner of the Harris Grill in Shadyside since 2004, has been working for months to get financing to open a new restaurant in Garfield's Glass Lofts on Penn Avenue.

"It's not that they're saying no," he said. "[Loan officers] are working really hard to try to get loans through ... but they're still not getting answers."

Mr. Swartz said he thinks it may also be harder to secure financing to lease, rather than buy, a building for a restaurant, because "when there's not a real estate component to the deal, what is the bank buying — spoons and forks?"

Mrs. Sokoloff, the restaurant broker, said she has noticed that most of her clients are relying solely on private investment.

"People are just pulling out their checkbooks," she said, and even taking money out of 401k funds, something she almost never saw before the recession.

That isn't an option for David Racicot, who is trying to open a restaurant Downtown. Until a few months ago, he was the chef de cuisine at the fine dining restaurant Lautrec at the Nemacolin Woodlands Resort in Fayette County. Under Mr. Racicot's leadership, Lautrec earned 5 diamonds from AAA and 5 Mobil stars — the highest ratings possible. It's the only restaurant in Western Pennsylvania to earn these distinctions. Despite these prestigious awards, Mr. Racicot has struggled to get investors.

"Someone who's cooking in Pittsburgh might have a thousand people come eat their food who might want to invest in their restaurant," he said.

But at Nemacolin, Mr. Racicot cooked mostly for visitors from across the country and

formed few connections with the city he now wants to call home.

Getting an invitation

Henry Dewey and Angela Earley were lucky enough to have a potential landlord come to them. They plan to open a second location of Penn Avenue Fish Company, their Strip District retail shop and cafe, on Forbes Avenue, about a block from Market Square.

"This guy who owns the building came to us and said 'I think you guys are so exciting, I want you in our building and I want you to be a draw for other people to come down [here].'" Mr. Dewey said.

The new location will concentrate on the lunch and early-dinner crowd, with a sushi bar and a similar selection of seafood-focused soups, salads and sandwiches, Mr. Dewey said. Depending on demand, the restaurant may also have retail fish available, which could be a boon to Downtown workers and residents who until now have had no place to buy fresh fish.

Jeff Iovino wants a similar tale. He knew he wanted to open a second restaurant as soon as he was done opening Iovino's four years ago on Beverly Road in Mt. Lebanon, but it was only in the last few months that an opportunity presented itself. A retail spot on Washington Road became vacant, and the landlord and his wife asked Mr. Iovino if he would be interested in opening a restaurant there.

Brad Kelly, who was Mr. Racicot's predecessor at Lautrec but most recently worked as executive chef of corporate dining and special events at SUPMC, is Mr. Iovino's partner on the project. Ciboulette —

"chive" in French, pronounced see-boo-lyeh — is still in the planning and development stage, but Mr. Kelly described the concept as a whimsical interpretation of American dining and cuisine.

Operating a restaurant is still a risky business that carries a narrow profit margin. Amid the news of restaurants coming Downtown, Palomino closed last Sunday after eight years in Gateway Center. Its corporate headquarters in Seattle cited difficulty in managing the restaurant from afar, but did not men-

tion the economy as a factor.

Even the most optimistic restaurateurs are still well aware of the challenges ahead.

Mr. Pekarci, the hopeful chef for Spoon, has had a bottle of champagne in his fridge for months now, purchased to celebrate the new project.

When does he plan to pop the cork?

"When I'm in the kitchen, cooking."

Restaurant critic China Millman can be reached at cmillman@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1150.

Great cars.
Great prices.
Ask Suzie
SuzieKnows.com
Your Personal Female Car Shopper

Calling Men with Prostate Cancer Ages 60 and Older for Bone Health Study

The University of Pittsburgh is conducting a research study to examine bone health and risks for fractures in men being treated with zoladex, lupron, or casodex. This study involves up to 2 study visits. It is funded by a grant from the Department of Defense.

Call about the **BOSS Study - Bone Strength Study**
412-692-2478
or e-mail wagnerjm@pitt.edu