

The Coercion of Cuisine

Looking to spur sales and stir up repeat business, metro Detroit's resourceful restaurateurs are combining new menus with upgraded décor — and adding a pinch of piquant promotions.

BY JESSICA BOND AND TIFFANY ESSHAKI

After producing arguably the world's largest gathering of electronic musicians in 2008, Jason Huvaere was looking forward to a few long weekends up north.

Then the phone rang.

It was a Detroit civic group, the Greater Downtown Partnership, calling to see if Huvaere would promote and operate another major downtown event where fine restaurants would offer signature dishes at discounted prices.

"It was only fitting that we had lunch downtown because we use so many of the fine restaurants to host musicians and executives from around the world," says Huvaere, president of Ferndale-based Paxahau Promotions Group.

Patterned after similar promotions in New York, Los Angeles, and Boston, the inaugural Detroit Restaurant Week (actually 10 days from Sept. 18-27) features 16 fine-dining Detroit restaurants offering three-course dinners for just \$27 per person.

"The event not only provides the participating restaurants with the opportunity to entertain new and repeat customers," Huvaere says, "but our research shows the promotion will have a lasting impression, and many patrons will return again." Sponsors include Greater Downtown Districts in Detroit and the Social Connection in Ferndale, while participating restaurants include Seldom Blues, Roast, Cuisine, Iridesence, and 24 Grille. Looking to add another element to the traditional culinary experience, Huvaere is planning a musical component, as well, which aims to give patrons the chance to visit several entertainment venues after dinner.

The culinary week is one of many promotions restaurants are embracing to maintain or enhance revenue in what everyone agrees is a challenging economy.

"You have to stand out and keep your name in the minds of customers, but you also need to do a great job of watching what people are ordering," says Jerry A. McVety, president of McVety & Associates, a food service and hospitality consulting firm in Farmington Hills.

A case in point: Six months ago, David Ritchie, managing partner of Bastone Brewery in downtown Royal Oak, noticed diners were ordering fewer appetizers and desserts. Entrée items were also down, but pizza and sandwich sales were up. And beer was starting to outpace wine and cocktail orders.

So what did Ritchie do? "We offered more pizzas and sandwiches and spent time pairing them with the beers we offer," he says. "We saw the trend before the restaurant trade magazines started reporting it, and because we got out front, it helped us increase our revenue and profits."

Décor changes were also undertaken — new lighting, artwork, and furniture — not only at Bastone, but Ritchie also redecorated sister operations like Commune, Vinoteca, and Café Habana. Other restaurants such as Bourbon Street, the Capital Grille, Andiamo, and Morton's Steakhouse pursued similar paths.

Bourbon Street, the steakhouse at MGM Grand Detroit, recently created a specialty menu in its bar, paired with drink specials, while Morton's features a "Bar Bites" menu with several dishes starting at \$5. Selections include petite filet mignon sandwiches or crab cakes made with jumbo lump crab. "The menu's great because there's a lot of variety for a great price," says Morton's sales manager Andrea Aretakis.

Similarly, Andiamo has designed a "10 for 10" menu, offering a choice of 10 lunch entrees for less than \$10. The selections include a prosciutto and salami panini, as well as a chicken and seasonal vegetable risotto.

Another emerging trend: Multiple restaurants host culinary tours where people can sample locally created dishes, meet chefs, and peek inside commercial-grade kitchens. For example, Culinary Escapes offers Saturday lunch tours of more than a dozen eateries. Separate tours are available in Birmingham and Royal Oak, while Ferndale is planning to start in the fall.

Among the 10 stops on a recent walking tour in downtown Royal Oak were Superior Fish, Goldfish Tea, Gayle's Chocolates, and Memphis Smoke. The walking tours typically last three hours.

Getting everyone "in the kitchen" is popular, as well. Long the domain of resort areas like Walt Disney World's Epcot Center or the Food Network's Iron Chef America, multi-seat "cooking arenas" allow audiences to watch top-flight chefs create their signature dishes. Operators often use these venues to promote their products or menus.

In Auburn Hills, Trevarrow, a wholesale distributor of high-end residential kitchen equipment, houses an 85-seat culinary-training auditorium, where chefs showcase gourmet food in a live setting. Guests can also test high-end appliances before making a purchase.

Meanwhile, at the new Culinary Learning Institute at Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital, a 90-seat kitchen stadium allows chefs to teach patients and the public about producing, preparing, and serving organic food. The move to healthy food comes as more restaurants, gourmet markets, and food producers are offering and promoting locally grown cuisine. While the trend is popular with patrons, it also reduces delivery costs.

Hospital president Gerard van Grinsven, in partnership with the Matt Prentice Restaurant Group, says they use no deep-fat fryers or freezers. He also helped develop healthy menus that change every two weeks. The institute is also planning to add a greenhouse, where many of the fruits and vegetables will be incorporated into their recipes.

In Royal Oak, Holiday Market's Mirepoix cooking school offers individual culinary classes from \$30 to \$215, as well as team-building exercises and private cooking parties. The school has other promotions, including an English pub format every Thursday evening, where fine food, gourmet wines, and microbrews are available at modest prices.

With all these new tasting tours, diverse menus, cooking stadiums, and culinary classes, the business of eating in metro Detroit is no longer just an afterthought or a pre-show pit stop. Food here is quickly becoming the main event, giving diners the chance to participate in the performance and offering insight into an industry central to our community's culture.