

FOODSERVICE NEWS

T O P C H E F S



Foodservice News recognizes the Top Chefs in the Twin Cities who, during 2011 and heading into 2012, have impacted the state's dining scene in unique and important ways.

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WELCOME TO THE FOODSERVICE NEWS TOP CHEFS

As Foodservice News readers, you know that there has been considerable activity in the Twin Cities restaurant scene in recent years, in spite of a creeping economy. One can definitely say the metro area has arrived on the national stage—evidence of that is with the last three James Beard Awards for Best Chef Midwest have returned in Minneapolis chefs hands: Tim McKee, Alex Roberts and Isaac Becker.

But there's more to it than the medals passed out. A convergence of young and seasoned talent, a fast-growing network for excellent local ingredients, cultural influences, a deep passion for old-world cooking techniques, the dose of technological advancement and a decided shift from rigid structure has created a new type of restaurant: serious with menu and intent, casual in environment and price point.

In this issue we look at 10 chefs (two of whom work in the same restaurant) who have in the last year or two forced local diners to think differently about the food they

eat and the place and community in which they dine. Some names are familiar, but there are many new faces in this year's Foodservice News Top Chefs, all will have great impact in the years to follow.

Also in this book are our first Premier Chef designations. These are chefs that earned their top-tier status toiling in their restaurants, and with success evolved their role as a chef to impact the greater food community. They've mentored, inspired, and pushed boundaries, and continue to lead. We're pleased to name Lucia Watson and Tim McKee as the first in line.

Thanks for reading.



Mike Mitchelson
Managing Editor

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Russel Klein

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Meritage, located in the historic Hamm Building in downtown St. Paul, opened as a polished concept four years ago, and perhaps that's one reason it was a bit taken for granted. No drama or chest pounding when chef Russell Klein and his wife, Desta, launched the restaurant. It was the best Parisian-style brasserie west of...well, Paris, when the door opened the first night. It looks the part, too: tiled floor, dark woodwork, and broad street-level windows capturing the view of a historic town square. The atmosphere is simultaneously refined and comfortable, and the menu reflects that. Want a beer and a great burger? Have it. Your dining companion can have the Atlantic swordfish with the coriander crust and the saffron and orange-braised endive.

But downtown St. Paul's reputation for nightlife five years ago, outside of a Wild game or Ordway Theater production was, shall we say, not exactly buzz-worthy. The Kleins simply ignored that reality. Meritage quickly developed a loyal clientele and it was named "Best French Restaurant" for three years running by City Pages.

When the space adjacent to the restaurant became available

last year, the Kleins seized it, knocked down a wall, built an oyster bar and expanded the kitchen, along the way establishing Meritage as the premier place for oysters in the Twin Cities, if not the Midwest. Klein brings in more oyster varieties than anyone else in town by a long shot, extending his sourcing-from-small-farms sensibility to those family operations harvesting bivalves on the coasts.

Klein and his staff kept on cooking (of course) excellent renditions of classic brasserie fare such as steak frites, cassoulet, escargots bourguignon, and French-inspired preparations of fowl and pork. Local diners also learned how excellent all manner of seafood can be in skilled hands, a statement Star Tribune food critic Rick Nelson shouted loudly in his four-star review of Meritage last August.

Becoming the "go-to" place for seafood wasn't in the business plan, although it's a pleasant result of the kitchen staff's efforts, Klein said. "We're not a 'seafood restaurant,' we're a classic Parisian brasserie."

Part of that, he added, is the oyster bar. That bar is also a bit of nostalgia for Klein, an New York native—fresh, raw oysters were a regular treat. "Blue Island (Shellfish Farms in New York) is 25 minutes from my parents house," he said. "For us, the raw bar (at Meritage) is a passion."

"Passion" might be an understatement. During his and Desta's travels to learn and source from the best oyster farms on the coasts, they attended a few oyster festivals, and thought one could be feasible in St. Paul. "We've been staring at the plaza (in front of the restaurant) for four years," Klein said. "We wanted to figure out a way to use it."

Thus, Oysterfest was born. More than 750 people crashed

HARVEST PUMPKIN SOUP WITH NUTMEG CRÈME FRESH AND SPICED PECANS

Yield: 4 gallons

INGREDIENTS:

10 ea.	sugar pumpkins, split and seeded
20 ea.	shallots, sliced thin
3 ea.	onions, sliced thin
2 cup	carrot
1 cup	celery
10 ea.	garlic clove
4 cup	sherry wine
4 cup	brown sugar, packed
1 cup	cinnamon, ground
½ cup	nutmeg, ground
2 T.	cloves, ground
2 T.	mace, ground
5 gal.	vegetable stock
1 gal.	heavy cream
3 T.	sea salt
1 T.	white pepper
1 lb.	butter

Method:

1. Toast the spices in a sauté pan until you can smell them. Reserve them on the side. Be careful not to burn them. If you do, throw the spices away and get new ones!
2. In a large pot, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the spices and half the brown sugar.
3. Arrange the pumpkins on a sheet pan and pour the butter/spice mix over them. Roast in a 350° oven until tender.
4. Remove from the oven, allow to cool, and peel the pumpkins.
5. In a large pot, melt butter and sweat the vegetables.
6. Add the sherry and reduce by half.
7. Add the remaining brown sugar.
8. Add the roasted pumpkin.
9. Add the vegetable stock and bring to a boil. Whisk the soup to break up the pumpkin and incorporate the stock.
10. Simmer the soup for 10 minutes.
11. Add the cream and salt and pepper and cook an additional 10 minutes.
12. Puree the soup and strain through a fine china cap. Chill immediately.

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Doug Flicker

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When Doug Flicker closed his innovative Minneapolis restaurant Auriga in 2007 after a decade-long run, the surging Twin Cities dining scene lurched and mourned. Flicker went underground (so to speak), but didn't disappear. Or despair. He worked for other people for about three years, including the Hemisphere Restaurant Partners' Mission American Kitchen and Porter & Frye. During that time he was able to think: "About what I wanted to do for the next 10 years," he said.

What he came up with was Piccolo, a restaurant that offers diners a menu of a la carte small plates, each an exploration of balance in both flavor and texture, ingredients often transformed to forms unexpected. "Texture and contrast really shine through in a small plate," Flicker said. "If you're just cooking something or plating a salad to fill a slot (in the menu) it gets lost. With a small plate you can get very precise with cooking and meaning."

Take a recent menu—included on one plate (with interpretations of garlic toast and celery root, and a cornichon) was flatiron steak with bone marrow. The steak was represented by two pieces of

perfectly cooked flatiron, the marrow rolled in the middle. The morsels are about an inch and a half in length and width. Flicker extracts marrow from bones, then cooks the marrow sous vide (sealed in plastic and cooked in a water bath at a low temperature for a long period of time) to avoid rendering.

The flatiron steak is pounded thin and cut. Flicker then taps a small amount of "meat glue" (transglutaminase) onto the steak, which he then rolls to create a "meat tube," in which sits the shaft of marrow, pearl-like. That piece is also cooked sous vide, achieving a perfect rare temperature and holding the marrow, then lightly seared for color. (For another painstaking example, look at the recipe on the facing page, an item that appears on the current Piccolo menu.)

Each plate is visually stunning, simultaneously familiar and not, appetizingly visceral. The flavors are deeply satisfying and balanced on the plate, as are textures: a vegetable might be pureed, diced or shredded; pickled, sautéed, gelled or cooked sous vide. Nothing is off limits. But the idea of each plate is the same: small, balanced portions built on the simple idea of quality over quantity, at a price that allows for exploration (the flatiron steak is the most expensive item at \$15, other plates range from \$8 to \$11).

It's the quality over quantity idea that's earned Flicker mild abuse from unofficial online reviewers/whiners who complain they left the restaurant without feeling stuffed. "People love to hate," Flicker said. "But I think if you (cook well) and people respond to it, it's a very small restaurant and it's easy to fill up."

That it is. Piccolo is as its name translates: small. It's only 36 seats. And enough people find it exciting to have made it a requirement to call for reservations. It's earned every local food

CHESTNUT "TARTARE" WITH BONE MARROW, 62° EGG YOLK AND WORCESTERSHIRE GEL

INGREDIENTS:

- 200 g. roasted chestnuts
- 75 g. bone marrow, cooked sous vide 38° C For 25 minutes
- 40 g. red onion, small dice
- 20 g. salt packed capers, rinsed
- 6 g. yellow mustard
- 5 ea. brown eggs, cooked sous vide at 62° C for 45 minutes (up to 90 minutes)
- Worcestershire sauce
- Ultra Tex tapioca starch (3 or 8)

Method:

In Robot Coupe pulse chestnuts. Mix chestnuts with onion, capers, and mustard. Season with Worcestershire sauce and salt as needed. Mixture should be slightly over seasoned. Fold in bone marrow, being careful not to overmix, keeping bone marrow in chunks.

Transfer Worcestershire sauce into Vita Prep. Turn Vita Prep on low. Using small strainer, tap in Ultra Tex. Add until Worcestershire starts to thicken. Check consistency with spoon. Mixture should make beads off the spoon, or stand up in beads on a plate.

Flash tartare mixture in oven just to bring above room temperature, keeping in mind that the bone marrow will melt at a temperature over 40° C. Divide mixture into four ring cutters and tap down with squirt bottle.

Remove eggs from 62° C water bath. Crack open and separate yolk from white. Discard white and shell. Place egg yolk in center of tartare circle. Dot or swoosh Worcestershire gel around tartare. Garnish with micro green mix. Serve





Stewart Woodman

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When the original Heidi's Minneapolis was destroyed in a fire in February 2010, owners (and chefs and husband and wife) Stewart and Heidi Woodman mourned, but not for long. They set about reinventing the concept, found a new space off Lyndale and Lake Street in Minneapolis and started, quite literally, from scratch.

Stewart had already earned the praises from critics and diners in the old space; he simply could have resurrected the old menu and sailed along. (Coincidentally, the day of the fire, Woodman was named a James Beard Award semifinalist.)

But instead, the Woodmans went about designing their dream workspace—or as much of it as they could afford. The result is one knows immediately what the heart of the restaurant is when they walk through the door: The Kitchen.

There it is, in your face. Spacious, behind glass: a wide-screen entertainment center for those sitting at the bar (from the adjacent dining room, the view is more like the flatscreen in the corner; present but not imposing). It's a far stretch from the original Heidi's kitchen, which was squeezed into the footprint an old building, the

prep area in the basement.

The spacious digs allow for a broader range of experimentation, from a range of sous vide options to finding ample uses for liquid nitrogen. Most of the turf is ceded to just good old fashioned cooking, however: baking and roasting, sautéing and braising, poaching and curing. The resulting menu is a zigzag field trip through haute cuisine, ranging from the "caviar sundae," a delicate oval of scrambled egg "ice cream" (there's some nitrogen action for you) topped with paddlefish roe from North Dakota, to the perfectly carnivorous anise-scented braised lamb shank, a holdover from the first Heidi's menu that might have caused a riot had it not been included in version two.

And that's what makes the Heidi's menu and Woodman's cooking unique: it rides the cutting edge of cuisine (a red and golden beet salad with sous vide egg yolk, hearts of palm, apple dressing and pickled herring powder) without forgetting the basic, instinctual pleasure of a bowl of squash and potato soup on frigid winter day.

There's more to Woodman than his chops in the kitchen that makes him a force in the food world. There is, of course, his cookbook, "Shefzilla: Conquering Haute Cuisine at Home," written during the downtime between Heidi's restaurants, when he was forced for the first time to think as (and be) a home cook.

But what's made Woodman a lightning rod of sorts is his blog, Shefzilla, which he started in 2009, and on which he writes almost daily his opinion on...well, just about everything. Reservation practices at various restaurants. The obesity epidemic. The local food movement. Occupy Wall Street. His distaste for Mpls.-St. Paul Magazine's "Restaurant Rater" (even though he's rated very well). His love for his wife. His battles with weight. And, of course, cooking.

The online stream of consciousness has earned attention from

Woodman | page 24

RED WINE POACHED TENDERLOIN

WITH TARRAGON SPAETZLE

Yield: 4 servings

INGREDIENTS:

Tarragon spaetzle

1/2 cup milk
1 ea. egg
1/2 t. salt
1/4 t. freshly grated nutmeg
1½ cups flour
1 T. chopped tarragon
1 T. canola oil

Red wine poaching liquid

1 t. olive oil
2 ea. carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces
2 ea. onions, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces
2 ea. ribs celery, cut into 1-inch pieces
3 ea. cloves garlic, smashed
1 t. black peppercorns
3 cups red wine (merlot)
2 sprigs thyme

Beef tenderloin

4 ea. 6-ounce fillets beef tenderloin
1/4 t. salt
1/4 t. freshly ground black pepper
4 T. butter
1 t. lemon juice

To finish

1 T. canola oil
1/4 t. salt Freshly ground black pepper
1/4 t. fleur de sel

Method:

1. For the tarragon spaetzle: Mix together milk and egg in a small bowl. Stir together salt, nutmeg, flour, and tarragon in a large bowl. Make a well in the dry ingredients and, using a whisk and then a spatula or wooden spoon, stir in milk mixture until just combined: do not overmix. Cover and let rest 30 minutes. After the 30 minutes, bring 4 quarts of salted water to a boil. Slice dough with a sharp, smooth knife on a dampened wooden board into small noodles, about 3 inches long. Working quickly so that spaetzle will cook evenly, scrape noodles into boiling water. Boil vigorously until spaetzle float on water's surface. Using a slotted spoon, remove spaetzle from water, rinse under cold tap water, and toss with canola oil.
2. For the red wine poaching liquid: Heat a large (4-quart) saucepan over high heat 3 minutes. Add first 6 ingredients (oil through peppercorns); turn heat to low and sweat 10

to 15 minutes. 2. Add wine and thyme; turn heat to high and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 10 minutes. Remove from heat and cool to room temperature, then strain, discarding solids. Set aside.

3. To poach beef tenderloin: Bring red wine poaching liquid to a simmer in a small (1-quart) saucepan. Season beef fillets with salt and pepper. Add meat to poaching liquid (if liquid does not cover beef entirely, add red wine to cover). Keeping liquid to just below a simmer, around 150 °F, cook 15 minutes; turn beef and cook an additional 15 minutes. Remove beef from poaching liquid and set aside on a plate. Strain poaching liquid into a wide sauté pan over high heat and reduce quickly to 1 cup. Add beef to sauté pan. Reduce heat to medium and whisk in butter and lemon juice. If sauce is thick, add a teaspoon of water. Remove from heat and allow to rest. Slice fillets in half crosswise.
4. To finish: Warm a large sauté pan over high heat. Add canola oil and heat to smoking point. Add spaetzle and cook over high heat, stirring frequently, until golden brown, about 3 minutes. Divide spaetzle among four plates, add poached beef slices, season with pepper and fleur de sel, and drizzle with reduced sauce. Serve.





Landon Schoenefeld

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Landon Schoenefeld, chef and co-owner of Haute Dish restaurant in Minneapolis, remembers the date on which he arrived in Minneapolis from his home town of Aberdeen, S.D.: January 28, 2000.

It says a lot about his mindset, for that date marked the launch of a most intense culinary education. He took nearly any job around food he could find, from Rudolphs in Minneapolis and the shuttered Marimar (replaced by Al Vento), to delivering Chinese food. He also jumped into culinary school at Arts International, and upon completion in 2004 moved to Alaska for the summer. He worked at Denali's Café to support himself, but wound up running the kitchen.

He returned when the tourist season was over and resumed his path, which eventually earned him a reputation—an inaccurate one—for transiency. “People say I couldn’t hold a job,” Schoenefeld said. “But it’s really that I worked for everyone.”

As in, at the same time.

It was a habit for Schoenefeld to hold positions at three restaurants concurrently. Consider this run: He met Isaac Becker working at the D’Amico restaurant Lurcat. When Becker, then the executive chef, left to start 112 Eatery, he recruited Schoenefeld to work full-

time. “Then Isaac got me a part-time job at Alma,” Schoenefeld said, to learn from Alex Roberts. Somewhere he found time to work one day a week—for free—at Levain under Steven Brown’s tenure. “From Alex I learned about sustainability, flavorful food and the lighter side, with Isaac it was interesting, simple dishes, and Steven is really clever with food,” he said.

While working at those restaurants, he found time to work breakfast and lunch at Barbette in Minneapolis. The stint at Barbette led to his job at the Bulldog Northeast, and when that ended abruptly, he was recruited back to Barbette. “And it was the last few months at Barbette that I became convinced that if I’m going to be in charge of a kitchen again, it’ll be as an owner.”

And so began the three-plus years developing the idea that became Haute Dish. He kept up his workaholic pace, from the upscale (Nick & Eddie and Sea Change) to the considerably more humble (The Weinery). Finally, in May 2010 he opened Haute Dish with three partners: Dave Walters, Jess Soine and Tim Johnson. Schoenefeld was 29 years old, equipped with a vast reservoir of experience, which he channeled into Haute Dish’s menu, which holds a modern interpretation of classic dishes.

The humor on the menu (“I try to think as if Frank Zappa was writing the menu,” he joked) is counterweighted by serious craft. For example: the Tater Tot Haute Dish. It employs a brick of short ribs bathed in an intense reduction, topped with baby green beans, a puddle of porcini bechemel standing in for cream of mushroom soup, and near-molten mashed potatoes shrouded within “tots”: three carefully fried morsels stacked like firewood next to the beef.

Or the Haute Pocket, which appears to be a larger version of the Hot Pocket one heats in the microwave in shape and zigzag edges. But it’s created with a chef’s sensibility: that house-made

PUMPKIN STEW

Serves 6-8 people

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 large serving pumpkin, hollowed out, lid reserved
- 3 lbs. cleaned blue prawns
- 1½ qt. roasted pumpkin pieces
- 1 package diced tofu
- Red curry base (recipe follows)

Method:

Warm the pumpkin in a hot oven to take the chill off of it. Gently heat the curry base in a medium-sized saucepot. Once the curry base is warm, add the prawns, roasted pumpkin, and tofu and gently poach until the prawns are just cooked through. Serve the stew in the warm pumpkin.



Red curry base

Yield: 2 gallons. (Divide size as needed. Can be made one day in advance to allow for flavors to marry.)

INGREDIENTS:

Part 1:

- 1 gallon coconut milk
- 7 stalks lemon grass, crushed
- 1 ea. large nub of galangal thinly sliced
- 15 ea. kaffir lime leaves

Method:

Take all of these and steep to infuse flavor, reserve.

Part 2:

- 1 gal. chicken stock
 - 3 ea. oranges, zested
 - 1 ea. star anise
 - Shrimp heads and shells
- Sweat shrimp heads and shells in canola oil until cooked, add stock, zest, and star anise, simmer for 1 hour, strain through a fine mesh strainer, pressing down on solids to extract all the juice.

Part 3:

- 10 ea. large shallots, thickly sliced
 - 1 cup garlic cloves, thickly sliced
- Add to hot oil, almost burn in the oil then add:
- ½ cup minced ginger
 - 10 ea. Fresno chili pepper, thinly sliced
- Sweat for a minute with shallots and garlic, then add:

- 1½ cups red curry paste
(add extra ½ cup if more heat wanted)
- 1 qt. thai basil
- 1 qt. mint, whole leaves
- 1 qt. cilantro

Part 4:

Add stock and strained coconut milk, season with palm sugar to balance heat. Finish with fish sauce and lime juice to taste



HAUTE DISH



Erick Harcey
VICTORY 44

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Victory 44 was an accident. Sort of. Sure, co-owner and chef Erick Harcey was slated to open a gastropub, but it was supposed to be in Northeast Minneapolis. Called *Gastronome*, it was to be a “pork and whiskey bar,” Harcey recalled. And he and his then business partners were within days of jumping into the space, and already had key people on payroll. But it was 2008, and that economic crash thing happened. The Small Business Administration, which had already approved loans to Harcey and co., would not give them out.

With a team assembled and time and money invested, Harcey went about looking for a location to turn and open quickly. The bistro *Sauced* in North Minneapolis had recently closed. “I tracked down the (building’s) owner and said, ‘This is what I’ve got,’” Harcey said. They struck a deal. Most in the local food world wondered what he was thinking. A destination restaurant in North Minneapolis? Who would go? But Harcey had faith in the neighborhood.

“We printed menus and got going,” he said, the doors opened in May, 2009. “We didn’t really have a concept, but the name (Victory 44) came quick.” (The restaurant is located on North 44th Avenue, a short distance from Victory Park.)

They quickly started figuring out a concept, however, based on

the lessons that eventually shuttered the previous tenant. *Sauced*, Harcey said, didn’t go far enough to fit itself into the neighborhood realities and economic times. “Even if you keep everything under 20 bucks, they’re not going to pay for it.” Harcey, in the early days, had entrees at \$17 at dinner. A bargain for the ambitious cuisine—his kitchen prowess revived the *Nicollet Island Inn*; he wanted to take a fine-dining sensibility to a neighborhood restaurant. He searched for ways to drive costs down further.

Then, serendipity intervened.

He overheard a server deliberately and lazily misrepresent a dish to a customer rather than take the time to give an accurate description. He was, to put it mildly, irritated. He thought about the passion that he and the other cooks at the restaurant put into preparing the food—the butchering and in-house curing of meats, the time spent with local growers to procure ingredients, the hours logged.

About that time he read an article in *GQ* magazine about Chicago chef Michael Carlson, whose restaurant, *Schwa*—one of the nation’s top dining destinations—has no servers. He also was aware of the attention chef and restaurateur Michael Chang received for his *Momofuku* restaurants in New York where the cooks served the food, bringing to the diners not just the meal but the passion behind it to the table. And he thought about how he could pay his cooks more by, essentially, pooling tips and drive the price of the meals down.

Harcey approached his business partner, Jody Heyerdahl, and his small kitchen staff with: “I think we’re going to fire all the servers and do it ourselves.”

They did. And it was rough.

“That first night it was me, James Winberg (now at *Travail*) and

SALMON PASTRAMI

INGREDIENTS:

Salmon cure:

- 1½ T. Meyer lemon juice
- ½ cup Kosher salt
- 3 T. brown sugar
- 1½ T. black pepper
- 1 cup chopped cilantro leaves and stems
- 1 cup chopped parsley leaves and stems
- 2 ea. shallots minced

Method:

Mix ingredients and spread on salmon. Let salmon rest for 2-3 days or until firm. Once cured, rinse.

Pastrami glaze:

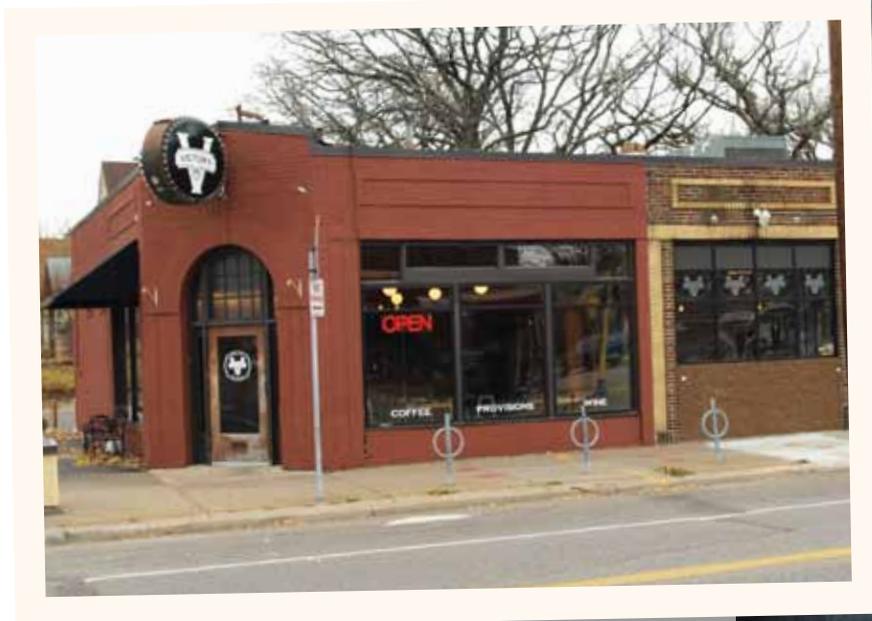
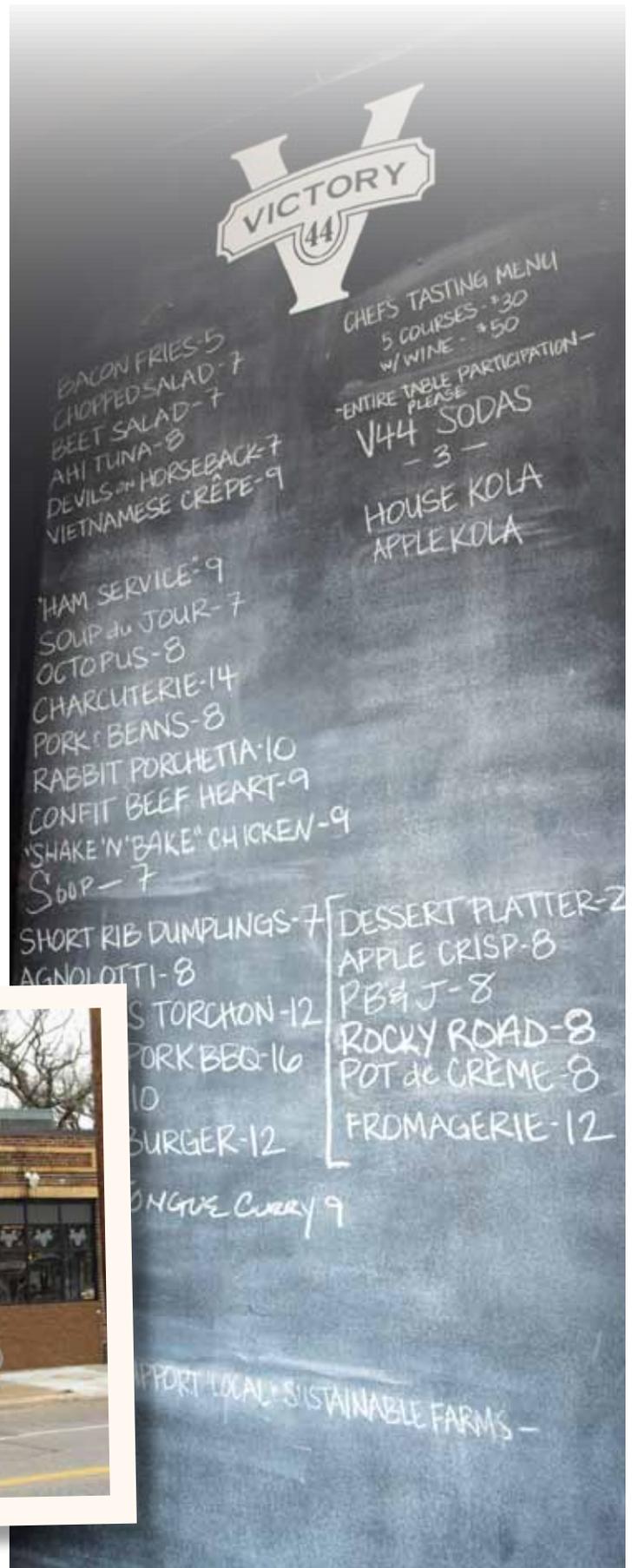
- 2 T. blackstrap molasses
- 2 ea. bay leaves
- 1 t. caraway seeds
- 1 t. coriander seeds
- 1 t. smoked paprika
- 1 t. ground pepper

Method:

Toast spices and grind to a fine mixture. Brush the molasses on top of the salmon and then coat with spice mixture. Cold smoke until desired flavor. Let rest for 24 hours uncovered before slicing.

Serving option:

Chevre, capers, red onion and an "everything" bagel.





Chef Tim McKee with his Masu Sushi & Robata crew at last summer's Ramen-Off event, a fundraiser for tsunami victims in Japan, held at Create Catering in Minneapolis. The Masu team won the competition, which helped raise about \$10,000 for the cause.

Tim McKee

LA BELLE VIE

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Tim McKee was honored again last month at the first annual Charlie Awards ceremony, receiving the first award of the evening for Outstanding Chef. The event packed the Pantages Theater in downtown Minneapolis. McKee, if he were in the military, would tip over for all the awards and accolades pinned to his jacket (including this FSN Premier Chef nod). The most weighty and important medal, of course, was the 2009 James Beard Award for Best Chef Midwest, the first chef in Minnesota to be honored with the distinction.

Like a true Minnesotan, he appreciates—and is slightly taken aback—at the attention. He stepped onstage at the Charlies and, in accepting the award, said nothing of his own efforts that got him to the peak of his profession, and instead thanked his staff at the restaurant he is best known for (La Belle Vie), the crew at the restaurants for which he consults (Sea Change and Masu Sushi & Robata) and, finally, Parasole Restaurant Holdings, which hired him in the latter part of 2010 as their vice president of culinary development to resurrect two floundering concepts and infuse his knowledge throughout the company's 14 restaurants.

And he also praised the people behind the other restaurants in town that have been turning the Twin Cities into a dining destination.

It's that latter statement that McKee is drawn to. In recent years, he said in a conversation last month, restaurants have become “more experimental, starting to really explore the wants of chefs that you never really saw before,” he said. “You're always cooking for the guests, of course, but (dining) is also an educational process.”

The Twin Cities has caught up to other areas of the country quickly. “Think about 15 years ago, there was Goodfellows and D'Amico Cucina (for chef-driven fine dining),” he said. Then McKee launched La Belle Vie in Stillwater. And, he noted Doug Flicker's Auriga, and J.P. Samuelson's jP American Bistro. There is also the stalwarts Lucia's Restaurant and Alex Robert's Alma. “For a long time, Minneapolis has been coming of age in a culinary sort of way,” he said.

And it's exploded recently, despite the difficult economics of opening a restaurant. “I think part of this is just the next wave of younger guys,” he said.

But, as much as McKee avoids calling attention to himself, it's impossible to ignore the impact he's had. Among the accomplishments, he co-founded Solera in Minneapolis in 2003, bringing Spanish tapas to the city and formally launching the metro area onto the national scene: Food & Wine magazine named it one of the world's—yes, *the world's*—top 10 new restaurants. (He sold his stake in Solera to the Graves





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Lucia Watson doesn't need an introduction, which is one of the reasons she is an inaugural member of Foodservice News' Premier Chef category. Lucia's Restaurant has remained at the top of the Twin Cities dining scene for more than 25 years by pioneering the local and sustainable sourcing movement, and pairing that with uniquely classic, soulful bistro cooking. Watson's dedication to craft earned her James Beard Award nominations from 2004-2006. That would be enough for anyone's career.

But in addition to being a great chef, Watson has been an astute business operator, steadily growing her business—adding the wine bar and in 2005 taking over an adjacent space for the Lucia's To Go bakery/café/sandwich shop with proprietary label products (there have several restaurants since that have followed her retail example)—to provide career opportunities for her staff and meeting the increasingly diverse needs of the surrounding neighborhood. She's also spent considerable time outside work promoting the values on which the restaurant was built. She's served on the boards of directors of two agriculture-

based organizations, the Youth Farm & Market Project, which operates youth-run neighborhood markets in south Minneapolis, and the Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy, the Minneapolis-based organization that promotes and helps create policies that ensures fair trade and sustainable agricultural practices across the United States and the globe. (Watson served as board chair for the IATP for three years, stepping down last year.) "But now I'm boardless," she quipped. "Which is nice for a change."

That doesn't mean she's not still supporting the organizations, or remaining active in promoting the causes important to her. But she is focusing more on the next phase for the business, and reflecting on what has made it a success. "It's an evolution," she said. "How do you grow your business? You want it to be the best."

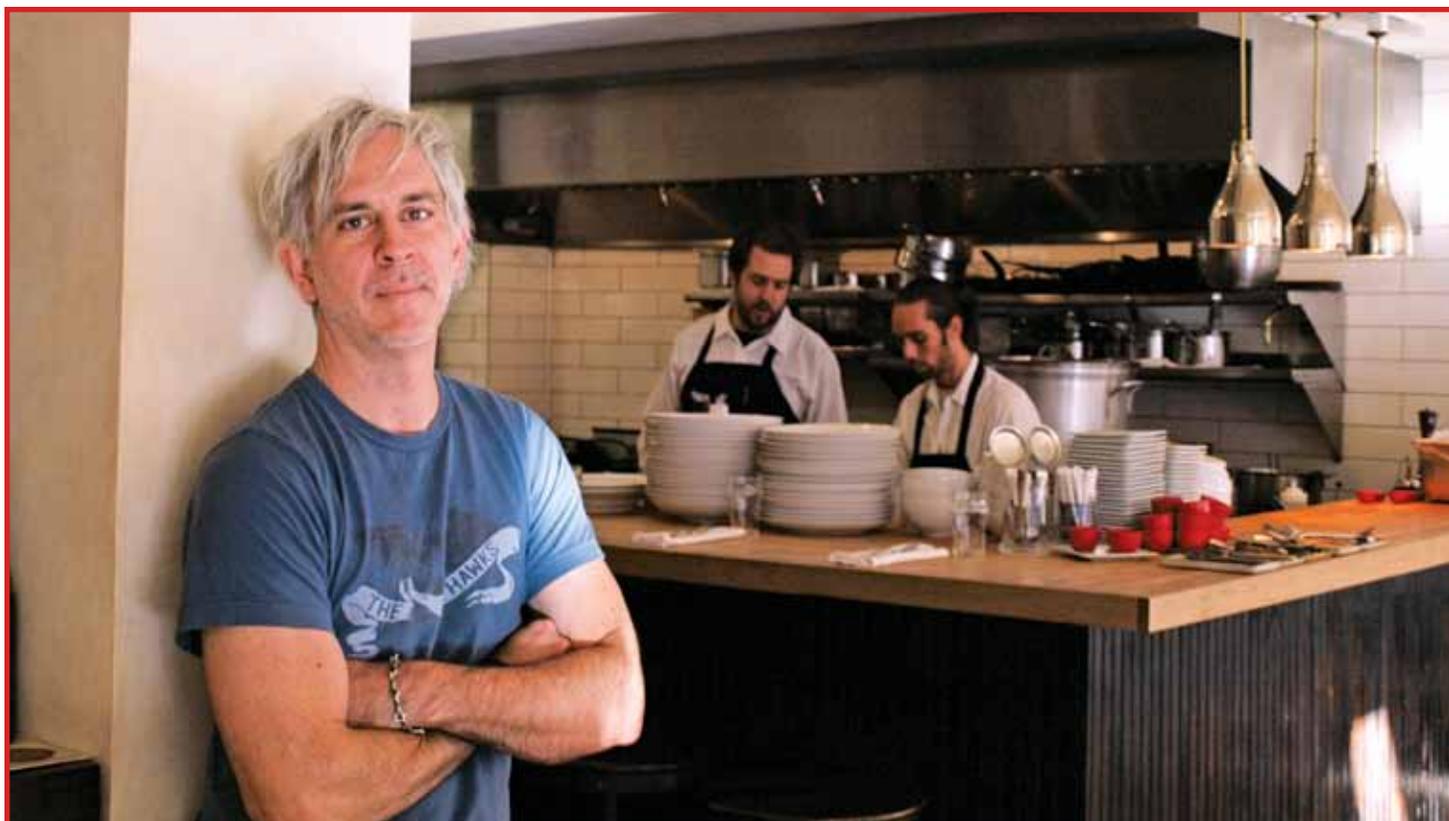
Being the best means building a great team, which she has done over the years. The business employs 70 full- and part-time workers. "The staff is awesome," she said. "I have a great management team."

She remains a hands-on owner, but has stepped back from running the kitchen, although she remains involved in menu development. "It's really hard to let go of being in the trenches, at least it was for me," she said. "I wish there were some role models—there really aren't any around here in this phase (of being an owner)."

Most restaurant companies in this area have survived by growing larger: either significantly in physical size and seats or



Watson | page 25



Steven Brown

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Steven Brown, the co-owner and chef at Tilia in Minneapolis, answered the phone behind the bar on a Wednesday afternoon, a query about reservations. “No, we do not take them,” he said, offering friendly advice. “If you’re here before six, it’s no problem. But after that, until about 8:30, you’re probably going to wait a half-hour, 45 minutes. But you can sit at the bar...”

Such is the problem with success.

“It’s much bigger than I ever thought it would be,” said Brown, dressed in jeans and Jayhawks T-shirt, a far distance from the chef coat required at some of the other prestigious stops on his resume. “I thought (Tilia) would be an Eli’s-type place (a decades-old local hangout at the southern edge of downtown Minneapolis). I could host, bartend, cook during the day and leave at 10 p.m.”

Those are understandable goals from a man with a wife and young daughter at home. But it’s not going to happen anytime soon. Tilia is the “it” place. One recent midweek evening, Brown said he left at 12:30 a.m. “And there were 25 people in here.”

That’s more than half-full at Tilia.

One might say to Mr. Brown that he should have known better.

Twin Cities diners have flat out loved his food since he started heading some of the most storied and acclaimed kitchens in Twin Cities dining history during the last decade, including the short-lived Rock Star, Restaurant Levain and his assembling of a culinary dream team at Porter & Frye, though short-lived.

As high-flying and trend-driven as some of those restaurants were, Brown’s signature was always a tight grip to *terra firma*. At Porter & Frye, a pork loin and belly that was paired with sweet potato, gingerbread and pearl onions was intricately prepared with high-tech methods, but the result triggered a blast of primal craving. And soup. People fight over Brown’s soups. They do.

The problem with concepts that soar to great culinary heights is they often don’t last. Susceptible to economic dips or shortsighted ownership, they shut down or revamp to something less ambitious, which has left Brown without a kitchen for stretches during his career. Which is why he decided to own his own restaurant.

But it’s more than just the kitchen that’s the story at Tilia. Brown and his business partner Jorg Pierach created a space in Minneapolis that is precisely what its Linden Hills neighborhood desired: a place that’s open more hours than it’s not, with a menu loaded with a variety of food that’s a nifty blend of nostalgia and modern technique, classic American flavors and global influences, in a space subtly decorated to be immediately comfortable. All made with the precision and depth of flavor that Brown’s food fans have come to expect. All the better that the prices resemble those at decent bar and grill.

Brown has peppered the lunch menu with his usual flavor explorations masked in casual or old-school items, such as the fish taco torta with peppadew pepper slaw and laced with cilantro and lime, or the “potted meat of the day”—could be duck one day, pork

HALIBUT WITH SWEET-CORN CURRY AND PICKLED MUSHROOMS

Yield: 4 servings

INGREDIENTS:

Halibut

- 4 ea. 5-ounce halibut fillets
- 2 t. salt
- ½ t. anise seeds
- ½ cup mirin (Japanese sweet rice wine)
- ½ cup rice wine vinegar

Sweet-Corn Curry

- 1 T. unsalted butter
- 1 ea. garlic clove, finely chopped
- 6 ea. kaffir-lime leaves (substitute the zest of 3 limes if necessary)
- 1 ea. small yellow onion, diced
- 1½ cups sweet corn (cut from 2 ears)
- 1 ea. jalapeño, seeded and diced
- 1 T. Madras-style curry powder
- 1 cup coconut milk
- ½ cup chicken stock
- Salt

Pickled chanterelles

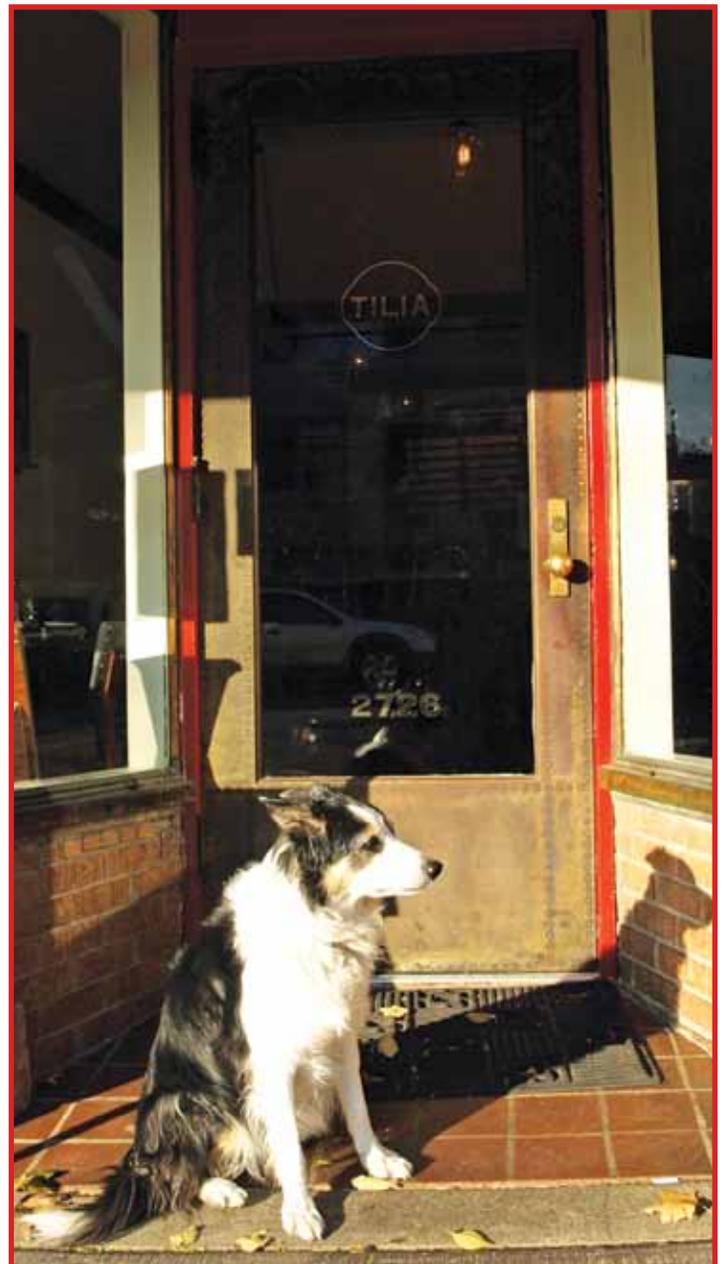
- 1 cup water
- 2 cups rice wine vinegar
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 T. fine sea salt
- 1 t. yellow mustard seeds
- 1 t. coriander seeds
- 1 t. chile flakes
- 1 t. anise seeds
- 2 ea. garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1 lb. chanterelle mushrooms (substitute canned straw mushrooms if chanterelles are not available), cleaned
- ½ ea. small onion, thinly sliced
- 1 ea. small carrot, thinly sliced into 2-inch-long slices

Method:

1. Prepare the halibut: Season the fish on all sides with the salt and anise seeds and set aside for 1 hour. In a medium bowl, combine the mirin and rice wine vinegar and dip the fillets in the mixture. Remove and pat dry. Set aside at room temperature while you make the rest of the dish.
2. Make the corn curry: In a medium saucepot set over medium heat, sweat the butter, garlic, lime leaves or zest, onion, corn, jalapeño and curry powder until the onion is translucent, about 5 minutes. Stir in the coconut milk and chicken stock and bring the mixture to a simmer. Simmer for 5 minutes, then remove from

the heat and purée in a blender. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve, season with salt and keep warm.

3. Make the pickled chanterelles: In a medium saucepot set over medium heat, combine the water, rice vinegar, sugar, sea salt, mustard seeds, coriander seeds, chile flakes, anise seeds and garlic. Bring to a simmer and cook for 5 minutes. Place the mushrooms, onion and carrot in a medium bowl and pour the water-vinegar mixture over the vegetables. Reserve.
4. Preheat oven to 300°. Place the fish on a lightly oiled glass baking dish and cook for 12 to 15 minutes, until the fish is opaque and warm all the way through.
5. Divide the curried-corn sauce among 4 bowls and top each with a halibut fillet. Top with the mushrooms and serve immediately.





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“Sources ingredients from local farmers, everything prepared ‘from-scratch,’ menu changes with the seasons.” The restaurants staking those claims in these parts generally have variations of traditional Midwest fare on the menu. But the Vietnamese restaurant, Ngon Bistro, located on one of the most diverse thoroughfares in the state (St. Paul’s University Avenue), could paint that on the dining room wall.

Ngon (pronounced as if it were spelled n-o-n-g) has been open since early 2007, but it took about a year before the daily papers’ critics discovered it, immediately drawing their three-star reviews. They found out that owner Hai Truong, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Jessica, is a self-taught chef, and churns out consistently great, French-tinged meals that change one’s impression of Vietnamese food. “People’s perception of Vietnamese food is that they think it’s cheap street food,” Truong said, seated at the restaurant’s bar one afternoon, his toddler son seated on the counter, playing with car keys. “But that’s just the business type—a mom-and-pop. It’s like comparing the mom-and-pop diner to a (full-service) restaurant. It took us a

while to get past the perception many have. If you have better ingredients, you pay more. Local pork and beef costs more.”

That said, Ngon’s food, in presentation and the skill behind it, is upscale, but not the prices. Elk medallions on a recent dinner menu, paired with zucchini, tomatoes, baby bok choy, and bacon daikon cake with hoisin ginger sauce, ran \$20. That was the top price on the menu. Or the “Duck Cassoulet de l’Indochine,” with duck confit, great northern beans, grape tomatoes, garden carrots, shiitake mushrooms, pork belly and a pho-spiced duck broth was \$18. The most satisfying bowl of pho (Truong is constantly making vats of beef broth using oxtail and beef bones from grass-fed cattle) you will ever eat runs, at most, \$10—the price at which most items on the lunch menu hover.

There were neighborhood goals in mind when Truong built the menu with a creative, chef-inspired technique: “We wanted to create a business that supports more people,” Truong said.

It’s about economy of scale, something Truong knows a bit about. He went to college at the University of Minnesota for economics, and wound up working in the financial industry. “But I did not like the corporate life,” he said.

Truong grew up in his parent’s restaurant, Caravelle. The first location opened in 1984, where Ngon now sits. (The family opened the restaurant five years after emigrating to the United States from Vietnam in 1979, when Truong was five years old). “It’s nice to hear some of the people that come in here who remember eating in Caravelle,” Truong said. “I say, ‘Yeah, I was probably this tall,’” he added, holding his hand about bar height, “bussing your table.”

It was perfect timing for Truong to jump into the restaurant business: his Aunt, who purchased the Caravelle restaurant from Truong’s father, wanted to retire. “I wanted to stay in this neighborhood,” he said. “We bought a house two blocks from

here. We keep things small—what we do at home we do here, keep a small footprint and support the micro-economy of the area, the Frogtown neighborhood.”

Supporting a local economy means buying products from area businesses, from local farms beyond the metro area, to products from the bakery down the block. “The way we make our food (at the restaurant) is true to Vietnamese food,” Truong said. “There are no feedlots in Vietnam. ...Our ingredients are from local farms whenever possible.”

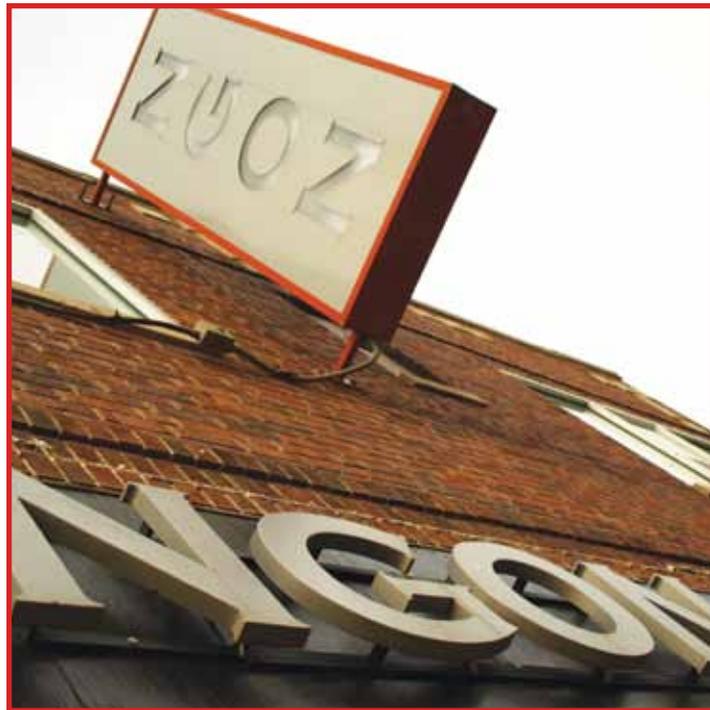
With those ingredients, Truong develops dishes experimentally. “I think of the Dalai Lama quote: ‘Approach love and cooking with reckless abandon,’” Truong said. “Play with things, have fun. If you screw up, you can make another.”

He hits St. Paul’s Hmong Market and others, tasting different ingredients, asking questions. Among his studies in college was sculpture, and he applies that skill. “I process visually; I taste flavors, then imagine in my head how things go together,” he said, adding that he is also “totally influenced” by what his grandmother and mother cooked at home and at the Caravelle restaurant.

Truong’s support of local sourcing goes beyond purchasing product. He’s also deeply involved in strengthening its food supply networks. He is co-chair of the St. Paul/Ramsey County Food Commission that focuses on growing food and increasing access to it. (Another FSN Top Chef, Lenny Russo, is also on the committee.)

He also participated this year in the Minnesota Food Association’s Immigrant Farming Conference. Truong spoke in a workshop designed to connect farmers in the MFA program to various markets, including restaurants.

The next year will prove interesting on University Avenue as light rail construction moves east. To counter that, Truong, handy with a welder, finished converting in his garage a 1967 Volkswagen bus to a food truck. “It’s part of the plan to keep up exposure during the construction,” he said.



Another post-construction project is to convert the space above the restaurant into a bar. The plan in the kitchen is to keep experimenting with what the local farms can provide, which he believes is a primary driver for the chef-driven, boundary-pushing cuisine appearing in the Twin Cities in recent years. “It’s more people getting used to different ingredients, and the local food movement has pushed it,” he said. “The focus is on allowing ingredients to shine.”

GRILLED PORK LETTUCE WRAPS

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS:

1 package	rice noodles
1 lb.	boneless pork loin chops.

Marinade

1/2 cup	hoisin sauce
2 T.	sugar
1 T.	sesame oil
2 T.	rice wine
1/2 t.	grated ginger
1/2 t.	sliced lemongrass
1 clove garlic,	minced
	splash soy sauce

Ngon dipping sauce

1 cup	water
1/2 cup	sugar
1/4 cup	apple cider vinegar
2 T.	fish sauce
1 t.	red pepper flakes
1 clove garlic,	finely chopped

Method:

1. For the marinade and meat: Stir together marinade ingredients and marinate meat in sauce for 24 hours. (This marinade is equally good with beef or chicken.) When finished, grill meat to doneness. Prepare rice noodles as package directs.
2. For the Ngon dipping sauce: In a small sauce pan, heat the water and sugar together; stir until sugar is dissolved. Remove from heat and add remaining ingredients. Let stand until cool. Pour into a jar or squeeze bottle and store in refrigerator for up to a month. Makes about 1 1/2 cups.
3. For the plate: Slice grilled pork and arrange on a platter with, rice noodles prepared as package directs, cilantro sprigs, cucumber slices, pickled carrots and daikon. On another platter, arrange lettuce leaves. To eat, wrap meat, noodles and veggies in lettuce leaves. Drizzle with dipping sauce and enjoy.



Team Travail. With James Winberg, second from left; and Mike Brown, second from right.

James Winberg & Mike Brown

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The scene: A loud bar and restaurant in downtown Robbinsdale, a small suburb about 15 minutes from downtown Minneapolis. Driving by to a parking spot, you noticed about 50 people waiting in line to get into the place, just before the door opened at 5 p.m. (You joined that line.) The space inside is lighted low, the music loud—it more closely resembles a beer hall than acclaimed restaurant. You take two seats at the bar because the tables are full. Activity is immediate. As the evening progresses, the young, scruffy-looking man working the bar shouts across the room whenever a mixture of Surly “Bender” and “Furious” beers are poured: “Fender here!” and a chorus of other scruffy-looking young men (and one young woman, not so scruffy) running food to tables responds in kind, a call and response worthy of Sunday church service.

You, seated at the bar with your significant other, order the

10-course tasting menu for two for a ridiculous low price: \$70. Soon, amid the building chaos in the crowded dining room and those standing, beer in hand, near the bar waiting for a table (no reservations in this hotspot), out from the kitchen walks a stout, slightly disheveled, goateed young man with long hair piled on top of his head in a bun. Your middle-aged mind immediately flips back to early Saturday Night Live episodes and John Belushi’s “samurai” skits.

This samurai, with long surgical tweezers in hand, sets a kit of squeeze bottles on the bar and with a smile, says, “Hold out your hand and make a fist.” He demonstrates. You mimic. “Now close your eyes,” he says.

The samurai then describes the brush-stroke sensations you feel on the back of your hand: An egg white pancake, black truffle gel, cooked egg yolk, a fine strip of pancetta, and a garnish of some kind of micro (really micro) greens. “Now open your eyes,” the samurai says. And there, on the back of your hand, is the miniature sculpture of a fried egg with a strip of bacon. And that little bit of green. You eat it. It tastes like bacon and eggs, potently and deliciously so, which is surprising, and you think about how that was accomplished in such a tiny package.

What follows that interactive *amuse bouche* is an avalanche of meticulously prepared dishes. They’re listed simply on chalkboards scattered about the walls as “scallops,” “herring” or “pork,” but proteins arrive in front of you in a tightly bound form, within a swoosh of reduction, artfully prepped and placed vegetables, a shot of foam, slab of gel or small pile of powder—those last items richly infused with all manner of flavors (bacon powder, anyone?).

It might appear to be all technical trickery, but that would ignore much of the old fashioned cooking that’s also on the plate, from the top-flight charcuterie to the downright traditionally

FOODSERVICE NEWS TOP CHEFS

presented, pan-seared hunk of sea bass on a recent menu.

But back to the egg and its delivery. It summarizes the whole point of Travail Kitchen & Amusements, and is the reason the eager diners line up outside the restaurant at 5 p.m., waiting for the door to be unlocked.

The samurai was Mike Brown, 26, co-chef and co-owner. "I was trying to think of something we could do that would be different," he said one afternoon while prepping for evening service. He was inspired by reading the Noma restaurant cookbook. Noma, located in Copenhagen and owned by chef René Redzepi, was named the world's best restaurant in 2010. One of the dishes on the menu is a duck egg set sizzling on a hot skillet—the skillet on a bed of hay—in front of the diner. The diner then prepares the dish, wilting greens and adding herbs in a puddle of infused butter beside the egg, with instruction from the server.

Brown watched a YouTube video of its presentation, thought about that egg, and a way to have more fun with it without the complexity. The conclusion: deconstruct the egg, and plate it on the back of a diner's hand while they close their eyes. "The customer imagines what's happening, creates a mental picture with what they feel," Brown said. "It's a different experience, and something never tried before."

Brown founded the restaurant with James Winberg, 33, another chef in the kitchen. The two schemed together about opening a restaurant since they first met working in the kitchen at Porter & Frye when that restaurant opened in 2008 with the dream-team kitchen staff that included Doug Flicker,

Eric Anderson and Josh Habiger under then-Executive Chef Steven Brown. Both landed there from cooking journeys that took the Savage, Minn.-native Brown, after graduating from Le Cordon Bleu in Mendota Heights, to Arizona to work for Chef Kevin Binkley at his fine dining restaurant, Binkley's. Winberg, from Grand Rapids, Minn., graduated from culinary school in Bellingham, Wash., in 2003. From there he worked in California at Thomas Keller's Bouchon, to Boston in 2006 where he helped open 28 Degrees, an upscale restaurant and bar. He then moved back to Bellingham to open (as a partner) the ambitious Nimbus Restaurant, but left for New York City before returning to Minnesota and landing Porter & Frye.

At Porter & Frye, Brown and Winberg became fast friends and began, as many young cooks do, to talk about owning their own restaurant. Then, the P&F implosion: Brown was out in a cost-cutting measure and the axe fell on others in the kitchen. Long story short, Winberg grabbed jobs "here and there," Brown took a couple months off before jumping into the kitchen of P&F alum Erik Anderson, who was the chef de cuisine at Sea Change.

Winberg eventually landed at Victory 44, Erick Harcey's North Minneapolis restaurant. Brown soon followed, and the two, with fellow P&F alum Geoff Haussman and Harcey, powered the restaurant's chef-as-server, high-flying-cuisine-at-pub-prices movement in the Twin Cities. (Chefs-as-servers has been done famously at the acclaimed Schwa in Chicago and the

Winberg & Brown | page 26





Lenny Russo

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To call Lenny Russo a “game changer”—after his years hovering around the top of the dining scene—sounds like a sports reporter trying to write something new about Packer’s quarterback Aaron Rodgers after yet another 300-yard, three-touchdown game, accomplished in mostly workmanlike fashion. It’s old news.

Except it’s not. The story is a rare thing, really: it’s a guy who sticks to what he does best, incorporates the tools at his disposal, doesn’t get distracted, doesn’t over-reach and therefore doesn’t make costly mistakes and remains within the top-tier of his profession.

So, the challenge is for the media, perpetually searching for something new—especially for end-of-the-year lists. In the case of the food world, it’s the new personality, the new restaurant, best dishes of the year, the new technique or business twist. And every year, we look around at what happened, and if we’re honest

journalists, we sigh, pick up the phone, and call Mr. Russo. Again.

Sure, moving Heartland Restaurant, a tiny fine-dining establishment in a tony neighborhood to a two-story, 18,000 square-foot space within a historic building in St. Paul’s developing Lowertown neighborhood on the eve of inconvenient light-rail transit construction was bold move. But meticulously calculated.

Heartland Restaurant was, as everyone knows, built upon local sourcing and an everything-done-in-house philosophy. The new Heartland Restaurant & Farm Direct is a massive undertaking with considerable risk, but the odds were (and are) favorable. Because it wasn’t a reinvention. It was a growth opportunity a practical person with appropriate resources and a detailed business plan would make. (And, actually, it was a compromise on Russo’s original vision of also incorporating a central distribution system for local goods). With expansion came new tools and new people, and Russo utilizes them all, delegating when appropriate.

The restaurant’s four-star dining room remains in top form, the bar area builds upon the casual atmosphere (and menu prices) of the old wine bar with a full liquor license. The butchery in the basement allows for more...well, butchering, and paired with the large kitchen upstairs, helps to fuel the retail market adjacent to the bar with “Heartland” label products (charcuterie items, jams, stocks, soups, rendered animal fats) in-house baked goods and pastries and made-to-order sandwiches to go with fresh produce and a meat case.

The game-changing part of the equation was the scale of the operation and the impact on the surrounding neighborhood—and a growing part of that is the retail market.

BRAISED CHICKEN WITH APPLE CIDER, CREAM AND ROOT VEGETABLES

INGREDIENTS:

For the chicken:

- 24 ea. free range chicken thighs
- 24 ea. free range chicken legs
- ½ lb. whole butter
- 1 gal. apple cider
- 1 gal. chicken stock (see recipe)
- 1 ea. bouquet garni consisting of 6 rosemary sprigs, 2 bay leaves, 24 black peppercorns and 2 whole nutmegs
- 2 T. sea salt
- 1 T. black pepper, freshly ground

For the plate:

- 1 ea. chicken thigh (see above)
- 1 ea. chicken leg (see above)
- 4 oz. assorted root vegetables such as carrots, turnips, parsnips and rutabagas
- 1 T. whole unsalted butter
- ¼ t. sea salt
- ⅛ t. white pepper, freshly ground
- 4 oz. apple cider cream
- 1 oz. court bouillon (optional)
- ½ t. Italian parsley, chopped

Method:

For the chicken:

Dust the chicken in some seasoned flour. Add the butter to the pan, and brown the chicken on both sides. Deglaze with the apple cider making sure to scrape any bits from the bottom of the pan using a wooden spoon. Add the bouquet garni and the cream. Cover the pan, and simmer the chicken over low heat until very tender (about 45 minutes to one hour). Season with the salt and pepper. Remove the bouquet garni. Transfer the chicken to a 4" hotel pan making sure to separate the thighs from the legs. Refrigerate immediately and allow to cool. Cover tightly, label and date. Strain the sauce through a chinois and chill it immediately in an ice bath. Transfer it to a labeled container with a tight-fitting lid.

For the plate:

Gently sauté the root vegetables in the butter until tender. Make sure not to caramelize them. Season them with the salt and white pepper. Add the chicken and the apple cider cream. Gently heat the chicken until warmed through. Don't let the cream over reduce. Add an ounce of court bouillon if necessary. Stir in the parsley. Spoon the vegetables into the bottom of a serving bowl. Arrange the chicken on top of the vegetables. Pour the sauce over the chicken and serve immediately.

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Klein | from page 4

an unseasonably summery October Sunday afternoon at Meritage. A section of St. Peter Street, which runs in front of the restaurant, was shut down (as was the restaurant for regular service), barriers and tents erected and about 15,000 oysters awaited their fate on ice.

The festival extended to the basement meeting space where oyster farmers from the east and west coast delivered two repeated seminars on oysters, which drew a crowd of 100 for each. An oyster-shucking contest between area chefs—including Klein—was held outdoors.

It was a great party, but also a shrewd business move. The media attention for Oysterfest tattooed Meritage in the minds of oyster aficionados, and also showcased how far St. Paul has progressed in the last few years as a dining destination. It will be an annual event.

Culminating a successful year was Russell's inclusion in the group of top chefs asked to help develop restaurant concepts in Delta's soon-to-be-remodeled Concourse G at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. (Among the others are FSN Top Chefs past and present Erick Harcey, Doug Flicker, Koshiki Yonemura Smith and Lenny Russo.) Klein's concept will be called Mimosa, and construction on the concourse is set to begin in January 2012. "OTG (Management, the foodservice contractor) really did their research to find the best restaurants (in the Twin Cities)," Russell said. "It's an honor to be part of it."

Flicker | from page 6

critics' accolades, including the 2010 Restaurant of the Year nod from the Star Tribune.

What is it about the Twin Cities in recent years that made him think the area was ready for a concept like Piccolo? "I don't really know," Flicker said, after a moment of reflection. "It's a good question. I don't think it would have worked a few years ago."

But there have been a few changes to note, he said, with restaurants like Tilia, Victory 44 and Travail opening in quick succession with Piccolo within the last two years, all focused on chef-driven cuisine at very affordable prices. "We've all worked together, we're all responding to our past," Flicker said. "Maybe there's a collective consciousness that's happened in the food movement, the in-house techniques, charcuterie. ... We're all cooks who don't know much about the front-of-the-house. At Travail and Victory 44, you're served by the same people who cook the food. Like knowing your farmer, it's another step."

Whatever the reason, in the time from Auriga's closure to Piccolo's opening, Flicker said he was "figuring out how I cook best, which is the tasting portion type of things."

Flicker earned recently a bit of attention from an East Coast observer, known best for his acerbic wit and harsh judgments that often obscure his otherwise thoughtful musings on food. Anthony Bourdain, the chef, author and host of the much-watched "No Reservations" on Travel Channel, was on a speaking tour that stopped in the Twin Cities, and was looking for restaurants to feature on a "No Reservations" episode that would feature Midwest eateries. Fellow Travel Channel host and local celebrity chef Andrew Zimmern immediately recommended to him

Piccolo.

Bourdain arrived, Flicker prepared a meal. Bourdain came away from his meal and conversation with Flicker, it seemed, slightly dazed with inspiration, and raved about the restaurant beyond the confines of television—including his live speaking engagements. "Anthony Bourdain helped to legitimize us," Flicker said modestly. "He continues to plug us. It never hurts to have people like that in your corner."

With the success, Flicker remains the chef who would rather be away from the attention, back in the kitchen, honing his craft, yet not taking himself too seriously. What he aspires to is to have people remember his cooking as they would a "good joke," he said. "It's well told, it's smart and at the end provokes a reaction. That's what a great joke does. It pulls you in with a story, you might laugh or smile, and if it's good you tell it to someone else. You remember."

Woodman | from page 8

across the country, and commentators on posts include many from the local media and celebrity circles. "It's a separate thing (from the restaurant)," Woodman insists. "I like writing, it's an enjoyable activity."

The blog is, simply "stuff I like to write about. I don't want to labor over it. If it's stuff I like to write about, I can crank it out in about 15 minutes. ... I didn't want (the blog) to be a polished thing. I view it as a different activity. Standing in front of the stove is truly my passion. It still gets me excited."

Still, the blog reveals diverse interests that extend into the Twin Cities arts community, and sometimes the writing (and reading) intersect with the cooking. Example: Local novelist N.M. Kelby's book, "White Truffles in Winter," a fictional account of the legendary French chef Auguste Escoffier's culinary journey. Woodman was asked to prepare a multi-course meal for the book's launch featuring, as one might guess, white truffles.

In short, Shefzilla forces study for its author. "I'm constantly reading as a consequence," Woodman said. "If I'm writing about a topic, I need to keep up."

All that—in addition to the day-to-day operation of a four-star restaurant—has led to more ideas about the direction for the menu, and the restaurant itself. Woodman is thinking about Heidi's as an incubator of sorts for young cooking talent, a way for them to learn, experiment and potentially go on to start their own restaurants "with a smart company behind them," he said.

Whatever impression Woodman presents with his online persona doesn't impact the business in the dining room. (And, frankly, the blog wouldn't earn the attention it does if he couldn't deliver in the kitchen.) Minneapolis—and the Midwest—is a different kind of place, said Woodman, an East Coast native. "It's a little more wholesome culture. If something is good, if you work hard, people support it. If you give your career to going for celebrity, they would dump you."

Schoenefeld | from page 10

pastry is perfectly browned, the exterior flaking, and the interior an updated nod to the old-school Irish pasty: loaded with beef cheek and rutabaga. Paired with chilled mint pea puree, it's a balance of

richness and brightness on the palate.

The food showcases the technical prowess that puts Schoenefeld in league with the top chefs in the area, and also his understanding of a simply satisfying meal. “I read a lot of old cookbooks and menus online,” he said. “A chef mimics everyone they’re taught by. Just now after 15 years I’m coming up with my own style—not that anything is truly original anymore.”

He’s evolved the menu beyond Midwest tastes, but still items rooted with familiarity, such as a riff on Peking Duck. And, while Schoenefeld’s flavorful charcuterie platter reinforces a meat-centric attitude, he doesn’t want to be pigeon-holed. “The direction cooking is going, vegetables are a focus,” he said, and his kitchen displays a deft touch with them (a recent baby beet salad, served with a pile of lightly dressed frisée in the middle of those beets was among the highlights of a multi-course meal), and he has a vegetarian menu that runs on Sunday.

Moving into the next year, his goal for the menu is simple. “We’ve had 150 different dishes since we opened,” he said. “In year two, we’re refining ideas, and scrapping some. We’ll have half as many dishes in year two. And some equipment upgrades along the way.”

They’ve settled into enough of a groove, however, to consider a retail component for the house-made charcuterie. “And a food truck next year, Schoenefeld added. “Haute Dog.”

Harcey | from page 12

Jodie,” Harcey said. “There was a line out the door, we were getting killed. But we kept slugging it out, went through adjustments and we were able to drive the price down.”

Way down. The majority of the plates at Victory 44 range from \$7 to \$9; a five-course tasting menu is \$30 (with wine pairing is \$50). Plates arrive a showcase of cooking styles, evidence of molecular gastronomy (tightly pressed meats, perfectly poached eggs, foams and gels) flow seamlessly with traditional cooking-with-fire; diners at the same table can feast on scallops presented within an abstract painting of edibles, and what is hailed as the best Reuben sandwich in town with a pile of bacon-tinged fries on a platter. Cooks as servers isn’t anything new, Harcey said, and it so happened that the location works well for the practice. “I wouldn’t do it again unless it was the perfect spot,” he said. “You can only have so many cooks around and keep them engaged with the food.”

The restaurant earned plenty of critical acclaim, even prompting locally-based celebrity chef Andrew Zimmern, host of Travel Channel’s Bizarre Foods, to Tweet to his 275,000 followers: “Best restaurant no one has heard of nationally Eric (sic) Harcey’s Victory 44 in Minneapolis. Just had lunch here and it’s insanely good.”

This summer, Harcey expanded into the space next door and refitted it with a coffee bar and breakfast joint (the space also is used as much-needed overflow for the main dining room), offering pastries and baked goods in addition to those breakfast plates, and offering Dogwood Coffee, a local roaster—it’s another step toward cementing Victory 44 into North Minneapolis for a long, long time, an area that needs mooring more than most.

McKee | from page 14

Hospitality Group last year).

In 2005, he brought La Belle Vie from Stillwater to the storied space that held the 510 Restaurant, across from the Walker Art

Center, and pushed its French and Mediterranean-inspired menu to perfection, which eventually brought him the Beard award. He proved a top chef didn’t have to live among white tablecloths—they could follow their passions—by launching the distinctly Jamaican restaurant, Smalley’s Caribbean Barbecue, in Stillwater.

McKee’s reach grew longer with consulting projects, most notably with Sea Change at the Guthrie Theater, and he installs great talent wherever he goes. McKee tapped Eric Anderson as chef de cuisine when the Sea Change opened in 2009, and Anderson was a James Beard Award semifinalist in 2011. Mike DeCamp, the chef de cuisine at La Belle Vie, established himself as a top-tier performer; the restaurant hasn’t missed a beat without McKee there day-to-day. McKee also designed the menu and hired the staff at Masu, which is earning raves.

But it’s his new role with Parasole Restaurant Holdings, perhaps the most influential restaurant company in the state, that may prove to have the greatest impact as that company continues expanding. That company’s concepts range from the upscale (Manny’s Steakhouse, with a \$60 check average) to the casual (Good Earth, with a \$12 check average). The first project was to revamp the Italian concept Il Gatto; his first move was to install one of his protégés, Jim Christiansen, as executive chef.

“There’s a lot I like about (the position at Parasole),” McKee said. “I get to work on 14 different concepts at any one time. There’s also La Belle Vie, and I’m still involved with Sea Change and Masu. ...I might be the luckiest chef.”

Watson | from page 15

by multiple units—something that’s never interested her. The Lucia’s concept, she said, “is bigger than me. But how do you do that? You don’t think about it at age 30. Then if you succeed for 10 years, it’s exhausting. And the first thing is, how do you transition, how do you cut down your hours to A), keep your sanity and, B), keep your health and personal life. You must do something different.”

She appears to be figuring it out. “It’s been an interesting evolution, whenever things were stable, I changed it up—I opened the wine bar, wrote two cookbooks, then opened the bakery,” she said. “I designed the bakery like a Parisian bakery, to be here in 200 years.”

That means it’s utilitarian and, again, continually evolving. Watson and team have added full Sunday dinners for take out at the Lucia’s To Go this past September, offering rotisserie specials such as chickens and prime rib with sides. “We used to close at 5 p.m. on Sundays, but then I thought, what about all those people driving back from the cabin or something else? It’s easy and ready, the whole kit’n kaboodle.”

Watson might have stepped back, but only for a better view of the operation.

Brown | from page 16 and continued on next page.

the next—a simple terrine that’s as addictive as it is artery clogging (note to self: it’s meant to be shared). There’s scarcely an item more than \$12.

The entrees present influences from Brown’s past (dry-aged duck breast) coupled with a more a more earthy sensibility (preserved

Brown | from page 25

pruned and roasted shallots), a perfect fit for a neighborhood joint. His hand with sea creatures hasn't faltered a bit, either. But no one expected they would.

Brown's reputation throughout his career has been that of a thoughtful and creative chef, a master talent recruiter and an excellent teacher. For his new title as owner tacked on to that of "executive culinary director," those skills are paramount. Brown said it's his job "to keep encouraging, mentoring and teaching the staff I have—and it's a great one. I admire the D'Amico's. They have staff working for them for years, they get out of culinary school, take a job, and they stay."

He's having some similar success, two employees are taking sommelier and cicerone (pairing beer with food) classes. "They see reward and mobility within the company," Brown said. "I'm extremely fortunate to attract good people. I'm really proud of my staff."

Winberg & Brown | from page 21

Momofuku restaurants in New York City. "True credit goes to Schwa," Brown said.)

All the while, Winberg said, he and Brown tried to "hit up banks and family" for money to open their restaurant. The families came through, as did the Robbinsdale location (the building's landlord was from Brown's hometown, and knew his father. "We couldn't have done it without (the landlord), willing to take a risk on us," he said.) The space was a former diner in the city's small downtown, and was basically turn-key. "We were going to do this (redesign) on the cheap," Winberg said. "We wanted an open kitchen, a walk-in cooler, a hood, and didn't want more than 60 seats."

The caché they built up with their brief tenures at Porter & Frye and Victory 44 had local food writers following their every move to opening. They did a soft opening in July of 2010, and ran the restaurant with eight people, "including the dishwasher," Winberg said.

The buzz slowly built upon the swooning reviews of those food writers. All their influences married on the menu: traditional cooking and artisanal techniques paired with molecular gastronomic innovation and artistic presentation. The restaurant's décor, utility and atmosphere are homages to their resumes and influences, down to the glass jars of various ingredients lining the walls (they're not just decoration, they get used—storage space is tight).

They chugged along. Served lunch, but dropped it. Kept working. They brought on a third partner, Bob Gerken, 30, about eight months ago. Gerken, like Brown and co-founder/chef James Winberg, is from Minnesota, but went elsewhere. Brown cooked with Gerken in Arizona. ("He's been here at Travail since the beginning," Brown said. "He came up here, didn't have a place, my wife and I had him stay with us. We don't have a big place, and he lived in our walk-in closet.")

The neighborhood responded immediately to the restaurant, and filled it regularly, Winberg said. "But that began to fade; we still see them, but not at the volume we used to."

The reason? Among Bon Appetite magazine's 10 Best New Restaurants in America list in the September 2011 issue was,

at No. 4, Travail. Since that short review (a grand total of 117 words) there has been that line of people waiting outside the restaurant before it opens. "We had 65 to 100 people out the door for three weeks," Winberg said, still with a touch of disbelief. "We still have up to 30 people weekdays, and 70 to 80 on the weekends. ... (The restaurant) is its own animal, we're just holding on to it."

It's a rush of attention and activity that, Winberg said, is handled by a kitchen staff that is "pushed to collaborate, and find a way to make it better for everybody."

"Everyone knows every single thing in the kitchen," Brown said. It's a grueling pace—14 to 16 hours a day—but alleviated by long breaks: Thanksgiving week off, two weeks at Christmas, a month in the summer. With a kitchen upgrade coming soon to streamline things, they only plan on "getting to the next level," Brown said. "We are early in our journey, but we can see we can do something more."

Russo | from page 22

Russo didn't intend the market to become a serious revenue stream for the business—particularly in its first year. It was created as a sales outlet for his suppliers (area farmers; Russo's long-held desire is to create larger sales markets for them), make good, inexpensive food available to consumers and serve as a larder for the restaurant. But something happened this past summer: it got more crowded in there. "The sales are up and down in the market, but we obviously did pretty well this year—a lot better than I thought we would do—at least from what I saw coming out of the gate," Russo said.

If the market stood on its own, "it would be closed," Russo said, but as a piece of the restaurant, the market's income is just about covering the costs of the mortgage and taxes of the new space, and drawing in a growing number of customers. That proves there's increased demand for year-round markets featuring locally and sustainably grown product priced competitively, and, in turn, more appetite to support those growing the food. The pleasant reality dovetails neatly into Russo's efforts in the past year beyond the restaurant to help bring healthy food to the general public where they shop, work and go to school.

He's partnered with the Community Design Center of Minnesota, and volunteered for the Minnesota Organic Advisory Task Force. The Task Force advises the state's commissioner of agriculture and the University of Minnesota about policies and programs to improve organic agriculture within the state and recommendations for changes to the Farm Bill.

Russo also chairs the "food literacy task force" within the St. Paul/Ramsey County Food & Nutrition Commission, which looks at specific policies and ordinances that encourage local food production. "We come up with recommendations that the city and county can do to educate people on healthy food choices, in particular children," Russo said.

Throw stepping into the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce in the mix, and Russo's tacked on more hours to the already big pile that most chef-owners do at their restaurants. But with more staff support in the larger new space, Russo can focus some personal attention on those food network and education issues most important to him. "If I'm given the opportunity to make an impact, and I don't take it, I don't have any reason to complain about the way things are," Russo said.

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