

recipes *for* success

IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY TO PASS THE CITY'S TASTE TEST, BUT LUCKILY LOCAL RESTAURANTS KNOW THE INGREDIENTS FOR CULINARY SUCCESS.

BY COLLEEN HEATHER ROGAN

In an industry packed with pitfalls and competition, restaurant survival rests on an ability to offer diners the best of what they want. Local pros like Sandy D'Amato and Joe Bartolotta have proven to have a special touch for this time and time again. Yet we wondered about the formula for success for those fresher to the city's culinary scene. From local entrepreneurs to national chains, the answers came back the same: offer great quality, deliver terrific food, create memorable experiences, understand the business and cater to the customer. Opening a restaurant in the Milwaukee area takes drive, determination and talent. Here's a glimpse at the strategies local restaurants use to keep diners coming back.

Jose Zarate's goal for **Hemingways Habana Vieja**, located across the street from his other restaurant, La Fuente, was to add a touch of old Havana to the South Side neighborhood. "Really it was my father's love of Cuba, its people, architecture and beauty of the island that inspired our new restaurant," says Mariela Zarate, Jose's daughter and manager of the newer venture. "Diners really appreciate being offered something different." The menu features traditional Cuban dishes like la ropa vieja, vaca encebollada, tostones rellenos and Cuban sandwiches. Mariela admits to being "surprised that there was such a big audience for Cuban cuisine in such a northern state." When establishing the restaurant's "comfortable yet somewhat elegant ambiance," Mariela says, "we looked to ornate bars that still exist in Cuba and even had a print made of a large painting that hangs at the famous El Floridita." But it's the impressive hand-

carved bar, created specifically for the restaurant, that Mariela says really gets attention. "Everyone just loves the bar," she says. Just like those in Cuba, it's stocked with lots of imported rums for making classic Cuban cocktails like daiquiris and Cuba libres, as well as Hemingways' own private mojito blend. (626 S. Fifth St., 273-6000, www.hemingwaysoldhavana.com.)

Gathering a strong restaurant team is also a top priority for new ventures. The new millennium has ignited a number of trends in restaurants nationwide, including a focus on upscale casual dining establishments created by a new generation of passionate restaurateurs. Locally, we have seen this in the partnership of Omar Shaikh, Tom Wackman and Dimitri Dimitropoulos. Part of the sizzling-hot steakhouse movement, their restaurant, **Carnevor**, has been credited with redefining the city's take on steak. This is pretty much what they had in mind from the very beginning. "We knew we wanted to offer something completely different, to have award-winning food and décor and a service style unlike any other steakhouse, so we really pushed the envelope," says Shaikh.

With a restaurant design that fuses rustic and urban elements, Carnevor's menu offers more than just the steaks. It also features innovative entrées, appetizers and sides. Their mission, Shaikh adds, "included creating a restaurant where people in jeans and suits could feel equally comfortable." Acknowledging the toughness of the industry, he feels confident in the cohesiveness of the team moving forward. "Three heads are better than one. Between us we have all the keys for success, and being in sync, we work equally hard to create something really

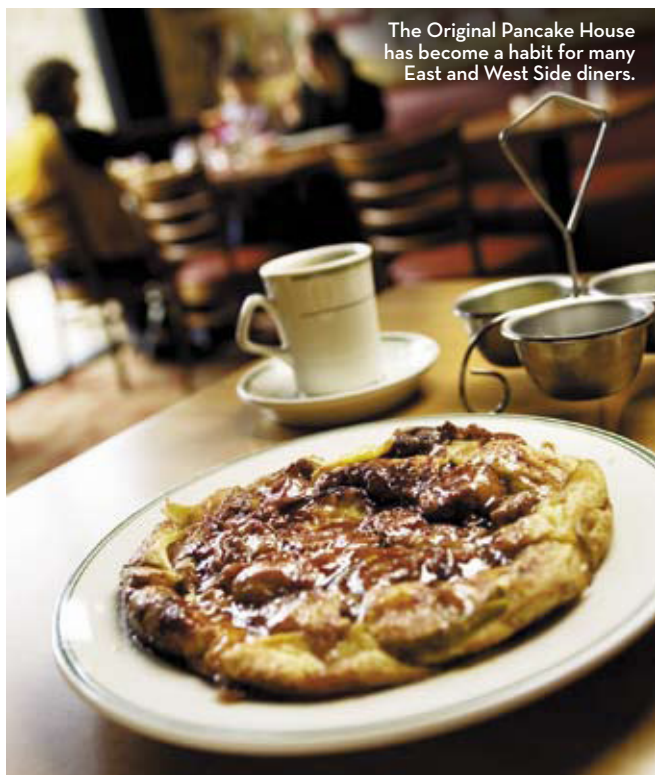


Devon Seafood Grill's
tuna tartare with pickled
cucumbers, broken wasabi
vinaigrette and house-made
sesame cracker.

unique.” He’s also confident in the city. “Having local critics who really understand food has helped create very articulate diners. Our customers understand food and are so loyal, friendly and unbelievably nice. Treating them as our No. 1 priority is simply a pleasure.” (724 N. Milwaukee St., 223-2200, www.carnevor.com.)

It’s a pretty tall order to treat each and every diner as a priority when you operate 27 restaurants nationally, yet that’s precisely what **The Capital Grille** sets out to do. “Given the level of service we offer, diners are assured no matter in what city they dine with us, they’ll have the same quality of experience,” says Leslie Johnson, manager of marketing and sales. Staff education plays a vital role in this process, she explains. “Servers are required to complete a two-week training course before they even see their first table and then are assigned fewer tables in order to give diners proper attention.” From taking reservations promptly and politely to on-site chefs keeping close tabs on prep and presentation, the restaurant stresses conscientious customer care. Rounding it out are premium steaks (dry-aged on the premises), an extensive wine list and seafood choices that include tuna, salmon, swordfish, caviar, oysters and plenty of lobsters flown in fresh daily. “We’re so much more than a steakhouse,” Johnson says. “In fact, I’m astounded by the number of orders we get for 5-pound lobsters. I had no idea Milwaukee loved lobster as much as it does.” (310 W. Wisconsin Ave., 223-0600, www.thecapitalgrille.com.)

The city’s love of seafood and a good location are two main factors in **Devon Seafood Grill’s** success. “We find we do well in lifestyle centers located in upscale neighborhoods,” general manager Ryan Doerr says of the restaurant’s Bayshore Town Center location. “Plus, we feel we’re delivering something new and different that diners in this area have been waiting for.” Appealing to both dinner guests as well as shoppers looking for the perfect excuse to break for lunch, the restaurant features a



The Original Pancake House has become a habit for many East and West Side diners.

creative menu centered on market-fresh seafood from around the world. “We’re here to wow,” Doerr says of the comfortable dining environment, one that’s reminiscent of a modern Malibu mansion with Asian undertones. “We are confident we can offer diners the experience and feel of a really upscale restaurant without the price.” (5715 N. Bayshore Dr., Glendale, 967-9790, www.devonseafood.com.)

Opening **Andrew’s Restaurant** in the upscale Delafield Hotel he developed with partner Bob Lang gave Andrew Ruggeri “the opportunity to meet the demand for a high-end dining experience that area residents have been requesting for years.” Tucked into a traditional inn with classic design, Andrew’s Restaurant focuses on “creating a comfortable, elegant dining experience with great food, great wine, great music and great service,” says Ruggeri. He and chef Dean Schmitz were especially conscientious when it came to developing the refined American menu. Years of hospitality experience had taught Ruggeri that “people like to know what they’re going out for, so while we’ll always try new things, we understand the importance of retaining entrées customers love and specifically come in for, like our crisp roast duck with Cointreau pan sauce.” Ruggeri sees an increasingly discerning palate in the diners he draws from Milwaukee, Waukesha, Madison and the western suburbs. “Especially with wine, people are definitely drinking more of it and moving into more expensive and exciting selections,” he says. Also, “in little things, like fewer requests for sauces served on the side, they’re trusting and allowing the chef to do what he’s supposed to do.” (415 Genesee St., Delafield, 262-646-1600, www.delafieldhotel.com.)

In Brookfield, where George Flees has opened a second location of **Jose’s Blue Sombrero** to match the popular one in Racine, diners are trusting chef Javier Ortega. They trust him to satisfy their cravings for authentic “from-scratch” Mexican favorites as well as surprise them with unexpected specialties like salmon enchipotleado. While acknowledging that his is the area’s only restaurant meeting demand for the popular cuisine, Flees feels its immediate success is based on far more than a lack of competition. “How well we concentrate on what goes on inside the restaurant really determines how people respond to it,” he says. “[Our success comes from our] inventive ‘south of the border’ menu, the dedication and personality of our staff and a comfortable contemporary Mexican décor.” No matter what, one thing is certain: As soon as it opened its doors, customers came running. “I knew we’d be busy, I just had no idea we would be this busy.” And they are, every day of the week. All except Sunday, that is. “We love making our customers happy, but it’s important to us that our employees have family time too.” (20371 W. Blue Mound Rd., 262-432-6667, www.josesbluesombrero.com.)

One popular way to spend time with family and friends is over breakfast, and with the opening of a second location of **The Original Pancake House**, Jeff Winter and partner Joe DeRosa aim to make it both easy and delicious. “The cool thing about breakfast,” says Winter, “is while most people wouldn’t have dinner in the same place three times a week, where they eat breakfast definitely becomes a habit.” And Winter sees a definite difference in his East and West Side diners. “Surrounded by high-end residential and retail, our Blue Mound Road location sees a lot of breakfast business meetings, shoppers, seniors and families with kids, while our Downer

Hemingways Habana
Vieja's hand-carved bar
evokes old Havana.



Avenue location, in its eclectic neighborhood setting, sees more college students, groups of friends, couples walking from East Side condos or families driving in from Shorewood, Whitefish Bay and Mequon.” The menus, however, are identical, featuring homemade sourdough buttermilk pancake batter, crêpes created from scratch, thick-cut bacon, homemade syrups and fresh-squeezed juices. Cracking 2,000 eggs a day, Winter is confident when he says, “we make the most and the best breakfast food you can get anywhere in the city.” (2621 N. Downer Ave., 431-5055, www.originalpancakehouse.com.)

At **Sheridan's**, breakfast, lunch, dinner, cocktails and perhaps even a bedtime snack are on the minds of Lee Barczak and wife, Jane Schilz. In late spring, they're planning to open their upscale boutique hotel, the Sheridan House, as well as Sheridan's, the hotel's restaurant. Though new to the hospitality field, when presented with the opportunity to purchase and completely renovate Cudahy's historic and beloved Fountain Blue, the couple followed a dream. “Since travel, wine and good food are our passions, we really wanted to offer some of the best of what we've seen and experienced in other cities, especially in Europe,” says Schilz. Nestled in a quiet lakefront neighborhood with easy access to parks and a golf course, the hotel is already receiving inquiries from foreign travelers. And locals are also looking forward to an inviting bistro atmosphere promising both dining and events that celebrate music and wine. “Having grown up in the area, we wanted to create an alternative to the taverns and chain restaurants more common to the South Side – a place people will frequent to enjoy the ambiance of their experience,” says Barczak. To define that ambiance, the couple chose a warm, earth-toned palette, installed marble flooring and brought together custom birch wood, wrought iron and etched glass design elements extolling the lyrical lines of art nouveau. “No matter the meal or occasion,” says Schilz, “we're here to encourage people to comfortably enjoy dining, conversation and music with family and friends.” The seasonally changing menu, Barczak says, “features uncomplicated food created with incredibly fresh ingredients, food to intrigue rather than

intimidate.” (5133 S. Lake Dr., Cudahy, Sheridan's: 747-9800; Sheridan House: 747-9810, www.sheridanhouseandcafe.com.)

Avoiding intimidation was a key factor in both the concept and design of The Pfister's **Mason Street Grill**. After operating such venerable and acclaimed restaurants as the English Room and Celia's, Keith Halfmann, the hotel's general manager, recognized that “the dining scene in Milwaukee was definitely evolving.” With Peter Donahue and Mark Weber, the restaurant's general manager and managing director respectively, Halfmann set about exploring exactly what diners wanted. What they found: “Special occasion dining just isn't viable anymore. People don't want to spend a lot on stuffy service and opulent décor. They're eating out more and want restaurants that become a part of their social scene with a well-priced, wider range of choices,” says Weber. Confident they could deliver on all fronts, the team set its sights on designing a restaurant capable of hosting a broad variety of dining experiences. The design includes a visible wine room and divides the restaurant into distinct seating areas. Those seating options include tables with wide leather chairs, large cozy booths, a marble-topped dining counter with a view into the kitchen, private dining rooms and a bar that opens to sidewalk seating in the summer months. “By appealing to so many different diners,” says Donahue, “there's so much more we can offer.”

The steak and seafood menu is expanded to include American classics like chicken pot pie, hamburgers and entrée salads, complemented by an extensive selection of more than 2,500 wines. Inherent to the restaurant's originality, says Halfmann, “is the idea that a businessman can have the confidence to entertain important clients at a formal dinner one evening and the next feel just as comfortable coming in with his wife to enjoy a great casual meal at our dining counter.” Have they met their goal of creating the quintessential neighborhood restaurant? Ask any Downtown dweller or guest of the hotel, any night of the week. (425 E. Mason St., 298-3131, www.masonstreetgrill.com.) ■