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Fox Cities' restaurants meet the taste test

Ethnic restaurants now flourishing alongside meat-and-potatoes places

By Kristin Brantmeier Stankewicz
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Twenty years ago, the Fox Cities restaurant scene was mostly a meat-and-potatoes kind of place. Today, supper clubs and Friday fish fries are still part of the dining-out landscape, but residents are also tempted by more exotic fare.

"I think the biggest thing you notice is more of an ethnic influence ... Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, which is great," said Jay Supple, chief executive officer of the family-owned Supple Restaurant Group; operator of Fratello's, Fox River Brewery, the Melting Pot, and Johnathan's Bistro. "You're seeing people's tastes changing."

According to Pam Seidl, marketing and communications manager for the Fox Cities Convention and Visitors Bureau, "We've had many visitors comment on the Fox Cities' restaurant scene, saying, 'you guys have more good restaurants per capita than larger cities.'"

Seidl said visitors are especially impressed by the number of independently-run restaurants in the area.

"A lot of times in communities this size,



Jay Supple stands in the dining room at his new Fratello's restaurant at 501 W. Water Street in Appleton. Supple opened the restaurant, which serves a variety of American and Italian food, in June. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

there's not those unique, locally-owned things," she said.

"We've always had a few nice restaurants, but now there's Thai, Korean, Indian, Greek ... those types of restaurants are really flourishing, partly

because of the growing numbers of people from other parts of the country and of different ethnic backgrounds coming into the area," she said.

Seidl said area employers who draw talent from a wide geographic base, like Kimberly-

Clark, help contribute to the demand for diverse dining options.

The changing tastes in the Fox Cities mirror what's going on nationwide, according to Supple.

"The customer is much more educated today," he said. "It comes from advertising, and from food channel shows ... from watching the Emerils and Wolfgang Pucks of the world. They've really done a nice job on educating people on food. People have gotten into food tasting, wine tasting, beer tasting. Dining out has really become an experience today," he said.

Seidl agrees, calling the trend, "the Food Network phenomenon."

"People are into food and are willing to try different types of food. Here, when people go out, they want to try something different that they might not tackle at home," she said.

While it may seem like there are more restaurants in the Valley to choose from lately, Supple said it's not necessarily the case.

"There is an increase," he said, "but there are also restaurants leaving. If you look at the number of openings and closings, it's always pretty even."

For a locally-owned restaurant or chain, competing against national chains is hard work. "A lot of it is from the financial side," Supple said. "They (national chains) have the dollars to grow companies much easier than the independents do.

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Restaurants/Area diners are looking for 'whole experience'

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They've got a supposedly proven concept, so they can roll it out into an area with a full marketing program."

To compete as an independent, being bigger can help, said Supple. "For an independent, we're a pretty good size right now, so we have our own marketing program and can roll out programs similar to what a chain can offer."

No matter the size of the company behind a restaurant, Supple said "to be successful, you have to give them the whole experience. The service has to be there, the food has to be there, and the ambience has to be there, too. All three parts have to work in sync for an independent or a chain."

He said the key to success is figuring out the restaurant's brand and promoting it. While chains can spend millions on marketing, "Independents need to research on their own and figure out how to get their brand out there and keep it going. There's always a 'catch' to what it is, what's the ambience, why are they developing the concept? It's got to be catchy," Supple said.

For Fusion, a new restaurant in downtown Appleton, the "catch" is a glass garage-door front that lifts to turn the dining room into an open-air experience.

A group of investors, including restaurateur Jeremy Martin, who has a Minneapolis restaurant background, opened the unique red-walled contemporary eatery in July. Fresh seafood is flown in three times a week.

A visit to downtown Neenah yields restaurants offering guests something special, too. A meal at the popular Cy's Asian Bistro includes a personal table visit from owner Cy Thounsavath, while just down the street the DeFranza family serves

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authentic meals and sells imported meats, cheeses, and pastas at Luna Italian Restaurant and Market.

With all the new tastes available in the area, is there anything lacking from the Fox Cities restaurant selection?

"I think one opportunity in the downtown Appleton area might be for more family dining," said Seidl. "Many of the restaurants are very nice places, but not necessarily places people feel comfortable bringing young children. When we have families come in for soccer tournaments and stay downtown, or groups that take bus trips to the Children's Museum or The Big Picture, they need a place to eat."