

DINING

Nifty's goes lighter, upscale with new owners

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

Yes, you guessed it. This is the former Nifty Norman's, sold by Birmingham-based restaurateur Norman LePage in 1993 to Debbie Miesel and Chef Rick Vogel.

Miesel and Vogel have known each other since their Detroit high school days, when their families had rival wholesale grocery businesses.

They went their separate ways until coming together on this venture and now are diversifying the food and lightening up the decor at Nifty's.

"When we took over this was a Big Boy with a liquor license," said Vogel, a graduate of the culinary arts program at Schoolcraft College. "We're no longer a 'Family Tavern' serving burgers and pizza," seconds Miesel. "Our new menu recognizes the changing needs of the 1990s dining public."

Although a glance at the menu doesn't give the overall impression of "light" dishes, it does note that Guernsey low fat yogurt can be substituted for cream in any sauced entry.

This would include a group of

Nifty's
Address: 1403 S. Commerce, Wolverine Lake. Call (810) 624-6660.
Hours: Dinner only. 4-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 4-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 4-9 p.m. Sunday. Bar hours extend one hour later except on Sunday.
Reservations: Parties of 6 or more.
Menu: Eclectic. Bar food, pastas, southwestern favorites plus a rotating list of chef-created entrees including fish and veal dishes. Children's menu.
Prices: Moderate. Credit cards: The majors. Atmosphere: Casual.
Highlights: Patio dining, banquet hall.

sauced pasta dishes created by Vogel, such as the Cashew Chicken Amaretto Tortellini (\$15.95) that I had.

It was a breast of chicken sautéed in Amaretto di Serrano with cashews and fresh strawberries served over cheese tortellini tossed in an Amaretto and

cream sauce.

It was more than I could eat, so those who like hefty portions will be happy. But had I seen the low fat yogurt substitution, I might have made a larger dent in it.

Dining near us this weeknight was the four-member O'Donnell family of Commerce Township, who have been eating at Nifty Norman's and now Nifty's for a decade.

"It's been a tradition for us to come here for family occasions," said daughter Jennifer who was having the chicken fajita (\$9.95), which she describes as "one of my favorite dishes."

Sandy, her mother, opted for the mixed grill combo of chair-broiled jumbo gulf shrimp, marinated chicken breast and medallions of beef tenderloin with three sauces: bournaises, homemade BBQ and teriyaki.

It was served with baked potato and fresh steamed vegetables for \$17.95.

Young Jeffrey was enjoying the nachos grande (\$8.95). His dad, Patrick, went for the 14-ounce boneless rib eye steak with the baked potato and steamed veggies (\$15.95).

They also remarked favorably on the warm bread, but were unable to discuss desserts, which except for those involving ice cream are purchased from the Pastry Palace in Novi.

"We never have room for dessert," Patrick O'Donnell said. For the record, the Signature Dessert is the Mud Pie for which Vogel uses Haugen Daze ice cream, a crust of Oreo cookies and graham crackers and two kinds of fudge sauce - Sanders and McGuire's (\$4.95).

Although the cozy atmosphere conveyed by the Tiffany-style fixtures and comfortable booths remains, Nifty's dark paneled walls recently were painted over in light-beige.

"We try to create a friendly atmosphere," says Miesel, who took culinary classes at Oakland Community College, but decided she liked the front-of-the-house better than cooking.

A customer-friendly touch is that the menu lists an appropriate wine selection after many entrees.

"Any given night we know five or six tables in the dining room by name," Vogel said. Every night but Sunday, the



STAFF PHOTO BY DAN DEAN

At your service: Chef Rick Vogel and Debbie Miesel try to create a friendly atmosphere at Nifty's.

bar stays open an hour past dining hours featuring after-dinner coffee drinks, specialty drinks and cognac.

RESTAURANT SPECIALS

Send information about special dinners, new restaurants, restaurant renovations, restaurant anniversaries, and menu changes for consideration in Restaurant Specials to: Kelly Wagon, Taste/Entertainment editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150. Or fax information to (313) 591-7279.

JUST OPENED

• **Tribute** - 31425 W. 12 Mile Road, Farmington Hills, (810) 848-1313. Look for restaurant profile in next week's Arts & Entertainment. Diner selections include Grilled Maine Salmon, Rack of Lamb, Char grilled Angus Beef Steak and Roasted Organic Veal Chop.

• **Carvers** - At Ten Mile Road and Grand River, Farmington Hills, (810) 476-5333, features steaks and chops, along with a host of other appetizing entrees.

• **Ruth's Chris Steak House** - 755 W. Big Beaver Road, Troy (on ground floor of Top of Troy building, adjacent

to I-75 at W. Big Beaver Road), (810) 269-8424. Open for dinner at 5 p.m. Menu features U.S. Prime beef, seafood, regional specialties.

• **Chuck Muer's Seafood Tavern** - 5656 W. Maple Road, West Bloomfield, (810) 851-2251.

• **Cafe Oliverio** - 25938 Middlebelt Road, Farmington Hills, (810) 478-1750, specializes in New York Style Italian cuisine.

• **East Side Mario's** - 29267 Southfield Road (between 12 Mile and 13 Mile Roads), in the Southfield Commons Shopping Center, (810) 589-9454. Open 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Monday-Saturday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sundays. Menu features pastas, pizzas and more.

RENOVATIONS

• **America** 4616 N. Woodward, Royal Oak, (810) 649-2000 is opening their new deck Monday, May 27. Winner of "The name the deck" contest will be announced today. Check Arts & Entertainment next week for details.

FABULOUS FEASTS

• **The Murel Feast**, tonight at Trattoria Bruschetta (810) 305-5210; Friday at Morale, A Michigan Bistro (810) 642-1094; and Saturday at Sebastian's (810) 649-6625 and Cafe Jardin (810) 649-1359. Cost \$39.95, not inclusive of tax or gratuity. Reservations required. First Annual Soft Shell Crabfest continues through June 30 at Sebastian's Grill, Tavern on 13, Morale, A Michigan Bistro, Trattoria Reliah and America. Call (810) 737-AURC for reservations.

• **Southeast Asia Dinner**, 7 p.m. Tuesday & Wednesday, May 29-30, the Lark, 6430 Farmington Road, (north of Maple Road), West Bloomfield. Cost \$77.60 per person, call (810) 681-4466.

Fifteenth Anniversary Dinner 7 p.m. Monday, June 10. Cost \$75 per person.

• **"Evening of Taste,"** 6 p.m. Tuesday, Downtown London Chophouse, 155 W. Congress, Detroit. Cost \$75

per person, reservations recommended, (313) 963-7778. Four course gourmet dinner, sampling of fine wines and single malt scotches (featuring McCallan), presentation/sampling of choice cigars, smooth jazz sounds of Ishah & Company.

KIDDING AROUND

• **Geni's Hole-In-The-Wall** - 108 E. Main, Northville, "The Spring Follies with Geni's Rascals" 11:30 a.m. Saturday, June 1, Wednesday, June 5. Children \$8.99, Adults \$10.99. Call (810) 349-0522 for reservations. Kids join our zany cast as they entertain you with music, dancing, sing-a-longs and the help of the audience to perform folia. Soup, mostaccioli, salad, chicken legs and dessert are on the menu.

BALLS & BENEFITS

• **Brew Splash I** on the Detroit River 6:30-9:30 p.m. Thursday, May 30, at

The Roostertail, 100 Marquette Drive, Detroit. Tickets \$20, available at Ticketmaster outlets, (810) 644-6066. Frathy celebrations features hand-crafted specialty brews from across the country, light food, non-alcoholic beverages and entertainment. Proceeds to support Arttrain's cultural and educational programs.

• **Michigan Chefs de Cuisine Association, Chef of the Year** - President's Ball, 6:15 p.m. Monday, June 3, Skyline Club, 2000 Town Center, Suite 2600, Southfield. \$60 per person (non-members) \$50 (members). RSVP by May 29 to Steve Allen (810) 559-4230. Dinner, cash bar, live entertainment.

MENUS

• All 20 Chuck Muer restaurants are featuring salmon as part of the fourth annual Taste of the Northwest through Thursday, June 20.

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*Discounts not combinable • Subject to limited availability • Big Apple Circus is a not-for-profit performing arts organization

Save Energy. Sit In Front Of The TV.

"Our House," a home energy-efficiency show brought to you by Detroit Edison, has some timely suggestions that can help you lower your energy bills. Starting March 17th, watch "Our House" Sundays at 7:00 a.m. on WDIV Channel 4.

Co-hosts Tom Tynan and Paula Engel offer many energy-saving projects for the home and tips to help preserve the environment. You'll see all new shows on energy efficient windows, kitchens and interior designs, as well as building an energy efficient home and conducting your own energy audit. Plus a special show about the Greening of the White House.

"Our House" is the only show that gives you the energy saving know-how. And it's Detroit Edison's way of helping you save energy at your house and money on your energy bills.

Our House

"Our House," Sundays, 7:00 a.m., WDIV, through June 9th