Restaurateuring, like politicking, is risky business

JUDITH DONER BERNE

It's all over, but the swearing in. We can turn our attention to other things. Particularly as the holidays approach, a lot of us will be dining out. Restaurateuring like politicking is risky business.

Politicos have an agenda. Restaurants have a menu. Both must sell people on their offerings as well as their delivery. Although each gains experience through years in office, neither is ever home free. New politicians emerge to challenge. At best, they must run for office every six years. At worst, every two. New restaurants emerge to challenge. Only one of 10 non-chain restaurants lasts five years.

While we've spent the last couple of *months immersed in the business of* politics, some important results have been released in the restaurant business. Two feature restaurateurs, we are proud to say, whose hometowns are Oakland County. One is like an experienced office holder: savvy, more accustomed to awards, but constantly fine tuning food, wine and service to stay ahead of the pack. The other is like the newly-elected office holder: enthusiastic, learning and refining operations each day, and absolutely thrilled to receive such an honor.

• The November issue of Esquire Magazines names Spruce, operated by Dan Sachs, as its Best New Restaurant of 1996.

Sachs, a Cranbrook Kingswood graduate who grew up in West Bloomfield, fulfilled a life-long dream of opening his own restaurant last May in downtown Chicago.

His restaurant, which features the cuisine of former Clinton White House chef Keith Luce, was selected *the best among 23 new dining rooms* ranging from Dallas to Denver and from New Orleans to New York.

"When we walked into Spruce we knew we'd found what we'd been looking for," writes Esquire's John Mariani. And, "In its meticulous attention to detail Spruce clearly reflects the personality of owner Dan Sachs, a graduate of Harvard, La Varenne, Union Square Cafe and TriBeCa Grill in New York and Spiaggia here in Chicago."

His former classmates and teachers, as well as his mom and dad, will be happy at Esquire's description of him: "Impeccably dressed, the 29-year-old Sachs exudes an unflappable hospitality that immediately puts you at ease."

Sachs draws on his Michigan roots for certain dishes on the menu, such as dried Michigan cherry and polenta pudding. Wonder if he first tasted that in the Cranbrook lunch room?

Luckily for us the other restaurant — and its proprietors — are closer to home.

• The Lark, an intimate, elegant West Bloomfield dining room owned by Jim and Mary Lark, received yet another national culinary award.

The October issue of Gourmet Magazine lists The Lark as one of the top 23 restaurants in North America, as selected by a random sampling of 29,000 subscribers. It was the magazine's first-ever report and guide to "America's Top Tables," according to Jim Lark.

The Lark, celebrating its 15th anniversary, has received numerous honors through the years, including being voted America's finest restaurant by the readers of Conde Nast Traveler magazine.

But, unlike young Dan Sachs, acclaim was hard to come by. Jim Lark is blunt: "The early days were torture. While other local fine restaurants opening in the '80s received supportive rave reviews which drew instant crowds, The Lark alone was attacked viciously...

"The pounding we took from the press was compounded by a deep recession, a period when the last person left in Michigan was requested to turn out the lights," he says.

"While putting on a brave face for our new patrons, we were also plagued by a staff which seemed to possess every known vice and addiction, and which topped things off by setting the kitchen on fire on a rare jam-packed evening."

Restaurateuring, like politicking, is risky business. Hail to the winners.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers. You can comment on this column by calling (313)953-2047, Ext. 1997 or by writing or faxing, (810)644-1314, Phil Sherman who edits these opinion pages.

Eagle population soars, but environment still in danger

TIM RICHARD

On balance, things are improving for our Great Lakes, the 95,000 square miles of water that are North America's most noticeable feature from outer space.

That's the conclusion one reaches after plowing through "State of the Great Lakes," a 67-page report from Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality.

I must warn you the writing is dreadful: flaccid abstractions, listless verbs, airy adjectives. Just 7,500 copies are in print, so I'll save you the bother of tracking one down and the eye-glazing labor of reading it.

In sum, we're getting a handle on chemical problems, but the habitat and "exotic" fish problems will be tougher to solve. We need those lakes for our drinking water, shipping, manufacturing, recreation and the health of our ecosystem. Key items:

• Eagles: excellent. The bald eagle, our national symbol, no longer is "endangered," just "threatened." A record 268 pairs nested in 1995, a steady increase from 83 in 1973. Eagles eat fish. Chemical pollutants in the food chain caused eagles' eggs to have thin shells that broke before hatching. Eagles nesting within five miles of the Great Lakes shoreline are less successful than those nesting inland.

• "Exotics": spreading. These are mid-European water creatures like the ruffe, roundnose goby and zebra mussel. They stowed away in the ballast tanks of ships and entered the Great Lakes when the tanks were drained. A new law called the Non-indigenous Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act requires ships to exchange their ballast water at sea. (Hooray for government regulations!) This cuts imports, but we still face threats from the species already here.

• Perch: uh-oh. Once Lake Michigan's most abundant, easily caught pan fish, the tasty yellow perch is in big trouble. No one is sure why. There still are jumbos from the class of 1988, but younger fish are missing. Although creel limits have cut the catch by half, DEQ is "not optimistic."

• Lake trout: trouble. We got municipal and industrial wastes out of the St. Mary's River and brought back Lake Huron's lake trout. But the situation north of Alpena has worsened recently as the lamprey, the vampire of the waters, makes a comeback. Probable solution: treating the river in 1997 to sterilize male lampreys.

• Urban sprawl: killer. Builders and their unthinking customers are eating up land far faster than population growth warrants: From 1990-2020, population will rise less than 12 percent while urbanized land will increase 63-87 percent. Results: erosion, sedimentation, loss of wildlife habitat, air and water degradation, closed beaches.

In one of the book's few concise statements, Carol Misseldine of the Michigan Environmental Council says, "There's no diplomatic way to say it: human beings, and particularly our manufacturing systems, are destroying the habitat on which we and all other species rely." We've lost 60 percent of our coastal wetlands, so necessary for spawning and the food chain.

The authors point out that more than 50 bills in the Legislature would affect land use. They fail to point out that most are in political trouble.

• Pollution: down and up. Point pollution from factories and sewers has been reduced. But non-point pollution — from parking lots, fertilized fields, treated lawns, salted roads — is increasing and is tougher to stop. Generally, water quality is improving. PCB levels in gulls and salmon have "declined significantly."

• Water levels: fine. On the four Great Lakes surrounding Michigan, water levels are close to their historic averages — "less flooding and shore erosion" and wider beaches.

• Public lands: good. The state is using Natural Resources Trust Fund money to help communities buy critical shoreline parcels. Organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and other private conservation groups are helping to save natural lands.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

Character education: A step forward

PHIL POWER

So the State Board of Education says it's OK to teach character in the public schools.

I suppose I should be relieved, but a quick glance at the four-page policy adopted last month makes me more than a little bit wistful.

The document starts with a lengthy and remarkably pompous preamble quoting, in order, the 1995 Michigan Youth Risk Survey, the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress, George Washington, the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King and Thomas Jefferson.

The board adopted the policy by a 6-1 vote, with Democrat Kathleen Straus, who voted no, explaining that she might have voted for the measure if the preamble had been deleted.

The policy statement holds, "Principles such as respect, responsibility, caring, trustworthiness, justice, civic virtue and citizenship determine the character of our people and the tenor of the society in which we live. The formation of character, both individual and social, is the responsibility of all of us. Education has a direct impact on the development of character in our citizens."

The board resolution then "empowers and encourages public schools to provide character education...based on the principles of our governing documents, including the principles of the First Amendment and maintaining the separation of church and state."

So what are we to make of all of this?

At first blush, it looks like the pretentious in search of the obvious. Of course, character is important. And certainly it does little harm to encourage schools to address matters of character in educating students.

Personally, I've always felt that parents are best equipped to provide their children with insights into the importance of character through the daily burly-burly of family life. Character comes about through engagement with complicated situations in real life, not through listening to a lecture in a classroom and taking a multiple-choice exam.

But behind the somewhat obvious nature of the board's resolution lies a significant and historic debate.

It seems clear that the unfortunate tendency of the last 40 years or so has been to decouple matters of value — character, ethics, citizenship, religion — from our public schools.

In part, this trend has been based on aggressive interpretation of the First Amendment, which prohibits government from establishing a religion. Certainly, this doctrine is fundamental to our secular society because it prevents government from imposing any certain religious doctrine on a people that are growing increasingly heterogeneous in race and religious doctrine.

But despite the enormous number of lawsuits brought against the schools in recent years, there is precious little evidence that the authors of the First Amendment intended it to be used as justification for purging all matters of value from the curriculum.

To the extent that the new policy helps rectify this situation, it's a helpful advance.

However, the issue here is that all too often the extreme becomes the enemy of the good.

State Board president Clark Durant set off this particular debate in July by arguing that schools ought to teach character by using the life of Moses as a role model. Members of the religious right then weighed in by arguing, simultaneously, that parents were best equipped to teach character, and if character were to be taught in the schools, it should be based on the Bible.

Others demurred. And it was not until board member Dorothy Beardmore, of Rochester Hills, added language referencing the First Amendment and maintaining the separation of church and state that the policy was passed.

Somehow, I would have wished that this sensible resolution could have been achieved without all the sound and fury.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.