

DINING

Smitty's Grill heats up downtown Rochester

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Just opened, Jimmy Schmidt's Smitty's Grill in Rochester is not a cookie cutter stamp of his Tuscan Grill formats in Southfield and Ann Arbor. In fact, Schmidt bills it as a "wild departure."

Tuscan implications at Schmidt's other restaurants may lead one to assume an Italian-accented menu. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"I use Tuscan only as a reference to Italy's Tuscany region where wood-roasting meats is a specialty," Schmidt explained. "And of the three restaurants I've called 'Grills,' the Rochester location plays out the wood-roasted theme best."

Schmidt built Smitty's Grill from the ground up. It was formerly a parking lot, but if you didn't see it in construction phases, then you won't recognize that it was built new to look world by design architect Howard Ellman of Dynamic Designs in Birmingham. Designed by Plymouth's Dennis Larson, the modern interior is bright and engaging.

Diners can enter from either Main Street or a rear entrance (designed as the main entrance with a bright green canopy) where there's also valet parking. A colorful, playful interior is arty, yet speaking to quality, natural materials with merry wood dividers, mahogany tables and stone work, highlighted by sophisticated, creative light fixtures.

"The colors are natural food colors," Schmidt noted. "That's not just blue, it's blueberry. Green is the color of leafy vegetables. And that's pumpkin."

It's all deliberate to showcase the natural food preparations created by super-chef/proprietor

Smitty's Grill

Where: 222 Main Street (between Second and Third), Rochester (248) 652-1600.
Hours: 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; until 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 3-8 p.m. Sunday.

Menu: Wood-roasted meats are the specialty, but the remainder of the large menu has inspired contemporary dishes Americans like to eat. Fun kid's menu.

Cost: Cold and hot appetizers \$6-10; Salads \$4-7; Seafood \$14-17; Wood-roasted specialties \$11-17; Desserts \$4-6.

Reservations: Not accepted. Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Other Jimmy Schmidt restaurants:

■ Tuscan Grill, 28665 Northwestern Highway, Southfield (248) 350-0055

■ Tuscan Grill, 314 South Main, Ann Arbor (313) 332-0690

■ Stellina, Somerset Collection, Troy (248) 649-0102

■ Jimmy's, 123 Kercheval, Grosse Pointe Farms (313) 886-8101

■ Rattlesnake Club, Stroh River Place, Detroit (313) 697-4400

Jimmy Schmidt and his partner Michael Schram, serving as executive chef at Smitty's Grill. Schram has been with Schmidt since his tenure at the London Chop House in Detroit. "I've been with Jimmy for 17 years and have gone from opening oysters to executive chef and one of three active partners in

the business," Schram added.

The food concept is a concentration of natural, lively, bright flavors that explode in your mouth. Plate presentations are dynamic and vibrantly colorful. Menu prices serve to emphasize Schmidt's philosophy that eating good food need not be a special occasion.

Among tempting appetizers are Gulf Shrimp, served in a martini glass with red/yellow salsa, similar to a cocktail only chunky and clean \$8; or Seared Yellowfin Tuna, spiced, seared rare, sliced thin, and arranged over jicama/pepper salad \$9. Spring roll style crab or shrimp \$9, characterize the eclectic mix on the menu that includes achiote spicing and papaya salsa. Poached oysters in champagne with chardonnay sauce and tons of chives \$10 are a Jimmy Schmidt signature.

Fresh-daily seafoods consist of such tasty treats as Yellowfin Tuna Asian Style \$17 and Pickercil in Parchment with cranberry cous cous, champagne sauce, roasted shallots and green vegetable \$17. Wood-roasted specialties include beef, lamb, veal, pork and chicken. Veal and lamb racks are Friday/Saturday specials. For those preferring meatless, salads, pastas and pizzas abound, in addition to a grilled vegetable plate \$11. Sides, in particular, represent seasonality in menu choices. There's ginger-flavored sweet potato purée, mashed root vegetables plus five different preparations of potatoes.

Stephanie Kane, Rochester Hills resident, graduate of Rochester Adams High School, and armed with a 1995 Central Michigan University business degree with emphasis in restaurant/hotel management, is Smitty's Grill's general manager.

"Coming home to run one of Jimmy Schmidt's restaurants is an exciting challenge," she remarked.

Schmidt's experience with restaurant "no shows" has made a no reservation policy necessary. Seating for 200 and ample bar room should make any wait short and pleasant. Even if the wait gets a little long, the great kid's menu will please young diners once they're seated.

In addition to a full-service bar with beers on tap, Schmidt has revolutionized restaurant by-the-bottle wine sales. A star-studded list of mostly California wines states "what Jimmy pays, what you pay." If you've groaned about high wine prices in area restaurants, the pricing at Smitty's Grill is just \$10 per bottle over wholesale. In the case of more expensive wines, such as a 1988 Burgess Library Release Cabernet Sauvignon, you pay \$33.10 per bottle. The full retail price in a wine shop is \$34.50. With more expensive wine, the deal gets even better. Drinking a bottle of wine in a restaurant for less than retail was unthinkable. Until now!

Look for Focus on Wine on the first and third Sunday of the month in Taste. To have a voice mail message for Eleanor Heald, dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1864.



At your service: Michael Schram, (left) and Jimmy Schmidt at Smitty's Grill.

RESTAURANT SPECIALS

Restaurant Specials features theme dinners, menu changes, and restaurant openings. Send news items to: Keely Wygonik, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 591-7279.

Gino's Restaurant - and Off Broadway Productions will present lunch and dinner with Santa along with the live musical stage show "Santa's Frosty Follies," 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 14, and Saturday-Sunday, Dec. 20-21. Tickets \$10 per person, includes all you can eat pizza, soft drinks, dessert, free picture with Santa, gift and show at Santa's Banquet Center.

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1995 Cass Lake Road, Waterford. Call (248) 673-7739.

Cafe Venezia - (formerly Cafe Oliverio) is offering dinner for two Monday and Tuesday night, \$19.97 includes glass house wine, soup or salad, entree, bread basket and dessert.

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