

DINING

Please your palate from Van Gogh's palette

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Michigan's third busiest corner, 12 Mile Road and Orchard Lake Road in Farmington Hills, is home to the new Van Gogh's Improv Grill. The name screams for explanation.

First, "Improv" is not short for improvisational, as in theater, but rather a "make it up as you go" food theme.

Is it fair to consider Van Gogh's works improvisational art? Perhaps. Did Van Gogh use a palette? Most certainly and so will you if you eat there. It's fair to say that Van Gogh colored outside the lines. So does this eatery.

To really understand the whole Van Gogh bit, you have to go there.

In Van Gogh's visually stimulating environment, the bar plays on *Starry Night* and the wall mural (still a work in progress) is *Paris Cafe*. There are sunflowers, lilacs, and painter's palette wall sconces.

As a diner, after some briefing by a waitperson, you walk through a buffet-like setting where you first pick up your palette and place on it a bowl for your primary colors: meat, seafood or vegetables from nearly endless choices. Complementary colors: sauces, oils and spices go in the smaller bowl.

Transport your full palette to the grill area (think of it as a huge wok) and have it cooked in about three minutes by one of Van Gogh's grill masters.

When you arrive back at your table, your server will have brought steamed rice and tortillas to enhance your self portrait or grilled masterpiece.

Van Gogh's Improv Grill

Where: 27909 Orchard Lake Road (at 12 Mile Road in Orchard-12 Mall), Farmington Hills (248)324-0400.

Hours: Monday-Wednesday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday until 11 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from noon to 10 p.m.

Menu: creative interactive dining theme where you can choose everything you want to eat and watch it being cooked at an open grill.

Cost: Moderate with lunch \$5-10 and dinner one price \$13 that includes a trip to the salad bar.

Reservations: Accepted Sunday-Wednesday only

Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Among food choices for your bowl you could have gone Oriental all the way, taken a Mexican twist or created a unique American BBQ. If your mind is a blank canvas, then you can get inspired by reading *Your Sketch Book* (a.k.a. menu) for recipe suggestions such as a new twist on Surf and Turf.

To create it, you're instructed to add beef, shrimp, pea pods, mushrooms, red onions, red and green peppers to the big bowl. The little bowl gets Worcestershire, soy sauce, garlic oil, chili powder, black pepper and garlic. A grill master does the rest for you!

Feel like going South of the Border? Chicken, tomatoes, scalions, onions, green peppers and mushrooms get together in the big bowl for the El Sombrero. Salsa, chili powder, crushed red pepper, cumin powder and salt are the medley in the small bowl. Do a chacha in the grill line and shout Ole!

If you don't like sitting through a whole dining experience, Van Gogh's lets you move around and even go back a sec-

ond time. It's Unlimited (a.k.a. all you can eat). There are no boundaries, no limits. Your second Unlimited need not duplicate your first. You're in control here. Go for the gusto and express your culinary artistry.

The Van Gogh idea is the inspiration of owners William Gitre, and brothers Duane and Tom Gmerek. They also own Roosevelt's Billiards Bar & Grill at the east end of the Orchard-12 Mall, a stone's throw from Van Gogh's. These three owners are not only into art, but history, as in Teddy Roosevelt, the major theme played out in this popular tavern that has been going strong for over five years.

As a bigger than life Van Gogh greets you at the entrance of "his" place, Teddy does "his." Faithful execution of the Van Gogh's palette play on words is done by general manager Stewart Sloan, who when it's busy, grabs a spatula and starts grilling.

The full service bar area is a cool place to hang out with friends, even on a cloudy night (no stars, get it?). Seven beers



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL DRESLER

are on tap; 17 more by the bottle. If you like wine, there are 14, all served by the glass (\$4.50-6) or bottle (\$21-26).

In a place like Van Gogh's, you won't need a kid's menu if you come as a family. Everybody's

sort of a kid here. Van Gogh's is fun, especially if you like playing with your food!

WHAT'S COOKING

Send items for consideration in *What's Cooking* to Kelly Wygonik, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, fax (248) 591-7279, or e-mail kwygonik@ec.homecomm.net

■ A Southwest Feast - 7 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 27 at Morels (248) 642-1094 and Thursday, Jan. 28 at No. VI

Chophouse & Lobster Bar, (248) 305-5210. Cost \$34.95 per person, not including tax and gratuity. Call for reservations/information.

■ Pick-A-Bone Rib House & Saloon - 30325 Six Mile Road, Livonia, (734) 762-RIBS or (734) 762-2063, celebrates its one-year anniversary on Jan. 28. Restaurant hours are 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and Sunday,

11 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday, closed Sunday.

■ LaShish Restaurant - Is planning a mid-January opening at the corner of Canton Center and Ford Road in Canton. It will be the seventh LaShish Restaurant in the metro-Detroit area. Keep reading the dining page for details.

■ Bailey's Pub & Grille - Just opened, 1777 Canton Center Road, Canton, (734) 844-1137. Menu includes salads, soups, sandwiches, gourmet burgers, baby back ribs, pasta dishes, fish & chips, hickory grilled chicken, shrimp on a skewer, broiled or Cajun salmon. Open 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. daily.

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