

LaDifference

Hills eatery follows in steps of New York's kosher restaurant

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Paul Kohn wanted was a nice place to take his family to dinner.

"I am a practicing Orthodox Jew, and I have no place to take my wife and kids to dinner, breakfast or lunch," the Southfield resident said.

Jewish dietary laws prevent the mixing of meat and dairy, and Orthodox means strict adherence to those rules. Laying claim to the word "kosher" requires kitchen supervision by one of a council of former rabbis to ensure cooks follow a specific set of standards.

In 1998, Kohn decided to help close the canyon-esque gap he saw in the Detroit area restaurant market. He opened his small shop in The Robin's Nest, a shopping center tucked into

the northeast corner of North-western Highway and Orchard Lake Road, between Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield.

Hiring head chef John Schmidt and manager John Wood, Kohn assembled a staff of people who he then called together for one final task.

"My staff and I went to a very nice restaurant, and I said, 'Nobody's getting up until we come up with a name,'" he recalled.

They selected LaDifference, which happened to be the name of New York's first, upscale kosher restaurant, housed in the Roosevelt Hotel many years ago, Kohn said.

"I thought it very appropriate. We were going to do very different things than the kosher industry in the Midwest. We are priced as if we were not kosher. Kosher usually comes at a pre-

mium."

LaDifference's menu, although somewhat smaller because of the lack of meat, chicken and shellfish, contains a variety of seafood, pasta and vegetarian sandwiches, soups and entrees at prices comparable to any family restaurant. The lunch menu offers both sandwiches, ranging in price from \$4.95 to \$9.95, and entrees, which include a fresh egg omelet, pasta primavera, perch and salmon, from \$8.95 to \$14.95.

Dinner's a bit more diverse, with Cajun, Oriental and continental appetizers to whet customers' appetites for dinner entrees such as a grilled salmon Caesar salad, angel hair pasta or Dover sole. Entrees are priced from \$12.95 to \$27.95.

Desserts, soups, side dishes and a children's menu round out the restaurant's offerings, all served in a quiet setting with elegantly appointed tables. Kohn and Wood agree, customers rarely notice the menu's limitations.

"I think people sit down to read the menu, and they're offered such a variety of things, they don't miss it," Kohn said.

"They'll probably ask a question or two before they leave," Wood added.

Chef Schmidt often makes his way out of the kitchen to chat with customers. Lured from North Carolina when Kohn opened LaDifference, Schmidt said the move has made a big

difference in the way he cooks and eats.

"The major difference (in the kitchen) is all the supervision," he said. "Food is food, but we have to be law-abiding. It's first better and healthier."

Hiring culinary students who intend a career in food preparation ensures a high-quality product and diverse menu, Schmidt said. Cooks are given the creative freedom to come up with new menu items, and everything is made from scratch, even the french fries.

"When you don't have the opportunity to buy french fries, you learn to make the very best," Schmidt said. "There is no limit to what we can do. It's exciting. It's very exciting."

LaDifference's wait staff also works to a higher standard, Kohn said. Training is an ongoing process that begins the day a waiter is hired. Most have been around at least a year, some as long as the restaurant has been open.

"The people they work with and the people they work for love them."

"They have customers who ask for them by name. We treat our employees very well."

LaDifference is open from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday-Thursday, and from 5-9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday. Brunch is served from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sundays. The restaurant is closed Friday and Saturday, to observe the Sabbath.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BEEKER

Prepare: John Schmidt, head chef at LaDifference, prepares food in a kosher kitchen. His work is overseen by a former rabbi. His staff of assistants includes culinary students.

Customers who don't have the time to dine in can also take their lunch or dinner back to the office or their homes. For carry-out orders or reservations, call (248) 932-8934.

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Corridor from page A1

ing. Lighting has been moved farther into the site, and two additional fixtures were added, though they faced only commercial properties. Plans also widened the sidewalk by a foot.

The company's request to add a sign on a third side of the building, though it meets the area standards set by city ordinances, wasn't so well received. Councilman Jerry Ellis felt the lighted Walgreen's sign traditionally built inside a glass tower in the front of each building would announce the store's presence.

Representing the company, Chicago-based Realtor Eric Maletsky said stores are normally built on a square corner. The Grand River lot has three sides that face the road.

"It would be like a suit with a pocket only on one side," he said, noting Walgreen's would likely remain adamant. "Signage is probably one of their most important issues ... I really don't know how they would view this."

Ellis, however, counted five signs, including the lighted tower, three on the building and a monument sign that will likely include a lighted render board. To address concerns over the effect on traffic, Maletsky said the company had agreed to use only a low-key, beige or yellow colored light and change the message four times an hour, rather than have scrolling or flashing messages.

In addition, he said, the company was willing to devote 5 percent of board time to public service messages, at the city's discretion. By the time the negotiations finished, Walgreen's had its third sign moved as close as possible to the far corner of the building's east side, and the city had doubled the percentage of public service messages.

The drug store will stay open 24 hours, Schafer said, because of business from Bofors Hospital. However, the store won't be licensed for liquor sales.

"Their slogan is 'America's Family Drug Store,'" Schafer said. "They're trying to get away from that."

Shopping center

In its final planning stages, the Walgreen's public hearing differed a bit from the one affecting a neighborhood shopping center, evaluated to determine whether it qualified for PUD zoning. City officials decided it did, on another 6-0 vote, this time with Councilman Ellis abstaining. This property is also north of Grand River, east and west of Waldron Avenue, which the developer proposes to eliminate, re-routing traffic to Averbill.

Several residents expressed concerns over the impact on surrounding streets, some of which already experience cut-through traffic.

Linda Sutton, who lives on Oxford, said she already contends with a great deal of traffic from the hospital and feels closing Waldron would only funnel more into her neighborhood. She also worried about the safety of children playing in the park, proposed on the north side of the shopping center, which would draw strangers from throughout the area.

"You bring in a neighborhood shopping center of that size, you don't know whether it's safe for your (older) children to play there alone," she said.

Sutton was also concerned about maintenance of a six- or eight-foot high masonry wall Schnfer said would be built to screen the building from residential areas. Carol Boyd, another Oxford resident, said homeowners have been working with the developer to get as much screening and green space built into the plan as possible.

"We're doing as much as we can to protect the residents," she said.

Boatland

Bob Blakeney, owner of the now-closed Blakeney's Restaurant, looked across the street at the Boatland property for years. Prospective buyers for his building also look at that property and wonder what's going to become of it.

"It's really, really a pleasure to see a beautiful building going into this area," he said. "This area really needs something like this."

Economic Development Commission co-chairman John Anhut agreed, calling Boatland a "pain in the neck." In addition to being a blighted property, he said taxes hadn't been collected from the property for years.

"Let's just put the frosting on the cake and make this project happen," he said.

While officials understood residents' concerns about what might go into the center (developer Schafer wasn't ready to make that announcement), as well as traffic impacts, those who commented saw the elimination of potential light industrial uses and the elimination of empty buildings as the greater good.

"I think it's important to get these properties redeveloped," said councilman Chris McEneaney. "The positives far outweigh the negatives to clean it up," councilwoman Vicki Barnett said.

Officials also voted to include both properties in a brownfield redevelopment zone, which allows the city's Brownfield Redevelopment Authority to come up with a plan for tax credits and, possibly, capture taxes to aid the developer in defraying costs for any environmental cleanup.

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