

Unique career suits Prentice fine

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Matt Prentice, president and CEO of the Unique Restaurant Corporation, can't believe he's been in the restaurant business for 20 years. His story is as inspirational as the food served at his dozen eateries which are strategically located around metro-Detroit.

Prentice, who has been cooking since he was 12, went to the Culinary Institute of America in New York. At 19, he returned home to Royal Oak with an opportunity to complete an externship program that also would pay for a second year of chef education. His employer, a deli owner, challenged him to turn around one of his struggling restaurants in Oak Park, which Prentice did.

Needing a greater culinary challenge, Prentice was about to accept a restaurant sous chef's position when the deli owner decided to sell. Prentice tapped his culinary education savings and bought the deli.

Using his last \$200 as cash register till, he opened Deli Unique in 1980, serving Beef Wellington and flaming duck at deli prices.

Definitely unique

In his first year of operation, Prentice employed 15 people and served 50,000 customers. Today, he employs more than 1,000 and serves more than 4 million annually.

Confident that he could expand, he opened Cafe Jardin in the main promenade of Somerset Collection South in 1984. Future successes and industry accolades followed. Today, Prentice is one of Michigan's key taste makers and Unique Restaurant Corporation one of the state's largest caterers.

Beginning with his first entry, Prentice found ways to turn sow's ears into silk purses. Ten of his restaurants are on sites of failed eateries.

In addition to a 16-hour per day work ethic, imitated by all

Fine dining

■ **Duet**, 3663 Woodward, Detroit, (313) 831-3838. Urban upscale theme and continental cuisine bring the word "creative" to new levels.

■ **Morels**, A Michigan Bistro, 30100 Telegraph Road (248) 642-1094. A very Michigan food focus is enhanced by a beautiful atrium garden that changes with the seasons.

■ **No. Vi Chop House and Lobster Bar**, 27790 Novi Road (in Hotel Baronette), Novi (248) 305-5210. Upscale prime steakhouse with lobster as the principal seafood focus set in an atmosphere reminiscent of a 1920s Havana hotel.

■ **Northern Lakes Seafood**, 1475 North Woodward (in Kingsley Hotel & Suites), Bloomfield Hills (248) 646-7900. In a modern, casually-elegant dining atmosphere, surfers enjoy the freshest of seafoods and surfers can order Certified Angus Beef.

Friends and family fun

■ **Flying Fish**, 17600 W. 13 Mile Road, Beverly Hills (248) 647-7747. Casual neighborhood family eatery serves comfort foods with special focus on fresh catches of the day.

■ **Portabella**, 2745 W. Big Beaver Road (Somerset Collection South), Troy (248) 649-6625. Italian with creative diversions such as dishes playing on the portabella mushroom theme.

Casual and quick

■ **Cafe Jardin**, 2815 W. Big Beaver Road (Somerset Collection South), Troy (248) 649-1348. Don't shop till you drop. This is a great place to people watch and grab a bite.

■ **Deli Unique**, 1475 N. Woodward Avenue (in Kingsley Hotel & Suites), Bloomfield Hills (248) 646-7923; 30100 Telegraph, Birmingham Farms (248) 645-5288; 6724 Orchard Lake, West Bloomfield (248) 737-3890; and 3663 Woodward, Detroit (313) 833-8810. Eye-opening breakfasts or for lunch and early dinner, there are soups, salads, sandwiches and burgers with an array of side dishes.

■ **Plaza Deli**, 29145 Northwestern Highway, Southfield (248) 356-2310. Deli delights that don't disappoint.

Matt Prentice's forecasting savvy has never let his restaurants become stale.

projects are the brightest real estate minds in Detroit. The whole development is \$80 million. There's a lot of smart money coming into Detroit today. If Dust executes, we'll have as good a food as any other fine dining in Detroit."

Forecast now realized.

Staying on top

Prentice's forecasting savvy has never let his restaurants become stale. He's willing to move on, not so much pushed by food trends, but by a chance to offer his dining patrons something new and fresh.

Such taste making is not cooked up alone. Prentice has kept the creative juices of Corporate Chef Jim Barnett flowing.

who work for him at the highest levels, Prentice has an uncanny ability to forecast restaurant trends. Add on an exceptional palate and unwavering attention to details and you know his formula for success.

Until 1998 Prentice had located all his eateries in the suburbs. When he opened Duet in Detroit's Orchestra Place in June of that year, he said, "People driving the Orchestra Hall

Perking up palates with stylized wine selections is the internationally renowned Master Sommelier Madeline Triffon, who serves as Unique Restaurant Corporation's Beverage Director.

A number of her protégés have advanced to certified sommeliers and are continually encouraged by Triffon to rise to the ranks of Master Sommelier through continued study and, by passing difficult examinations.

Highly anticipated

Prentice says he will open the highly anticipated Milk & Honey in the Jewish Community Center, West Bloomfield, by the end of 2001. Operating as a full-service Choleov Israel dairy restaurant, the menu will specialize in Asian, vegetarian dishes and fish.

"Because of kosher restrictions, Milk & Honey will be culinarily pristine," Prentice said. "Meat-like textures will be achieved with soy and mushrooms. Sauces made with roasted vegetables will be as rich as those made from meats."

"Vegetarians will be pleased with the offerings."

Eleanor Heald is a Troy resident who writes about dining, food, wine and spirits for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. To leave her a voice mail message, dial (734) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 18648.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMAYER

Lunchtime: Matt Prentice makes sandwiches in a hurry to keep up with the lunch rush at Plaza Deli.

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