

Some foods still obscure, and that's very good news

BY MIKE MURPHY
CORRESPONDENT

Take a drive down Grand River in Farmington and Orchard Lake Road in Farmington Hills and what you see is a multicultural culinary landscape.

Increased dining options are reflective of the diversifying population the area has witnessed in recent years, but they're also reflective of more daring appetites from across the cultural board. "I think the whole area northwest of Detroit has seen an increase," Farmington City Manager, Frank Lauhoff said. "People from different cultures are coming in and they're bringing their culture to us in business for themselves and to succeed they're drawing from a cross section of people."

And while the culinary explosion might not be unique to Farmington and Farmington Hills, the concentration of restaurants and ethnic grocers along the main drags of the two cities is truly impressive.

Tucked between the pizza and burger joints are Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Thai restaurants galore. Everest Express in Farmington bills itself as the first to serve Nepali cuisine in Michigan.

Some restaurant owners say they located in the area because it's a place where people of similar cultures increasingly live and work,

and some restaurant owners say they wanted a Farmington address because of the affluence of the community.

The Everest Express has been open on Orchard Lake Road for about 10 months and owner Nidhan Gorges said the restaurant has come to rely on the local clientele, which seems eager to try something new.

"I've been getting a lot of local people, which I am very happy with," Gorges said. "That's what we want—our neighbors to come here."

For some customers, the food is traditional, or something reminiscent of home. Others are setting off on an epicurean adventure.

Maria Guerra of Walley Lake spent about an hour scouring the shelves at China Merchandise, a grocery store on Grand River. She said she just likes to find something different and that sometimes she finds it at an ethnic restaurant will prompt a trip to an ethnic grocer where she can find ingredients she needs to experiment.

"I try different stuff at the restaurant. Then the idea is to try it at home," Guerra said. "I try Chinese, Japanese, you name it. I'm Italian. So you've got the United Nations right here."

Next door at a small Indian grocer called, Nam See Plaza, Ram Gupta of Priya, an Indian restaurant that opened on Grand River two

"People from different cultures are coming in and they're bringing their cultures with them, but for people to go into business for themselves and to succeed they're drawing from a cross section of people."

Frank Lauhoff
Farmington City Manager

he had picked up a few groceries.

"There's no place like this in Southfield. That's why I come to Farmington Hills," Gupta said. "You can't get this in Kroger's or Meijer's."

The strip mall where the two shops are located also contains a spicy desi Indian, a self-style "fast food joint" serving Asian-Indian food.

Owner Raja Bhupathiraju opened the restaurant in January. He said he chose the location because of the other ethnic shops in the strip mall and because the surrounding area is becoming heavily populated with Asian-Indians.

While many of the restaurant and shop owners said they located in Farmington or Farmington Hills because their cultures were becoming more visible in the area, most owners interviewed said they still needed a broader base of customers to succeed.

"We get all kinds of people," Ravi Mandava said. Mandava is Co-owner of Priya, an Indian restaurant that opened on Grand River two

years ago. Priya started out in Troy and Mandava said he and his partner chose Farmington because of the Asian-Indian population in Farmington, Novi and West Bloomfield.

The reputation of the restaurant has been growing and it's been doing well despite all the competition in the area. Mandava attributes the restaurant's success not only to the Asian-Indians in the area, but also to the area's overall diversity.

"I think that's the reason we're doing well," Mandava said.

But some restaurant owners are becoming concerned with what they see as an overabundance of restaurants in the area.

When Desert Sands owner Mike Salamey opened his restaurant on Orchard Lake Road four years ago, his was one of the only restaurants in the area serving Middle Eastern food.

Populations of Jews, Chaldeans and Armenians in the area prompted him to choose the

location. "All different types of people that like to eat Middle Eastern food," Salamey said. Now, he estimates there are 10 Middle Eastern restaurants in a five mile area.

More choices, he said, has meant a smaller portion of the customer pie for everyone.

"Obviously, it hurts," Salamey said. "The more choice, the less there is to go around, unless our customer base is growing, and I don't think it is."

Salamey said he was confident that the market would eventually sort out what he called a glut of restaurants but that restaurant owners would suffer in the meantime.

"There are a lot of ethnic people here, but it's become too much for the people," said Salamey, who added that the fallout from Sept. 11 also hurt a lot of the restaurants.

But his specialty ethnic restaurants are feeling the pinch of competition.

Thilagam Pandia, Co-owner of Udupi Vegetarian restaurant sandwiched between two Indian restaurants in a strip mall area on Orchard Lake Road said things have changed in the four years since the restaurant opened.

"Before was better," Pandia said. "People had less choice. Now, they have more choice."

But Ron Wilson, Co-owner of Alegria's, a Spanish tapas-style restaurant in the

Holiday Inn on 10 Mile Road said the area is still attractive to restaurant owners.

Alegria opened two years ago and frills like Flamenco dancing on weekends, as well as a type of cuisine that's rare in the metro-Detroit area, have combined to make it a popular dining spot.

"Spanish food is just so underrepresented in this area," Wilson said.

Wilson said that he and his partner, Jose Montes, figured that Farmington-Farmington Hills area residents fit a certain profile.

They were more affluent and more likely to have traveled to places where they could have become familiar with the type of food served at Alegria.

"You would not want to put this in Redford or Downriver. You would not succeed," Wilson said. "You need someone that has culture to try different things."

Hong Hua Co-owner, Gary Yau, said the restaurant's proximity to I-696 and the relatively high income level of the communities that surround the restaurant's Orchard Lake Road location

were reasons that he moved to Farmington Hills 18 months ago. Hong Hua, which began with a location in Troy, serves Hong Kong cuisine and is a relatively upscale restaurant.

"We're able to attract customers from Ann Arbor and from Lansing and were close to West Bloomfield," Yau said.

Celebrate theater - dine at Duet, see 'West Side Story'

In celebration of the start of the 2002-2003 theater season, the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers is offering readers an opportunity to win dinner for 4 at Duet, a Matt Prentice, Unique Restaurant Corporation fine dining destination in Detroit's Theater District, 3663 Woodward Ave., next to Orchestra Hall, and tickets to the Tuesday, Sept. 3 opening of "West Side Story" at the Fox Theater in Detroit. Dinner/theater package includes shuttle service to and from the show, but not tax, tip,

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Deadline for entry is Monday, Aug. 26. Send entries to Katelyn Kaleski, Assistant Managing Editor Features, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009, (248) 644-1314 or (734) 591-7279 or e-mail (as a text file, or copy and paste information into e-mail) to kkaleski@oe.homecomm.net

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