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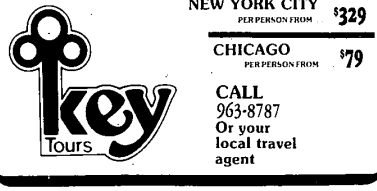
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Cincinnati

Its restaurants win the Super Bowl of good eating

By Iris Sanderson Jones
special writer

WHEN I THINK of Cincinnati, I don't think about football. I think of mouseline of pike, Veal Pierre, or possibly a salmon filet broiled in a copper pan and served on a bed of succini.

Cincinnati is one of the most underrated restaurant cities in the United States. Michael E. Comisar, manager of the Maisonet Restaurant, puts it another way:

"When people think of restaurants, they think of the East Coast, the West Coast and Florida. But does anybody think of Cincinnati?"

They think about it at Rungis, the famous marketplace in Paris, where they pack fresh fish and send it by air every day to the Maisonet. Dover sole, brill, turbot — all stored in the fish drawers of a special ice box, padlocked and ready, just outside the restaurant's wine cellar.

They certainly think about Cincinnati when they pass out the prestigious Mobil restaurant ratings or Holiday Dining Awards. The Maisonet, one of several area restaurants run by the Comisar family, has won a Holiday award every year for 29 years. It earns Mobil's coveted five-star dining award, making it the champion city restaurant.

But Cincinnati is not a one-restaurant town. The city has six four-star restaurants, according to Mobil, and lots of other interesting eating places prized by insiders.

THE FOUR-STAR restaurants cover a range of cuisines and are scattered all over town.

Staff trained by the Comisar family at the Maisonet played an important part in the development of two of them — the Gourmet Room, at the top of the Terrace Hotel (which opens off the Skywalk downtown) and Pigall's on Fourth Street.

La Ronde, built around a real carousel, has live music and dancing in the Carousel Inn Hotel off Interstate 75 on Reading Road. The Inn has several restaurants, including the Cascade, a family place built around a swimming pool within range of electronic games for the kids.

Two of the four-stars are in the suburbs: the Heritage, a 20-minute drive northeast, and Manna Francesca's, a 20-minute drive northwest.

Mecklenburg's in the university area was originally a German beer garden. Two young men converted it to "delicate American cuisine" a few years ago, with spinach and cheese turnovers, salmon mousse and walnut-pecan black bottom pie.

Scott Hanely still runs Mecklenburg's. His former partner, Rob Fogel, now oversees the creation of homemade pasta and northern Italian foods at a restaurant called Edward's.

EDWARD'S IS NOT a four-star but it is a favorite among locals, as is the Sovereign, with its monthly jazz brunch, on Price Hill, and the riverboats run by Ben Bernstein.

Ben owns Mike Fink's Riverboat,

travel

with its raw seafood bar and fun eating, as well as two cruise-food-house paddleboats that run year-round: the Betty Blake and the Lollipop. He will put two of his paddleboats on the Tennessee River in Knoxville during the World's Fair this year.

The Bernstein restaurant that few visitors hear about is the El Greco, across the river in Covington, Ky., where Ben and his wife keep a fabulous collection of pre-Columbian artifacts on permanent display.

And if you talk about restaurants in Cincinnati, you must mention the Golden Lamb, Ohio's oldest inn, 20 miles north in Lebanon, which runs a fine no-fussing-around 19th century American table.

AND WHO operates the Golden Lamb? The Comisar family, I course. The name is inextricably bound with good eating in the Queen City area.

Grandfather Comisar came from Russia with three brothers in the late 1920s. He did everything from selling newspapers to working in a sauerkraut factory before opening his first tiny restaurant.

One fateful New Year's Eve during the Depression, a man promised to bring a dozen people for dinner. When the party didn't show up, grandfather decided it was all over. He closed the restaurant.

In 1932, he tried again, and in 1948 the Comisars opened the Maisonet in its present location on Sixth Street. A few weeks later, grandfather died, and Grandmother Vallie and her sons took over. Over the next decades, they courted three chefs — Maurice Gorodowski, Pierre Adrian and George Hayden.

The 1950s were lean. 1965 was decisive, that's when they decided to stay downtown in spite of inner city problems. Nowadays they run the Normandie, downstairs from the Maisonet; Golden Lamb; and Chester's Roasthouse (it was supposed to be called Charlie's, but Detroit's own Chuck Muer opened a Charlie's Crab across the street.)

BUT THE Maisonet is the best. There are words for a restaurant like this: genuine, real, simple, unpretentious, as well as elegant and expensive.

The secret? Michael E. Comisar puts it this way: "Pay attention to detail. If small details begin to seem trivial, then you start thinking that larger things are trivial, and everything fails."

For information on this and other restaurants in Cincinnati, contact Lois Smith at the Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitor's Bureau, 200 W. Fifth St.

Or just ask anybody on the street, about the deli food at Levy's, the chili at the Empress, the Old Star of the Skyline, the wine-tasting-and-dinner at Meier's Wine Cellars, the Rookwood Pottery, a former pottery on Mount Adams, where they serve the classiest hamburgers in town, or...



IRIS JONES
Michael Comisar smiles with a sample from the wine cellar at the Maisonet in Cincinnati.

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