

DINING

Forté creates dynamic social adventure in eating

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Enter through the urban-fuel revolving door! The long-anticipated Forté restaurant in downtown Birmingham, next to the Birmingham Theatre, debuts 5 p.m. Saturday. No reservations will be taken that evening, and anxious-to-be-the-first diners may experience a wait.

"We will have limited seating on opening night," Chef de Cuisine Keith Famie said. But a wait on this or any night in the near future should be worth it. Famie set the tone by saying, "We will create a dynamic, social adventure in eating and gathering for the Birmingham community — this is our Forté."

The concept is played out in a Victor Saroki-designed atmosphere, art deco with a splash of Maxim's Paris. Main floor dining seats about 100 and the bar 60. Food style is a collision of provincial French, the Mediterranean rim from Italy to Morocco with an added touch of California fresh. All this conjures up flavorful cuisine influenced by Italian and Catalan traditions with cured black and green olive tapas; specialties including fresh fish, bouillabaisse with aïoli, herb-crusted lamb, pizza au feu du bois (pizza cooked in a wood-burning oven), ratatouille and an array of fresh vegetable side dishes.

Forté obliges. Diners will find crostini, tapas, thin brick-oven pizzas, crispy Moroccan salmon with black olive mashed potatoes, and Provençal-style herb-stuffed rack of veal. Exciting are a number of paellas. There's traditional, but also a roasted vegetable paella for those preferring a meatless option.

Epoch Enterprises, corporate owners of Forté and two other area restaurants, Too Chez in Novi and Tribute in Farmington Hills, sent Famie on a mission to Valencia, Spain. In the birthplace of paella, he learned from masters of the art. He visited the renowned rice fields and will use this authentic grain in preparing paellas at Forté. At last, we have a restaurant specializing in paella and you won't have to call a day ahead to order it.

Paella is a dish to be shared among six or eight. Try this idea on for size. A large group for paella complemented by a magnum of one of the many champagnes on the wine list. Too much bubbly? OK, then try some bottles of well-chosen Spanish wine.

Also intriguing, innovative and not on the "been there, done that" list is Aqua Pazzo, a Mediterranean-style bouillabaisse. France's Mediterranean seaport Marseilles is the traditional home to the world-famous

Forté
Where: 201 South Woodward, Birmingham (next to the Birmingham Theatre), (810) 594-7300.
Hours: Diner 5-10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and until 11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday.
Menu: Collision of provincial French and the Mediterranean rim merged with fresh California cuisine.
Meatless options: Many
Smoking: At bar only
Handicap access: Yes
Cost: Appetizers \$4-8; Main dishes \$12-19; Desserts \$4-7
Reservations: Accepted
Credit cards: All major
Parking: Complimentary valet

Provençal seafood soup, made from fish and shellfish available only in the Mediterranean. It will be interesting to experience Famie's style imprint here.

If you're into bar food, Forté's New York style bar will oblige with a bar menu filled with a variety of tasty tapas, traditional little dishes of Spain, eaten with great gusto in Spanish bars and taverns. In the U.S., people who like eating from an appetizer menu, make a whole meal out of several different tapas.

Farmington Hills native, Chef de Cuisine Keith Famie, is no stranger to the area restaurant scene. He worked for Epoch Enterprises in the early years before Chef Raphael lightened up to the more casual Too Chez. He was out on his own in Royal Oak with Les Auteurs, turned cowboy Durango Grill, and Famie's Chicken, a rotisserie chicken carry-out. His face is familiar to those watching Famie's Finds airing Fridays at noon on WDIV-TV Channel 4.

In the kitchen, located in the back of the restaurant, but in full view of diners, are Famie and his crew of three experienced, area culinary wizards. Sous chef Donna Brown, a Schoolcraft College Culinary Department graduate, worked for Famie at Les Auteurs. Pastry Chef Ralph Macioci, a Schoolcraft grad, has also worked for Famie before. Sous chef Frank Turchan, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, joins the kitchen from Tribute.

General Manager Penny Zywick, former GM at Morton's in Southfield, is in charge of daily operations. Dining Room Manager Patrick Coleman credits Unique Restaurant Corp. owner Matt Prentice for honing his skills. He joined Epoch in August and has been involved with Zywick and Famie, in planning Forté.

Coleman's concentration has

been the bar, a distinct focal point of Forté. In addition to a full stock of bar favorites, he has constructed a well-priced wine list with lots of international surprises. Two-ounce tastings range \$1-3.

"A diner can have a three-course dinner and a different wine with each plate," Coleman explained. "A flight of five wines totaling 10 ounces would be a maximum of \$15. Our belief in pricing both food and wine is that people shouldn't have to mortgage their home to go out to dinner."

Wine-by-the-bottle prices range \$16-\$90 (for a magnum of champagne). Nine wines on the list are under \$20.

Epoch Enterprises' 32-year-old President Toni Wiano Young was straightforward in saying, "Royal Oak is the restaurant rug now. We want to bring it back to Birmingham with lots of innovation such as Spanish paella and unusual Mediterranean foods. We've created Forté to be cutting-edge metro Detroit with a menu unlike anywhere else in the area."

Forté will be as excellent as diners have found other Epoch Enterprises dining spots. It takes time for a restaurant team, kitchen, management and servers, to operate in sync. In the early weeks, diners need to be patient. On the horizon is lunch, most likely beginning sometime in December, and a carry-out menu.



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLNERSKY

Chef de Cuisine: Keith Famie is helping to create a dynamic, social adventure in eating at Forté. He visited Valencia, Spain to learn how to make paella, one of the featured menu items, from masters of the art.

'Guys & Dolls' is fun

BY VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER

The oldest established permanently floating crap game in New York has made its way recently to the Nathan Detroit area. You can get in on the fun and action if you'd like. Just follow the fold to the little theatre on Chestnut St. in Birmingham, where the Village Players are currently staging Frank Loesser's Broadway Valentine, "Guys and Dolls."

Some productions of this "Musical Fable of Broadway" by Damon Runyon are, of course, superior to others. This one, directed by Mark Carley, is not the best I've ever seen. It seems a little wobbly on singing and dancing talent, and (with some notable exceptions) a little short on pizzazz and color, too. For some reason, many of these players don't seem to be having nearly as much fun as (they should).

But Loesser's memorable music and lyrics are still there, of course, following you right out the door and into the night — some of them "Luck Be a Lady," "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," or the delightful "Fugue for Tin Horns," for example) hanging around with you for the rest of your life. More I cannot wish you.

As the often-hapless Nathan Detroit, Jamie Mistry brings a healthy dollop of vim and vinegar to the stage in his Runyonesque pin stripes and snappy fedora. With lines like "You're always reading a book — you're becoming a regular bookie," he makes an utterly charming con man. Though his Detroit seems sometimes to have trouble keeping his head on straight, somehow you know that underneath those pinstripes, his

heart is in exactly the right spot and that, after their 14-year "engagement," he's going to try his damndest to do right by Ms. Adelaide.

Patty Ward may initially strike you as a little ready in the role of shapely Hot Box attraction, Ms. Adelaide. But as quickly as you can roll snake-eyes, she's won you over, and she seems perfect in every way for this plum role. She's got stage presence, comedic gifts, and musical talent in spades, and she's got this goofy, sexy, tancious character down pat. Everything she does here is right on target. Dave Springer's Sky Masterson is appropriately tall, leading man handsome, and coolly charismatic, but his singing voice is a bit uncertain now and then.

Playing Sarah Brown, the prim missionary who catches his eye, Carolee Castle fares better in the musical department, but appears slightly tired or bored with her role (and God knows, her tired-looking costumes don't add much interest to her image).

Dan Seo seems a bit miscast as Nicely-Nicely Johnson. He can sell a song, and his costume — bright as a new deck of cards — is one of the most colorful things about this show. But this role just cries out for somebody a little teddy-bearish and dumpling-plump, and Dan Seo is neither. Apparently, nobody thought this was especially important. But his physical appearance not only adds to Nicely's interest as a character, it adds a delicious note to the overall visual interest of this musical.

A large supporting cast performs inconsistently, and Joan Bowes' orchestra seems a bit tentative and under-inspired at times.

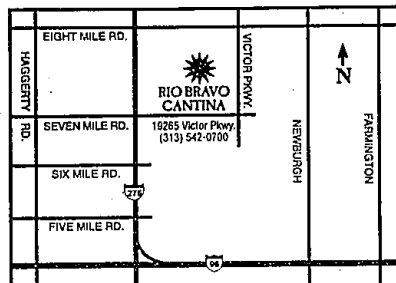
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