

DINING

At Too Chez, innovation is a culinary art

Greg Upshur, executive chef at Too Chez restaurant in Novi is an artist, and every plate is his palette.

"I work on a cumulative creative theory here," he said. "I don't dictate what my staff cooks. We learn from our mistakes. It's like the way I was taught painting at the University of Michigan. They give you a palette and paint, and say 'Now you're going to paint.' They don't tell you how. You have to develop creativity, then fantastic things happen."

Fantastic things are happening at Too Chez, and for Upshur, who was the featured chef for the Moral dinner at the James Beard Foundation in New York on June 4.

"It was a great success," said Upshur about the dinner, which celebrated the annual moral harvest. "It was a challenging menu."

Upshur defines his cuisine as contemporary cosmopolitan, a late 1990s menu looking into the next century.

Being a chef wasn't a career Upshur planned. He grew up in Dearborn Heights and started working at a coney island in Westland Mall that was owned by a neighbor. He was 14 and took the Warren Avenue bus to work.

Growing up, "Dinner reigned supreme at my house," he said. "You were starving. There were six kids, and the food was really, really good."

On Sundays the family gathered at his grandparents house. While Grandma was upstairs making boiled chicken soup with carrots and parsley, "which was awesome," Grandma was downstairs making kielbasa.

His family entertained a lot: The "Virginia hospitality" comes from his father's side, and the Upshur house was like Grand Central Station.

Upshur grew up loving food, but working in restaurants was just something he did to earn money. A classically trained singer, he studied fine arts at the University of Michigan and started a rock band - The Seat Belts, whose music was played on American Bandstand.

"I cooked at restaurants in the morning and sang nights," he said. "We even put out a record."

When he turned 25, Upshur got married and decided rock and roll was not the life for him. "I was always the best in the kitchen," he said. "I got along with great chefs. It seemed like a natural thing for me, and I love food."

He learned his craft from some of the greatest chefs in metro Detroit including Rene Moutte, Yvonne Gill and Miles Chelka. Before joining the Epoch Restaurant Group, which also owns Tribute in Farmington Hills and Forte in Birmingham, Upshur was executive chef at Cousins Heritage Inn in Dexter.

Too Chez
Where: 27155 E. Sheraton Drive, (northwest corner of Novi Road and I-96) Novi, (248) 348-5555
Open: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday, (lunch); 5:30-10:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday (dinner) and 5:30-11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Closed Sunday
Menu: Innovative, contemporary presentations for a variety of palates. Offerings include vegetarian dishes, pasta, seafood, steaks, and poultry.
Reservations: Accepted
Credit Cards: All majors
Cost: Dinner entrees \$13 to \$27; Small courses such as steamed mussels and Nori rolls \$4.50 to \$6.25; Soups \$3.50 to \$4.95; Salads \$3.25 to \$5.25; Pizzas \$7 and \$8. Half portions available at half price, plus a buck and a half.
Highlights:
■ Jazz on the outdoor patio features Heidi Hepler and Michele Rono 6:40 p.m. Mondays; Louis Resto and David McMurray perform 7-11 p.m. Fridays.
■ Pink dinner featuring rose wines, Monday, July 27 - call for information/reservations.
■ Macrobiotic dinner celebrating the first frost, late September or early October. Call for details.

Upshur has worked at Too Chez for the past five and a half years. "I'm doing foods I feel need to be done," he said. "We use a lot of sea vegetables. I go through 100 pounds of miso in six months."

Upshur is interested in healthy cuisine. For the last three years he's participated in triathlons.

"I'm really focused, the training gives me stamina in my job," he said. "I research healthy foods and how to make them marketable. A lot of our breads contain whole grain organic flour. I only cook brown rice here with spring water and kombu. Miso soup is on our menu every day. People are receptive to this. There's a great demand for healthy food right now."

Consistency is what makes a restaurant successful, and Upshur strives to be "consistently different."

The Santa Fe Tofu Quesadillas are filled with black beans, corn, cumin, sautéed tofu and scalions. "By mixing proteins and

carbs we provide a good healthy meal," he said. "We also have the classic things, and I try to buy the best ingredients that are available. Our menu is sufficient to people's wants with emphasis on pleasing them. I'm adamant that we will do whatever we can to produce a dish for the customer if it's not on the menu."

Upshur treats customers like guests in his house. "If you come to my house and want corn a special way, you will get it that way. If someone has a bad meal, we will make it up to them."

Upshur is interested in healthy cuisine and believes it's up to chefs to make the public like it.

The Go Girl - eggless penne pasta tossed with spinach, portobello mushrooms, bean sprouts, broccoli, sun-dried tomatoes and potato coals with herbed radish served with roasted corn on the cob - is a "fantastic plate, and people love it," he said.

If you want a steak, it's available, and Black Angus Certified. "My chicken comes from a farm



Culinary art: Executive Chef Greg Upshur presents The Blue Planet - chef's choice of seasonal vegetables including steamed asparagus, portobello mushrooms and sunflower sprouts, with brown rice at Too Chez restaurant. Upshur loves food, and his presentations are works of art.

in Indiana," he said. "The smaller the farm, the more attention to detail."

There are a number of fish and seafood offerings: The broiled walleye is very big with customers.

The luncheon menu is a scaled-down version of the dinner menu. During the summer, Upshur wants to use a lot more Michigan-grown produce. He grows a variety of herbs on the patio, including basil, thyme, dill and chives.

When he quit entertaining musically and started cooking instead of singing for his dinner, Upshur wondered what would come of all that experience. He's getting his answer.

Last spring Too Chez hosted a Fat Tuesday Polish Mardi Gras

dinner, and Upshur not only prepared a Polish dinner for sell-out crowds, he sang "My Melody of Love," a song Bobby Vinton made famous.

Upshur was recently invited to New York to do a cooking show on the Food Network.

"I take each day as it comes,"

he said. "I'm moving forward with presenting new foods, and I'd like to be on the forefront, and recognized for that."

Upshur and his wife Therese live on a farm in Stockbridge with their five children, three girls and two boys ranging in age from 3 to 16.

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