

## Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

### Putting revenue on front burner

With fixed-price dinners and a special week planned in March, local establishments stay nimble.

By ANN S. KIM, Staff Writer

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Gordon Chibroski/Staff Photographer

Five-O Shore Road in Ogunquit has started a G-7 Night, offering meals from G-7 nations for \$7. "Especially in these hard times, many people in Maine don't have a lot of disposable income to go out to eat," said Jeffrey Porter, the manager.

The past year has been worrisome for Johnny Robinson, the owner of Finch's Restaurant in Falmouth. The picture has become even more troubling since Labor Day.

Sales are way down at a time of year when the restaurant counts on being busy. Business is no longer predictable for Robinson, who was accustomed to estimating within 10 percent how much money the restaurant would make on a given night. He's had to cut back on staff hours and have employees double up on such duties as dishwashing and vegetable prep.

"The recession has certainly got my full attention, absolutely," Robinson said.



Gordon Chibroski/Staff Photographer

The Tyler Stanley Experience provides the music Sunday at a jazz brunch at Five-O Shore Road in Ogunquit. The brunch is among the ways the restaurant has tried to bolster its revenue in a down economy.

The economic downturn has Robinson thinking hard. He's planning to reinvent the restaurant in mid-January to attract consumers who perceived his establishment as a formal, special-occasion place. He's hoping a lighter color palette, the addition of a bar, a reformatted menu with smaller plates and a new name – Johnny's Bistro and Bar – will translate into broader appeal.

Many restaurateurs are looking at different ways to cope and to attract diners at a time when economic worries may otherwise keep them at home.



Gordon Chibroski/Staff Photographer

Pat Aden, a chef at Finch's Restaurant in Falmouth, spoons filling into fresh pumpkin tarts while preparing for dinner patrons. The restaurant plans to add a bar and reformat its menu to broaden its appeal.

Theme meals, fixed-price dinners at discounted rates and attractions such as live music are among their strategies. A public relations firm that represents fine-dining establishments is starting a restaurant week to generate winter business.

Even so, times are hard for many dining establishments.

Maine's restaurant industry has seen a decline in sales since Labor Day. September revenues were down 4.4 percent from the same time last year, and October was down 2.6 percent. Revenues were up just 1.4 percent from January to October, compared to the same period a year earlier.

Dick Grotton, president and chief executive officer of the Maine Restaurant Association, expects November and December also to be down when those statistics are released and believes the year overall may end up being flat.

That kind of performance is difficult for an industry that is used to growth of 2 percent to 4 percent each year.

"We're not accustomed to volume going down," he said. "When it goes down, everybody panics, they are so unaccustomed to sales going down."

Healthy cash flow helps restaurants deal with rising costs for such expenses as food products and heat, he said. But once sales volumes drop, it's more difficult to manage.

Norman Hebert, chef and owner at Bintliff's Restaurant in Ogunquit, said a decline in customers means he's tightening his purse strings and being vigilant about every penny coming in and going out.

A Thursday night special – three courses with wine for \$17.95 – is meant to generate foot traffic and provide value for customers pinched by the recession.

"We can't control the price of gas, we can't control the economy. The only thing we can control is the service and the quality of our product when people come in," Hebert said.

To help generate more wintertime cash flow, gBritt PR is organizing Restaurant Week ME for March 1-10. Planning is still in its early stages, but the hope is that 30 to 40 Greater Portland restaurants will participate with special menus at an agreed-upon price.

Back Bay Grill, Fore Street, Cinque Terre and Hugo's have agreed to take part.

The event is meant to generate awareness of the work that local chefs are doing every day, said Jim Britt, a partner in the Portland-based firm.

"It's especially important to remember them in the winter, when they need some extra attention," he said.

Some restaurants are holding their own because, it seems, their business strategies fit the times.

Business at The Front Room in Portland will likely be up 15 percent this year, said Harding Lee Smith, the chef and owner. He said his new restaurant, The Grill Room, hasn't seen any let-up in business.

Smith believes his strategy of high volumes with thinner profit margins resonates with consumers, so much so that he is opening a third restaurant.

The Corner Room will focus on homemade pasta. It will be located at the intersection of Federal and Exchange streets in the space formerly occupied by the Salt Institute. Smith hopes to open by April.

Back Bay Grill has found a creative way to finance projects despite the economic downturn.

To come up with \$15,000 for an air conditioning system this year, Larry Matthews Jr., the chef and owner, found clients willing to put up \$1,000 for \$1,500 worth of food. He's already got a waiting list for future "house account" projects. New chairs are next on his to-do list.

At Solo Bistro in Bath, a winter special evolved into a year-round offering because of the recession. On Wednesday, the restaurant offers a three-course dinner for a fixed price of \$15.99.

"This was the specific reaction to the economic situation because we could just feel the steam coming out of the economy," said Will Neilson, the co-owner.

He estimated that without that special, business on Wednesdays would be about

one-third of what it is.

At Five-O Shore Road in Ogunquit, Mondays are G-7 Night. For \$7, diners can choose meals from the G-7 group of industrialized nations. The menu explains the special is "in celebration of their pledge to take 'all necessary steps' to help stem the global financial crisis of 2008."

It's the deepest discount the restaurant has ever offered, said Jeffrey Porter, vice president and general manager.

"Especially in these hard times, many people in Maine don't have a lot of disposable income to go out to eat," he said.

The economic situation also spurred the restaurant to start a Sunday jazz brunch, an idea the restaurant had considered for a number of years.

On Sundays, about 80 percent of diners opt for a \$25 option – a cheese course, first course, entree and dessert – at Vignola in Portland, said Lee Skawinski, the chef and owner. Another fixed-price option for early diners Wednesday through Saturday is part of his strategy for sister restaurant Cinque Terre.

The new options allow the kitchens to play with new ideas and help make up for the loss of business diners, Skawinski said.

"The bankers and people like that who were out doing work and entertaining, that's what I feel we miss the most," he said.

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