

The Washington Post

[Buy Page Print](#) [Printer Friendly](#)

SUPPING IN SUBURBIA

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Washington, D.C.

Author: Gary Blonston
Date: Jan 31, 1993
Start Page: W.16
Section: MAGAZINE
Text Word Count: 3132

Only 15 years ago, the idea of going out for a nice dinner in Montgomery County was a lot like going to Novosibirsk for the sun. Suburban dining was a contradiction in terms.

Sans Souci, Jean-Pierre, Rive Gauche all were in Washington. Bethesda, about as urban as Montgomery County got, had Tiki Hawaii.

There also were two big fish houses from the 1950s, some neighborhood Chinese and Italian spots and a lot of places that would grind the valves on your Buick. The most positive restaurant reviews typically came from writerly amateurs talking about the pleasures of taking the kids for spaghetti in a place you didn't have to dress for.

Then everything changed. In dining, as in life, the '60s and '70s had been urban, hip, experimental - Georgetownesque, to put it locally. The '90s are something else - suburban, comfort-oriented, price-conscious, mainstream. Bethesda, you might say

And as it turns out, there has been no place in the Washington metropolitan area more Bethesda than Bethesda. As the Washington area began to shift its interest from city to suburbs, county planners in the mid-1970s sensed the potential of this old Indian trail crossing, so they redrew their maps and rewrote their rules in anticipation of a new business and employment center.

Right on cue, the old garages, bicycle shops and drugstores began giving way to high-rise office and apartment buildings. Parking became difficult, traffic clogged, and restaurants, scores of restaurants, opened almost side by side.

Today, from O'Donnell's in the north to T-Bones in the south, the little 4-by-15-block swath of unincorporated suburbia called the Bethesda Urban District is home to a greater concentration of eating places than anywhere for miles around.

One of every four businesses in Bethesda - 144 by most recent count - serves food, and 90 of them are full-menu, sit-down restaurants. Seating an average of 80 to 100 people each and turning over their clientele two or three times in the course of a busy evening, they could feed well over 20,000 people in a single night.

Talk to the people who run those places and, when they aren't contending there are more restaurants in downtown Bethesda than downtown Denver (not quite true), they are claiming that Bethesda has outstripped the onetime undisputed center locally, Washington's own Georgetown.

Dan Downing, Bethesda planner: "(Bethesda) had that potential - what Georgetown used to do - without all the excess and craziness a lot of people today enjoy in Georgetown."

Bethesda's restaurants don't have the city style or funkiness of some of the little restaurants tucked away in Georgetown. Nor are there places in Bethesda to buy pointy shoes or fringed leather jackets. Nor are there roaming bands of scussed frat-boy boys, nor kids playing plastic-bucket drums on the sidewalk, nor police patrolling the streets on weekends.

But that, of course, is the point.

Walk the two downtown Bethesda blocks called Cordell Avenue, past Tragara and Imperial India Club and La Panetteria and La Venezia and Bei Temp (the latter two are reviewed on Page 21), past Il Forno and Matuba and Ivy's Place and Kabu West and Nick's Place and Ricky's Rice Bowl and Cottonwood Cafe and Thai Place, and two things come clear: There are a lot of restaurants in this town. And even if you have to park on the top level of a parking structure three blocks away, this benign and prosperous estuary between city and suburb is oddly soothing and easy to take.

Joey Shasky, president of the Texas company that created Bethesda's centerpiece restaurant, the Rio Grande Cafe, says that is precisely what led his firm to make its first venture outside Texas in 1987.

"From Texas you hear about Georgetown, but we decided that was not the place we wanted to be," Shasky says. "The parking, the crowding - it was not what we were used to in Texas. Bethesda really gave us that. It's more comfortable than Georgetown."

Two more testimonials:

Bernard Grenier, chef and co-owner of La Mische, one of the first upscale restaurants to open in Bethesda: "As Georgetown was in the 1970s - Georgetown was very affluent and there were those few blocks of fairly cheap rent - that's what's been happening in Bethesda."

And Bill Edelblut of O'Donnell's venerable seafood emporium: "I don't even know if Georgetown in its heyday had this diversity."

Three Bethesda businessmen aren't an especially objective sample, but even Peter Amato, executive director of Georgetown's business association, will go so far as to say, "Washington is blessed with a lot of good restaurants. Some of the best are in Georgetown. But there are many all over the region, downtown, in Bethesda, in Georgetown, Alexandria, Adams-Morgan, Capitol Hill. I don't think any one neighborhood dominates any longer."

One neighborhood does dominate in the northern suburbs, though, and it has lured restaurants and restaurant operators from all those other places.

Ivy's, from the District, opened a second location in Bethesda, as did Bacchus. Giulio Santillo at Tragara came up from the District and so did Peter Finkhauser at Louisiana Express Company.

And so did Carl MacCartee, who left a seven-year career in the Georgetown restaurant business, most recently as general manager of the Third Edition.

"A lot of the clientele I was going after were from Chevy Chase - Bethesda," he says, "and fewer people seemed willing to come down and deal with the parking and all the problems of Georgetown. They were looking for someplace closer to home."

So MacCartee traveled Wisconsin Avenue back to the no-longer-quiet little town where he grew up and became manager-partner of T-Bones, a rib and steak place in Bethesda founded 3 1/2 years ago by Washington restaurateur Robert E. (Bobby) Lee.

MacCartee is a Maryland suburbanite once more, and he says, "I would be the perfect example of somebody who wants to come to Bethesda."

That response is almost exactly what Dick Tustian had in mind. Tustian is the former Montgomery County planner who, as much as anyone, decided where Bethesda's Metro station would be, what should be built around it, how to hem in Bethesda's downtown and preserve the neighborhoods on every side, how to persuade builders to include plazas and plantings and people in their plans, how to make use of the neighborhood streets full of law offices and warehouses and auto repair shops.

Today he says, "I feel a little like the landscape gardener who looked at the soil and said, 'This area has lot of sunshine and it's protected from the frost and I hope some nice flowers will come up.' It's not always sure they will, but in this case they did."

Cultivating the terrain fouled up traffic for years before all the improvements were in place, brought a kind of change to the area that some longtime residents considered little short of nuclear and drove out a generation of small business people when storefront rents began to climb.

But the turmoil proved relatively short-lived and, from a planning standpoint at least, largely worth it. While other suburban downtowns turned into strip shopping centers and blank-faced office complexes, while Georgetown lost a lot of its old pizzazz, Bethesda's little web of old-style downtown streets survived.

Planning is swell, of course, and good old American entrepreneurship is what brought mesquite smoke, lamb kabobs and cream sauces to the suburbs, but none of this would have happened if Bethesda didn't sit amid some of the most demographically scrumptious people a restaurant operator ever could ask for.

In a three-mile radius of Wisconsin Avenue and East-West Highway live 160,000 people who are disproportionately well-to-do, well educated, well traveled, urbane and inclined to go out at night. And in the offices, stores and restaurants of downtown Bethesda, 38,000 people come to work every day, not counting the thousands more enconced up the street at the National Institutes of Health. They all have to eat.

Such a close-to-home, grab-dinner clientele isn't likely to support truly great restaurants, and in fact Bethesda doesn't have any. Without a downtown-style expense-account trade, it possibly never will, though La Mische and Tia Queta and Bacchus and Tragara and Cafe Bethesda and a number of others do what they do very well.

What Bethesda offers instead is what the smart and constant shoppers of Bethesda-Chevy Chase-Potomac look for in all things - newness and choices:

Afghan, Salvadoran or Szechuan, Thai, Lebanese or Neapolitan. Crabs, alligator or goat. Sushi, souffle or salimbocca. You can eat and play pool at Shootz, eat and watch a movie at Bethesda Cinema 'N Drafthouse, eat and listen to Irish troubadors at Flanagan's, eat with your hands at T-Bones, eat with a hammer at Steamers.

All that is missing at the moment is Vietnamese cuisine, which still isconcentrated in Virginia, and Ethio-plan, which has remained mostly in the District.

Such diversity and such numbers have led to a dangerous assumption about Bethesda, shared by countless current and would-be restaurateurs: Anyone who gets hold of a storefront in this town can make it in the restaurant business.

Little do they know.

This is the hard way to do it. Take over a defunct location, complete with rats still thriving on the pre-bankruptcy kitchen leftovers, find a venture capitalist willing to lend \$175,000, redo the place top to bottom in feathers and horns, fling open the doors and hope that Bethesda, Md., will turn out to like nouvelle southwestern food.

This is the easy way: Come to the United States with no English in 1985, make cheese, bus tables, take orders, become maitre d' of your cousin's restaurant, borrow \$10,000 from your mother-in-law to lease the former home of a chicken carryout place, pick up some tables from Hechinger, bring some dishes from home and four days later declare yourself the operator of an Italian restaurant.

J.J. Fletcher did the Cottonwood Cafe the hard way, Giuseppe "Pepino" Luise did La Taverna d'Italia the easy way.

Correction: There is no easy way.

The people who used to run La Luna and Le Marmiton and Le Peep, all now in the dumpster of restaurants past, would vouch for that, and so would a lot more restaurant operators who are hanging on by their oyster forks while the economy decides when it might get hungry again.

Martin Benjamin, the Thai-born, Malaysian-raised operator of the Ivy's Place restaurants in Washington and Bethesda, figures his business was off 35 percent in 1992. Even when business is good, he says, "a small restaurant doesn't do too well in Bethesda because there are too many choices of ethnic restaurants. If we're full, they have a tendency not to wait." He has no plans to leave Bethesda; he'd just like a larger place.

Bill Edelblut, whose family has served seafood at O'Donnell's for 36 years, worries that the chain restaurants discovering Bethesda - Houston's, Pizzeria Uno, the hugely successful Rio Grande Cafe and others yet to come - could prove to be too much competition for some of the good, culinarily interesting but economically marginal operators nearby.

So far, though, and despite the recession, most of the places that were operating in Bethesda two years ago still are, and they have been joined in that time by at least 20 more. And many of the new ones have had experiences similar to the one Luise has had at La Taverna - \$64 of business the first night in the summer of 1991, something nearer \$5,000 one Saturday night in the supposedly slow summer season of 1992, when his 150-seat place served 255 meals.

Jeri Gibbons, co-owner of La Miche, suggests that local restaurants may have been cushioned from the worst effects of the downturn because money that, in better times, people might have spent on vacations and such has been spent in Bethesda restaurants instead.

But in good times or bad, there is a synergy about these places, huddled together like car dealerships and displaying themselves to the passing crowd. What may seem on the surface to be cut-throat competition actually is more like a mutual security agreement.

Joe Spinelli, who has consulted for Washington-area restaurant operators for more than 20 years, speaks the simple truth that makes restaurant districts work: "People can't eat in the same restaurant every day." Consequently, he doesn't think Bethesda is even near the end of its restaurant boom.

"I'm sure there's some point in time when the restaurants are going to be saturated," Spinelli says, "but I think Bethesda has a long way to go before that.

"Let's say there are 150 restaurants there now . . . Two to three hundred restaurants would not be unrealistic in the next five or six or eight years. After all, there are over 1,000 in the District."

One of the first of the new wave in Bethesda was La Miche. The small, original space it occupied on Norfolk Avenue once belonged to Postiano, the pioneer of high-end Italian food in town. Postiano was so successful that its exhausted family owners closed it down, reopening it a few years later three blocks away.

Around the Postiano/La Miche location was a smattering of other places like Buon Giorno, which still survives. But as La Miche chef Bernard Grenier says, "In 1979, if a car came by, it probably was going to La Miche."

A founder of La Miche was distinguished Washington restaurateur Jean Michel Farret, whose Jean-Pierre was long a landmark of Washington haute cuisine (today's it's less haute and renamed the Place on K). His decision to venture into Bethesda was an early stimulus to others and a sign of things to come.

Two years later, as Farret's business plans changed, employees Grenier and Gibbons took the place over, gradually doubled its size and made La Miche one of the most respected restaurants in the area. They figure that in some ways they had it easier than later-comers.

"Our customers gave us many chances, because we were the only ones around," Grenier says. "Today, if you're going to be in Bethesda, you'd better be good. People won't forgive you. They won't give you a second chance because there are too many other choices."

ACROSS THE STREET, HAL MORRIS. NO fool, is keeping his day job. Morris, his wife, Yvette, and his son, Christopher, look over Le Restaurant in Bethesda from its longtime owner, Lionel Daury, just this past September, largely so Christopher, 29, who was a chef in San Francisco, could cook from his own high-grade kitchen. The elder Morris, who works in aerospace with Interstate Electronics Corp., serves as business manager of the restaurant in the evening.

Morris, who calls himself "a conservative kind of guy," doesn't seem like the type to roll the dice on an expensive French restaurant in an economic downturn, but when he talks about the experience of running the place, something in his voice changes:

"The restaurant gets in your blood. Here on a Saturday night when the place is full, it's the emotion of it. It's our place, and it's happening. It's a very good feeling. You walk around and people tell you how wonderful things are and that's enough. I'd be happy breaking even."

Bethesda hardly has a monopoly on enthusiasm, but most of the restaurant people of this town do seem to recognize, in a way that only competition can illuminate, what it's worth to treat people right.

Staff members at Matuba, particularly those behind the sushi bar, wish departing diners well with a kind of boisterous enthusiasm usually reserved for the closing moments of a big family reunion.

At Le Vieux Logis, anyone asked to wait for a table is likely to receive a lavish apology and a complimentary glass of wine to pass the time.

At Cottonwood Cafe, J.J. Fletcher seemingly spends all his time table-hopping, telling war stories (he has real ones from his Navy SEAL days in Vietnam) and making sure no one has died of internal burns from the more pugnacious dishes on his southwestern menu.

And at La Taverna d'Italia, Pepino Luise can remember not only the names of his diners but the meals he served specific customers weeks before, down to the shared pasta putanesca appetizers his dentist's party of four had maybe a thousand meals ago.

"We try to be very nice to people," Luise says. "They love it."

What they love most, though, is good food and good value, more than ever before. "In today's industry," says consultant Spinelli, "you're really dealing with an educated clientele. Ten years ago, people would eat out two or three times a month. The husband was working and his wife was home with the kids. Today people are eating three times a week, and they have something to compare to . . . People know more about the food than the guy who makes it."

They also know the price. It's old news that people are dining out less extravagantly than they once did. The result, here and elsewhere, has been to threaten the high-end places - Jean-Pierre didn't become the Place on K out of mere e'gaille' - and to press the vast middle of the restaurant industry to compete on price, quality and service, in the city and in the suburbs.

What is clear, though, is that as the region has become increasingly suburbanized, and as more people in the oh-so-tasteful private sector have moved in over the years with their money and their dining expertise, suburban restaurants have shaken the old images and become full partners with the city places in feeding this enviable metropolitan restaurant market.

Of course, now that patrons and proprietors alike are luxuriating in all this good fortune, there are rumblings . . .

Rents are creeping up. As Bethesda upholsterer Jeff Potter says, "Some landlords have decided these streets are paved with gold."

There is talk that, over the next few years, NIH is going to consolidate its work force on its campus north of town and pull a lot of people out of downtown Bethesda office space.

There is ongoing talk about the parking issue, although Bethesda planner Downing says enough parking for all the nighttime traffic in Bethesda is in place - if you search it out.

There probably is always talk.

What seems to remain true, now and foreseeable, is what Pepino Luise, during his seven years picking up the language, has learned to say in fairly evocative fashion:

"I don't know how in Bethesda everybody goes crazy for restaurants, but it's business for everybody."

Bethesda resident Gary Blonston is a national correspondent for Knight-Ridder Newspapers and lives within walking distance of these restaurants.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

[Buy Page Print](#)  [Printer Friendly](#)

Most Viewed Articles (Updated Daily)

- [U.S. Scientist Sees New Ice Age Coming](#)
- [Arctic Ocean Getting Warm; Seals Vanish And Icebergs Melt](#)
- [Melvin Purvis to Wed Janice Jarratt, Actress](#)
- [Knickerbocker Disaster Worst in 50 Years; Snow Weight Cracked Roof; Indictments Thrown Out by Just...](#)
- [Evangelist's Death Duo to 'Alcoholism'](#)

Logged in as: Joe A. Spinelli

[Buy Accesses](#)

[Log Out](#)

[Previously Viewed Articles](#)

[About the Archive](#) | [Pricing](#) | [Account & Purchases](#) | [Help](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

[NEWS](#) | [POLITICS](#) | [OPINIONS](#) | [BUSINESS](#) | [LOCAL](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [ARTS & LIVING](#) | [GOING OUT GUIDE](#) | [JOBS](#) | [CARS](#) | [REAL ESTATE](#) | [RENTALS](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#)

SEARCH  [washingtonpost.com](#)  [Web](#) : [Results by Google](#)

washingtonpost.com : [About Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Search Terms](#) | [Topics Index](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Mobile](#) | [RSS](#) | [Widgets](#)