

Spring Into Style: Gardens, Fashion and More
New Eateries, Top Docks and Other Dining Trends

Detroit

May 1995
\$2.95

MONTHLY

'SNAKE CHARMER

Salute to Jimmy Schmidt's

1995

Restaurant

of the

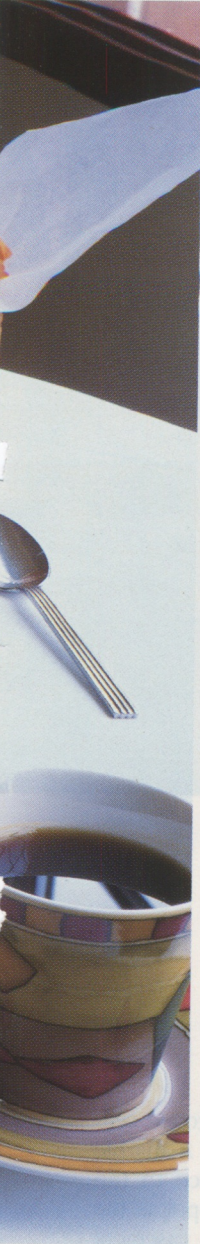
YEAR



What's on the menu at the Restaurant of the Year? Yellowfin tuna with tomatillo and roast pepper chutney, and WAM, a luscious blend of white chocolate ice cream and macadamia nuts on a bed of raspberry and passion fruit puree.



It took seven years, but finally **The 'S**
Takes the Prize



We hesitated only for a moment to call it a Detroit institution. It is, after all, barely seven years old. But so set is it in the local culinary consciousness that we had to go back and recheck the date of its opening to convince ourselves that it hasn't been here much, much longer.

Everybody knows about the Rattlesnake Club, *Detroit Monthly's* 1995 Restaurant of the Year.

It was the first, and best, of whiz kid chef Jimmy Schmidt's restaurant group. (Incidentally, the "kid" just turned 40.) It marked his return to Detroit after a sojourn in Denver. And it stunned home folks and outsiders alike when they learned it was being installed on the riverfront at a cost of \$3 million. People just don't spend \$3 million to build restaurants ... in Detroit.

But Schmidt and partner Michael McCarty did. They carved out roomy quarters facing the water on the Stroh River Place property, painted the walls stark white and outfitted them with bright, contemporary art in a collection that today includes works by Frank Stella, Wayne Thiebaud, Louise Nevelson, Jasper Johns and others. They laid down cherry-wood floors with green marble accents and jammed in enough tables (because social eavesdropping was a restaurant "thing" at the time) for 250 in the main dining room

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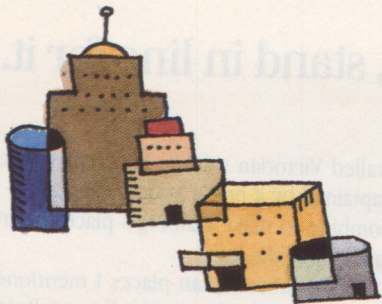
**JIMMY SCHMIDT AND
STAFF HAVE PERFECTED
FINE DINING AT THEIR
RIVER PLACE FLAGSHIP.**

By Ric Bohy

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GLEN CALVIN MOON



A winning staff (from left): Jimmy Schmidt, executive chef Peter Kelly, general manager Terri Verady, and master sommelier Madeline Triffon.



something wrong with you) and other perfectly executed Thai delicacies to a zone starting for any spike on its ethnic flatline.

City Grill rose from the ashes of master chef Ed Janos' rancorous relationship to business partner Alan Markovitz. When Janos walked, it was only a short distance up the street, where he went to work with the Machus organization and transformed the musty Sly Fox into a noshery for the '90s. He left behind the subtly doomed Avenue Diner, which nose-dived into the hands of a new operator, wily eatery emperor Matt Prentice, and reopened as **America**, whose menu is a heartland quilt.

(Though not a restaurant, Prentice's **Sourdough Bread Factory** must be included as a notable newcomer for bringing Nancy Silverton's sour starter and satisfyingly peasantry bread recipes to Pontiac, from whence her style of coarse and crusty loaves began to emit by the thousands.)

Not far away, sitting all lonesome on one side of the big square at the center of Pontiac, the **Wide Track Diner** started plating incredible ribs, stews and other heavenly heavy home cooking in a rehabbed rail car.

There can't be too many **Tom's Oyster Bars**, and the second in a group that continues to grow was an instant hit with the nomadic habitues of Royal Oak's burgeoning restaurant scene.

Big Fish Too contributed to the legacy of the late Chuck Muer, bringing his famous chowders and flopping fresh fish to Madison Heights, while the Robertses did much the same for Birmingham by retiring Richard & Reiss in favor of the more inviting Sidewalk Seafood.

And lest I forget, love it or not, the **Russian Bear** filled the space vacated by Halberg's demised R.I.K.'s the Restaurant with something other than Italian, Chinese, Greek, Thai, Mexican, Middle Eastern, fish house, steak house, coney or deli fare, and for that alone it deserves note.

Now quickly, requiescat in pace to these Noticeable Absences:

Bangkok Club, Buster's Bay, Cafe Pavel, Chimayo, Cocina del Sol, Down Cellar Bistro, Judy's Cafe, Kabob Grill, Kyla's, PUNCHINELLO'S, Sultan's, Sushiiwa Hyatt and Waleed's.

— Ric Boby

Restaurant

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and adjacent grill. They gave those diners Saarinen chairs as a subtle reminder that this is Detroit, and they prepared to feed the swells with more than three-quarters of a million dollars worth of custom kitchen equipment. It was noted at the time that the 'Snake's stoves could pour out 5 million Btu of gas cooking heat.

Then they made a mistake. Don't tip, they told their eager patrons — this 18 percent service charge appended to every bill will cover all that nicely. It was quite a haughty thing to do for a restaurant that dressed its wait staff in California-casual khakis and Polo shirts in an effort to appear friendly. That's different from in fact being friendly.

And in that lay the seed of a mixed rep that Schmidt and the 'Snake troupe have had to work hard at living down. Jimmy has always wowed 'em with his food. (We still maintain that he would deserve a seat in the pantheon if he'd created nothing but WAM, an exquisite dessert of house-made white chocolate ice cream, macadamias and counterbalanced sauces of passion fruit and raspberry.) But for a long time, the Rattlesnake Club got mixed reviews for its service. When it was rapped, it was most often for being spotty and cool.

It was, frankly, the only reason this famous eatery was

not named Restaurant of the Year before now. But in repeat visits over the last two years, we noticed a whole new attitude.

The service charge, of course, is long gone. It lasted just one year and was, Schmidt says, the primary reason he bought out McCarty and ended their short partnership on April Fool's Day, 1989. "He was the sole person on the planet who liked it," Schmidt says of the hated surcharge, symbol of a certain disdain for the customer.

Since then, the 'Snake's namesake in Denver, the original Rattlesnake Club opened by Schmidt and California restaurateur McCarty, has closed. But Schmidt resumed his presence there last fall by opening the much less ambitious Rattlesnake Grill.

Meantime, the feel of the Detroit 'Snake

was subtly softened with a new coat of "vanilla" paint over the harsh white. Servers were put in navy blue suit coats. Some tables were taken out to provide intimacy. Master sommelier Madeline Triffon, one of the most user-friendly wine experts ever to work a table, was brought into the fold, joining other alumni of the place where Schmidt made his name, the late London Chop House. Notable in his presence, too, is the Chop's popular barkeep, Farouk Elhaje, who took up his post at the 'Snake about a year after opening.

But two even more recent additions to the staff get particular mention by Schmidt for the Rattlesnake Club's new attitude: general manager Terri Varady, who rose through Schmidt's own

The A-List

Detroit Monthly's annual Restaurant of the Year award has recognized the metro area's finest dining establishments for 14 years. Consider the list of past winners to be the equivalent of a local culinary hall of fame.

- 1994 DANIEL'S
VINTAGE BISTRO
- 1993 OPUS ONE
- 1992 PIKE STREET
RESTAURANT
- 1991 TOO CHEZ
- 1990 THE LARK
- 1989 LES AUTEURS
SWEET LORRAINE'S
CAFE
GRATZI
- 1988 GOLDEN MUSHROOM
- 1987 THE WHITNEY
- 1986 THE LARK
- 1985 THE MONEY TREE
- 1984 THE LONDON CHOP

organization, and dining room manager Tim Gardella, who arrived a couple of years ago from the Ritz in Chicago. They put in place a Total Quality Management program based on a Ritz-Carlton system that documents and corrects even the tiniest of shortcomings. "And I've got to give her a lot of credit," the boss says of Varady. "Her personality is reflected (in the service). She's really warm and cares."

As to the food . . .

Schmidt himself has a hard time defining the menu, which is presided over day-to-day by executive chef Peter Kelly. He's a recent addition to the Rattlesnake Club and was trained by Schmidt's own culinary mentor, Madeleine Kamman.

Early on, Schmidt described the 'Snake's menu as modern American, but over time that term has lost its meaning (if it ever really had a clear one).

So, he tries: "Contemporary? I think it's really a regional menu, for the most part, because we use all the ingredients that are indigenous to the Midwest, and we focus on freshness and quality.

"And we prepare them with techniques that really push to enhance their flavors without adding additional fats and unnecessary seasonings and such like that."

He cites as an example his yellowfin tuna with tomatillo and roast pepper chutney (none of which is indigenous to the Midwest, as far as we know. Forgive him the contradiction. It's a wonderful dish.). Pastas are done with such flavorful, but low-impact, dress-ups as rock shrimp, fresh basil, marinara and the like, though things get a bit richer when he studs the "little ears," orrecchiette, with duck confit.

On this subject, just for reference, Schmidt tells a tale of the old days. "You know," he says, "the Chop House used to go through 700 pounds of butter in six days. They had baked potato with butter and sour cream and a side of asparagus with hollandaise sauce and then bearnaise sauce on top of their chateaubriand.

"Now we use maybe 50 pounds of butter a week, and most of that's 'table.' And we do more covers here than we did at the Chop, we're bigger."

In repeat visits to the Rattlesnake Club over the years, we've never been sorely disappointed in any meal. Don't take that as faint-praise damnation. It's just to say that the worst you'll get is good. And much, truly, is great.

Start with tiny, fried calamari that's tossed



The Rattlesnake Club features a fine collection of modern art, including the Louise Nevelson etchings on the left wall above.

with fragile, perfect baby artichokes, dressed if you like with aioli subtly accented with thyme and lemon. A much simpler, but no less delicious, appetizer is the mixed grill of wild mushrooms, kissed with balsamic vinegar and garlic. Black bean soup, when you can get it, is velvety and has just enough pepper heat to wake up that last indolent taste bud.

If you'd like an alternative to the non-indigenous tuna, pickerel is a regular menu item, broiled with a surprisingly light hazelnut crust and napped with Chardonnay cream. Or take the 'Snake's great big pork loin chop, given over with dried Michigan cherries and quick-fried sage.

Pheasant here is farm-raised but muscular enough to hint pleasantly of the wild. It's pan-seared, then roasted and served with sweet Vermouth sauce and mixed grains (quinoa is prominent, if memory serves, though we were distracted by the good bird).

One concession to a renewed public enthusiasm for heart-dumb but mouth-smart red meat is the selection of three expensive, top-quality Chicago beef cuts: a 10-ounce black Angus filet, an 18-ounce bone-in New York strip and a mighty 24-ounce Porterhouse, the latter two being the dearest items on the menu at \$29.95 each. We have eaten and can vouch only for the filet, which is as good as any beef we've had this side of Kobe.

While we can't think of a \$30 steak as a bargain, the 'Snake offers one indisputable steal when, on Wednesday evenings, Triffon hosts a wine bar featuring six themed selections plus appetizers at a fixed price of \$17 per person.

There are a few more changes coming. Schmidt is talking to highly regarded photographer Lisa Spindler, a local treasure, to display a collection of her works in the restaurant. New, higher tables will be added to the

lower grill area adjacent to the bar. Art screens will be added to physically separate the grill from the dining room, to make it "more womb-like," Schmidt says. Some booths may be added to the main dining room.

Schmidt doesn't talk or act like somebody who's about to fold, or sell, his tent and leave, although persistent rumors to that effect have passed through the restaurant community for many months. It has, in fact, become our habit to ask him monthly if the rumors are true. And monthly, Schmidt denies them flatly.

"We've done real well, paid down the debt quite a bit, we're still around and a pretty good, viable entity, I think," he says. "I'm pretty proud of where we've been. We've gone through some tough times in Detroit, with the recession and such in '90 and '91, when a lot of people dropped out."

He's talking about *other* people. Jimmy Schmidt and the 'Snake stayed.

And he's making more plans. His organization's accounting office is to be moved from Southfield to downtown Detroit soon "to consolidate all of our operations down here at the 'Snake, which will make life a little easier."

Looking ahead to the restaurant's 10th anniversary, Schmidt says he may modify the layout to open up the kitchen and allow "interaction" with the customer.

That's *the* customer, who these days is foremost at the Rattlesnake Club, 1995 Restaurant of the Year, in a city where people just don't build \$3 million eateries. ■

Ric Boby is Detroit Monthly's food and restaurant editor.