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Adventures in Dining: New Kids on the Block

It's too bad there isn't daycare for new restaurants—some place where they could experiment with various concepts and cuisines without that 27 percent failure statistic looming over everything they do. You see, I desperately want every new restaurant to succeed. Not so much for the food—there's plenty of that around here—but for the dreams that float in the eyes of the owners as they point out this detail on the menu or that décor. It's like going to the pound. Of course you love puppies, but you can't help but realize that not all are going to make it out. These are the thoughts that occur to me as I make my introductions to this season's class of new restaurants.

I'm sitting down for a meal at the new Lonjeivity Superfood Fusion Café, where a heavily landscaped frontage has a touch of the Disney Jaws ride to it—but no line. We're splitting an order of sautéed squid (I've been on a cephalopod kick this month), a seven-bean tuna salad and prosciutto pineapple pizza. We have two servers—one who takes our order and another who stands behind her, listening carefully, evaluating. I like this. It makes me feel like medieval royalty.

They bring forth the bread, which I later learn is sifted with a medley of garbanzos, lentils, barley, oats and flax seeds. It has that nutty-crust flavor that I associate with bread from the Granary and comes with a pleasant sop of olive oil. A little salt brought it together nicely—clean and neutral—and not bad with our pinots and gluten-free beer. When the plates start coming, the calamari dance in their sauté sauce. Tomato pesto and oil smears our napkins. A few toast points later we're chasing tentacles around the bottom of the bowl. Bellissimo. Applause.

The pizza comes, made of the same low-G.I. dough medley as the bread. Everything above that—the cheese, beautiful prosciutto and pineapples—tastes like a gourmet production of classic Chicago thin-crust. As far as the whole-wheat garbanzo lentil crust dough—well, keep this in mind: the food at Lonjeivity is formulated to have a low glycemic index, and it's across from a hospital. The crazy thing is you can still get a filet with your lentil cake and lime crème fraîche. If any concept can succeed in this spooked location (Mel's, carpe diem), it's probably this one. By the same token, if a

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superfood concept is going to succeed anywhere in this town, there's probably no better spot than facing Sarasota Memorial.

It's funny how a few blocks can completely alter the formula for a restaurant concept. Libby's Café and Bar on the west side of the hospital, is resolutely family, "neighborhood" dining. If Lonjevity looks to serve doctors and patients as they come and go from SMH, Libby's wants to serve them on their nights and weekends off.

The family behind Libby's, the Seidenstickers, is hanging its hopes on the personality of one woman: Libby Seidensticker, the matriarch of the restaurateur family. It's "a family-owned and operated restaurant, based in a neighborhood, based on an homage to a grandmother," Executive Chef Francis Casciato tells me once the flurry of soft openings and media previews has abated. Libby's is a refined, if unfussy, establishment. It isn't especially flashy, but the linens are crisp, the fixtures funky and the Margaret Barnes art tasteful but contemporary.

The food is likewise unassuming, yet decidedly gourmet. Every detail, every contingency, seems to have been accounted for in advance—starting with fresh, local ingredients and finishing with deft, highly competent prep and assemblage. The menu goes on for miles and farms of origin are listed for many items. "If I could stress anything," Casciato tells me, "it's that we don't want to identify ourselves as a high-end restaurant. We want to focus on family, neighborhood, on the vast menu, on all kinds of simple preparations and more complex ones."

Simple but elegant can be a tall order, but I'm harboring sweet memories of an unaffected cedar planked salmon—gently perfumed and flawlessly flaky. Truffled Wild Mushroom Torte with Coach Farm goat cheese and balsamic syrup left a more complex impression of merging air and earth in its light but rich interplay of ingredients. The Peachtree Farms Deviled Eggs are to die for. The egg whites have a consistency just a little firmer than Jell-O and the Mote Marine American sturgeon caviar can garnish my appetizer any day.

For all that talent, the word that keeps running through my head when meeting Casciato is "unassuming." He opened Devito's South Beach and Opus 5 in West Palm, but ultimately found the celebrity chef track a little empty. Casciato, who is a father, decided rubbing shoulders with the likes of Mario Batali and Ming Sai was not worth the cost to his personal life. And, when he called it quits, fate seems to have stepped in. "Conceptually, you couldn't have put a more appealing idea in front of me at that point in my life," Casciato says. "The bigger picture is to help the family keep Libby as the matriarch of everything we do. ... There are no pineapple chicken skewers. I'm confident that our food will distinguish itself."

At the corner of webber and beneva, B&G's Soup Stop has already distinguished itself as the neighborhood's most gourmet restaurant and (for the time being) our only soup specialty spot. This neighborhood is surprisingly good to its restaurants. There are a handful of nice, neighborhood-style spots that seem to be weathering the economy pretty well—Francesco's, Solorzano's, Bianca's, the Sunrise Café. The only recent closings were Four Gees—a fabulous gourmet coffee shop and bar that may have been just a little too "downtown" for the locale—and Chef D's, a specialty pizza place with much the same problem.

But back to the soup. B&G's has a leg up on those late gourmet concepts because its gourmet qualities don't cost anything extra. It's a familiar litany to anyone who spends time around chefs these days: the best ingredients make the best meals, require the least prep and fewer additional ingredients. For example, all it takes to make a stellar butternut squash soup, apparently, is a butternut squash, onions, salt, pepper and olive oil. I'm enjoying a cup of it on one of the first brisk afternoons of the season. The nuttiness tastes like a herald of the season and people wander in from the surrounding strip malls. Owner Brent Williams glides through the door after a massage from the therapist next door. I imagine the whole scenario as a set for a three-camera sitcom as I sit there enjoying the soup's nutty sweetness and the soft warmth of freshly baked bread.

"I buy the best of everything that I can buy," Williams says. "I don't believe in skimping on anything. Value perception is everything." That means the chicken noodle soup is made from fresh chicken stock—boiled down in the back from a whole chicken. It means that the pork loin in the Cuban sandwiches actually looks like pork loin. Cream of onion soup comes with crispy shallots. The pastrami is National Deli top cut. Simple tastes done tastefully. "My catering company, Gordon's Gourmet, is where I have a chance to really exploit my expertise," Williams tells me. "B&G's Soup Stop was designed to help pay for the space. And to execute that little dream of the 'Soup Nazi.'"

It's strange that the term "Soup Nazi" connotes something desirable, but there you have it. Having eaten at the Soup Kitchen in Manhattan—restaurant of the original Soup Nazi, Al Yeganeh—I can attest without hyperbole that the Soup Stop measures up. Seven or eight soups are served daily, and you can get a cup with half a sandwich for \$6.50. There are salads, too—such as a strawberry Spa salad with an adorable pink cream cheese finger sandwich. Given the low overhead, high appeal and the foot traffic I observed, I drop my defenses and allow Williams' enthusiasm to infect me. "It's at the point now where we wish we were a little bigger," he says. "We're thinking about, 'where could we open this up in another location?'" Here's hoping.

—By *Brian Hughes*, Photos by *Mark Sickles*

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