

Daily Gazette

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Non-holiday week's a good time to dine out

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No Super Bowl or Mardi Gras crowds will interfere with **Restaurant Week** this year. The Schenectady promotion will run a full **week**, from Monday to Sunday.

Twenty-three **restaurants** throughout downtown Schenectady and into the suburbs will offer three-course meals for \$20.13.

After years in which the promotion had to navigate holidays, restaurateurs said this time the dates were perfect.

They're hoping for big crowds to keep the momentum going after a strong turnout for Valentine's Day.

At Bier Abbey, which opened last fall, the **Restaurant Week** menu was designed to showcase the kitchen's breadth.

"Whether you're a chicken or beef or pork chops lover, it gives them an opportunity to try one of our entrees," said owner George Collentine. "I'm hoping for some new faces. Especially with us being new, it'll give people an incentive to come out."

Nearby Cafe Nola is revamping its menu just in time for the promotion.

"We're trying to be more vegan friendly," co-owner Kevin Brown said. "We're not calling it vegan, we're calling it plant-based. When I hear vegan, until a couple months ago, I thought tofu. People don't realize, but if you have a salad and fries, that's vegan. And butternut, it's very meaty. People don't realize it's vegan."

He started experimenting with vegan recipes after a friend walked in and asked him for a vegan meal.

"I made something and she said, 'Wow, you should really do more of this,' " he said.

Now a vegan group comes to the restaurant regularly, and he was just hired to cater a vegan birthday party.

Meat-lovers, don't despair. He isn't getting rid of his popular dishes, including chicken in puff pastry. He sold out of that in an hour on New Year's Eve, he said.

The chicken and his traditional crab cakes are on the Restaurant Week menu. He said he included the crab cakes because people want them -- even though they don't really fit into a \$20.13 price point. His cakes put the emphasis on the crab meat -- he disdains

crab cakes that are mostly breading, even though the crab meat costs much more.

"I don't make much profit. But the customer walks away happy," he said.

To fit in downtown customers trying to get lunch on a 30-minute break, he's added an online ordering system to his website.

Customers can order and pay in advance for takeout and sit-in.

"The food's ready when you arrive," he said, adding that it is working well for office workers who can't spend 45 minutes relaxing over the meal midday.

The promotion isn't just downtown. It goes into Scotia, Glenville and Rotterdam, as well as branching out to **restaurants** in other parts of Schenectady.

Randy Loren is hoping customers will head up State Street to the new location for his **restaurant**, Dolce Vita Ristorante at 1727 State St.

He took a leap of faith a year ago when he closed his previous location, half a mile away, and spent 10 months renovating the new building.

"I gutted out the walls and up to the roof," he said.

After 3 1/2 years at the prior location, he took a risk that customers might not follow him -- particularly not when they had to wait almost a year for his reopening.

But problems with his landlord pushed him to leave, he said, and he was able to sign a lease-to-own deal for the new building.

He opened in October. Already, business is booming.

"We've surpassed anything we did before," he said. "On Valentine's Day we were wall-to-wall. I had to turn away 70 people."

His **restaurant** offers live music and dancing.

"Between salad and entree, you can get up and dance," he said.

He's a professional entertainer, singing and playing on his baby grand piano. He's also hiring a backup band.

The entertainment is key, he said.

"Creating a warm atmosphere -- people don't understand this, but I do. When you walk into a room, it has to be alive before a single person is in the room."

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