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Giovanni's gets Supper Club lift

By Brent Snavely
• May 02, 2005

Tucked away in a heavy industrial corridor in southwest Detroit is a wonderful Italian restaurant called Giovanni's Ristorante, a restaurant that I dined at for the first time when I joined Detroit Synergy Supper Club in late March.

Founded in 1968 as a deli, Giovanni's established itself in the 1980s as a fine-dining Italian restaurant and has managed to survive in the shadow of the Ford Rouge Center despite a decline in the local population and the disappearance of several other nearby restaurants. It hasn't been easy.

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"We're an off-the-beaten path destination restaurant," said Randy Truant, a third-generation co-owner of the restaurant. "We would like it to be better, but we do OK."

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These days, Truant said that the restaurant does a stronger lunch business than dinner, but continues to survive in large part because of a core of loyal customers.

My first visit to Giovanni's was on March 23 with Detroit Synergy Supper Club, a crew of downtown professionals who gather together about once a month to eat at a fine-dining restaurant in Detroit. On that night the supper club drew more than 70 guests, which was enough to fill most of the 100-seat restaurant.

The Supper Club, which is the brainchild of engineer and Detroit Synergy member Jordan Medeiros, has grown in attendance from about 20 people at its first restaurant last summer to more than 70 every month.

As project leader, Medeiros has ensured the Supper Club's popularity by negotiating a flat \$30 a person price, including tax and tip, at restaurants that typically charge far more than that for a full meal.

An entree alone at Giovanni's is between \$19 and \$31. But Supper Club attendees received a four-course meal that included a salad, boneless breast of chicken encrusted with pine nuts, parmesan and Italian breadcrumbs, house-made angel hair pasta with marinara sauce and a flourless chocolate torte for dessert and a glass of wine.

And while I wasn't particularly fond of the chicken, the pasta - made from scratch on site - was possibly the freshest and most delicate I've ever tasted.

But why would a restaurant like Giovanni's agree to serve 70 people a four-course meal for \$30 each?

"We were just trying to get our fingers on the pulse of the people moving into the city and working in the city," said Frances Truant, who took over the management of the restaurant in 1979 when her mother died.

Truant said Giovanni's out-of-the-way location often makes it difficult to convince people who are new to the area to find her restaurant.

"We were just very excited to have them here," Truant said.

Medeiros said he convinces restaurants to offer more than what regular patrons would get for \$30 by handling the reservation process and the collection of money. Plus, he is bringing in 70 to 100 guests who may evolve into loyal customers.

"The idea is to get people into these higher price-point restaurants at a lower rate," Medeiros said. "That way, when they have a reason to celebrate a big event, they are a lot better educated on where they would want to go."

Supper Club events are open to anyone, and tickets can be purchased through Detroit Synergy's Web site, www.detroit synergy.org.

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But be forewarned: Medeiros said the club has become so successful that it has had to institute a cap on attendance. In April when Supper Club announced that its monthly event would be a private party at Vicente's, a new Cuban restaurant at 1250 Library St. in Detroit, the 80-person-capacity event sold out in five days.

This month the Supper Club is taking on its biggest challenge yet. It is putting together a strolling supper in Detroit's Midtown area. Medeiros and his fellow Detroit Synergy members have developed three routes that feature three or four restaurants each. The capacity for that event, scheduled for May 11 is 550.

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