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A DECADE IN FOOD



Cole's Chop House server Mike Delacy balances a tray of orders. Greg Cole was one of the first to open a new restaurant in downtown Napa this past decade, signalling the start of a dining boom. Register file photos

By Sasha Paulsen
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Ten years ago, Greg Cole was the brash guy willing to gamble on opening a fine dining restaurant in Napa. At the close of the decade, he's an established restaurateur who has two thriving eateries, Celadon and Cole's Chop House.

"I opened Celadon in 1996 because the rents were so cheap in Napa, it's where I could afford to open," Cole said.

At the time, Celadon was in the pocket-sized space behind the then-dark old Opera House. Success allowed him to move Celadon down Main Street to the historic Hatt Building (and the former site of Geezer's), and in March 2000 he opened the upscale, elegant steakhouse Cole's — a place to find the meat that matches

the valley's king of wines, cabernet sauvignon.

These are just two moves in a decade that saw the steady growth of the Napa Valley as a destination for food as well as wine — and an explosion of activity in the once-overlooked city of Napa that promises to continue into the new decade.

Other valley towns added to their repertoire of outstanding restaurants: Calistoga lost Jan Birnbaum's Catahoula, but gained Solbar in the new Solage resort, as well as the restaurant open only to members and guests at the secluded and exclusive Calistoga Ranch. St. Helena added Press, Martini House, Cook, Market and Cindy Pawlcyn's Go Fish and Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen.

In Yountville, Thomas Keller expanded his

empire (French Laundry and Bouchon) with Bouchon Bakery and a temporary Ad Hoc (formerly the Diner, briefly Wine Garden), which became permanent when fans flocked to enjoy the one-menu family-style meals. Michael Chiarello returned to his roots to open Bottega, and the posh Bardessono resort opened a restaurant within its luxurious campus. The hit of the decade in Yountville, however, was Richard Reddington's Redd, opened at the former site of Piatti; and the loss was the closing of Gordon's, one of the best breakfast places in the valley.

The story of the new decade may be how the surging Napa scene will affect the Upvalley.

"It used to be that when you wanted to go out to a nice place, you went Upvalley," Cole said. "Now, there is no reason to, unless you want to."

Napa

"There was not much going on in Napa at the beginning of 2000," Cole said.

Today the landscape is transformed, and one of the catalysts was the ill-fated Copia, the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts, which opened in November 2001 with fanfare and closed in November 2008, bankrupt and with a half-hour warning for the few remaining employees.

Copia never found a workable formula to fulfill the vision of Robert and Margrit Mondavi, but its legacy lies in the growing legitimacy of Napa as a destination for foodies. More than 50 new eateries opened in Napa between 2000 and the beginning of 2010. A third of them didn't make it, but new ones have moved in to take their place, and the story of what succeeded and failed is a study in changing tastes.

With the opening of Copia came Julia's Kitchen, the first restaurant to which Julia Child — who celebrated her 90th birthday at Copia in 2002 — lent her name. The first

incarnation of the restaurant had little to do with the ebullient, celebrated cook and devoted fan of butter and cream. Aside from a display of Child's copper pots and pans, the dining room was minimalist, but opening chef Mark Dommen's menu, which increasingly made use of the produce from Copia's extensive organic gardens, warmed the place up.

After several intervening chefs, in November 2008, TV chef Tyler Florence was introduced as the one who would create menus that honored the restaurant's namesake, and he presented a special welcome dinner with a menu straight out of Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." Two weeks later, Copia closed.

Another failed high-end experiment was Budo, which opened and closed in 2005 on Soscol Avenue. The space was stunning, gracious and elegant, although it also was across from a car wash and around the corner from Walmart. Executive chef and owner James McDevitt won praise for his exquisite Asian-California cuisine, but locals shuddered at the prices.

The site reopened as Cuvée, and with its good food, an innovative wine program and affordable happy hour, it quickly found a following.

Napa got its first Michelin star at the end of the decade when Ken Frank moved his La Toque restaurant from Rutherford to Napa in conjunction with the opening of the Westin Verasa Hotel.

Experiments

One of the odder experiments in the decade was the Lobster Shack. It opened in 2008 at the site of Napa's historic Depot, which used to be the place to pick up Napa's specialty pasta, malfatti. As the food world celebrated fresh, local and sustainable ingredients and chefs were going into justifiable raptures over Hog Island oysters, Cow Girl Creamery cheeses and high-quality beef, lamb, olive oils and produce, the Lobster Shack announced it was flying in ingredients from the East Coast and charged steep prices for clam rolls and chowder. The restaurant largely evoked a "huh?" and subsequently closed. It's now Fabrizio's, back to its Italian roots but still dogged by its unfortunate setting in a used car lot.

Other restaurants that opened and closed in Napa during the decade, Pilar, n.v., Elements, Kelley's No Bad Days Cafe, Bleaux Magnolia, Foothill Cafe and Belle Arti, all offered fine food, but timing, luck and location may have worked against them. Hoss Zaré, an acclaimed chef from San Francisco, opened Zaré in the site of the old Red Hen Cantina on Highway 29 but even painting the

building lavender didn't attract diners and he returned to the city.

The decade also saw the closing of a Napa landmark, Ruffino's, which, along with Jonesy's Steakhouse, had, for many, constituted Napa's fine dining scene for decades. Locos, Rio Poco, Bombay Bistro, La Gondola and Tuscany were others that appeared and disappeared. Piccolinos and Chanterelle also closed in the decade, the former a victim of 2008's plummeting economy and the latter giving way to the flood control project.

One successful experiment is the unlikely Ubuntu, a high-priced vegetarian yoga studio and restaurant that opened next to Cole's. It's creative fare caught the attention of a New York Times writer who proclaimed it one of the top 10 most interesting restaurants of the year, establishing it instantly on the foodie map.

Specialties

Napa's taco trucks were a fixture at the beginning of the decade. The most popular trucks, like Tacos La Playita, made moves into permanent restaurant spaces, and their customers followed. Mexican and Tex-Mex restaurants dot the Napa landscape. Compadres moved to Napa from Yountville to take over the old River City site on Lincoln; and one of Compadres' chefs opened Frida's Grill on Trancas Street. The latest Napa take on Mexican is The Border, formerly Tuscany. Italian food remains a foundation of the Napa restaurant scene. Built on the savory foundation of Bistro Don Giovanni, Michael and Christine Gyetvan in 2001 opened Azzurro Pizzeria in a small space on Second Street. It outgrew the space and is now in the new Wiseman building on Main Street. Allegria has won loyal fans in a former bank building on First Street, Bistro Don Giovanni remains a favorite for many, Filippi's thrives in Ruffino's old location and Villa Romano continues in its historic building at the foot of the Southern Crossing.

Culinary horizons expanded, however, with the growing interest in world cuisines. Napa has been slow in catching on, although ZuZu's tapas bar (opened in 2001) has been a winner, Juju's Mediterranean Kitchen and Small World have provided Middle Eastern foods and Neela Paniz, a respected Indian chef from Los Angeles, opened Neela's next to the new Azzurro.

World food really came to Napa when the Venezuelan street food vendors opened Pica Pica at the Oxbow Public Market — it has become one of the most successful enterprises there. The well-regarded Bleaux Magnolia drew positive reaction, but the Cajun restaurant didn't quite make it in the small

space on Clay Street formerly occupied by Cafe Lucy and briefly by an Italian restaurant, Posticino. Hopes are high for the new Thai restaurant in that spot, the charming Mini Mango Thai Bistro.

Comfort food

When Gyetvan's new venture, the Norman Rose Tavern, opened the last week of 2009, more than 1,000 people crowded into it on the first two nights to try the pub fare. It, along with Bounty Hunter, Pearl and Fumé Bistro, presents comfort food with flair. Chains including Buckhorn and Black Bear, as well as burger joints including the Squeeze Inn, Andie's, Big D and Taylor's Refresher have proved that Napans like the basics, especially when well-prepared and reasonably priced.

Hotels and coffee

New hotels also brought new restaurants to Napa. The Carneros Inn opened both the low-key Boon Fly Cafe, and the more upscale Farm, as well as the Restaurant, which is just for guests. The Meritage, Napa's newest hotel, Avia, and American Canyon's eco-friendly Gaia Hotel also opened new restaurants, and La Toque came to the Westin. Sweetie Pies and ABC have become coffee-oriented hubs of activity, but there are those who maintain that Napa really came of age when it got its own Peets, the Berkeley-based coffee house that opened a spot in Bel Aire Plaza. Oxbow Public Market's Ritual Coffee Roasters has found a following for its light-roast coffee, despite spotty service.

Despite the challenging economic times in which Oxbow opened, developer Steve Carlin has worked diligently since 2007 to form strong connections to local residents by launching "Locals Night" and programs with discounts for residents. Along with the opening of Trader Joe's and Whole Foods, the Oxbow is changing the way many Napans shop for food for everything from the Fatted Calf charcuterie, ecological ice cream, a cheese vendor that impresses French visitors and the quickly becoming indispensable for chefs and cooks' stop, Whole Spice.

Echoing others, Carlin has said he would not have created the upscale market on the edge of the Napa River had it not been for the influence of his erstwhile neighbor, Copia.

It's been a dizzying decade for food lovers in the valley. Over the years, entrepreneurs have found that while generating excitement among travelers can start the ball rolling, Napa County residents must be served.

"It's a strange business," Greg Cole concluded. "But we have always counted on locals."