

DINING OUT

Cafe Sam off to delectable start

By Mike Kalina
Post-Gazette Dining Critic

Few restaurants in Pittsburgh are overnight sensations, but Cafe Sam, open only a few weeks, has had so auspicious a debut that weeknight walk-ins may have quite a wait before putting fork to mouth.

That's exactly what happened to me Tuesday night on my first visit to the former Cafe Blvd. at 5242 Baum Blvd. Ravenous though I was on arrival (8:45 p.m.), the wait didn't bother me because Cafe Sam is a bonanza for people-watchers (or would-be Seen columnists.)

Among those I eyed were Patti Burns, resplendent in papal red; designer-gastronome Louis Talotta and wife; Talotta associate Patrick Gray; former Mayor Caliguiri aide Rich Talerico, now president of Yellow Cab Co.; Realtor Hank Stewart (he's Cushman & Wakefield); Sewickley designer Chester Lemaistre, and associate Richard Curran — to name a few.

And that was just at the bar!

Sitting in the dining room was an aggregation of beautiful people, whose names I didn't know but thought I should, judging by how they looked. I hate to pull out a New York comparison, but I felt as though I were visiting a bar on the Big Apple's so-called Yuppie West

Side rather than one just a pierogi's throw from Ritter's Diner.

But enough of this name-dropping. Let's get down to more serious matters. One look at the menu made it clear why Cafe Sam was off to such an enviable start. Not only does the menu make most interesting reading, the typographical errors aside, it is also clearly one of the most creative I've seen here in far too long a time. And it's not nearly so pricey as I expected.

It wouldn't be fair to review so new a restaurant — but let me say that what I sampled I loved. I'll offer just a brief overview, with a thorough review to come in about six weeks or so.

Appetizers range from the brash charred duck ravioli with goat cheese and fruit sauce (\$4.50), to the whimsical hard-cooked eggs with prosciutto, caviar and mushroom sauce (\$3.75).

Other openers are lamb tartare in a minced shallot-caper marinade (\$4.25); lump crabmeat with sliced tomato in coriander vinaigrette (\$5.25); and brandy-marinated duck pate (\$3.95).

A quartet of salads is offered, from a Caesar (\$2.50), to one of with hearts of palm, avocado and tomato (\$3.50). There are two soups: Gazpacho (\$3.25) and French onion baked with a trio of cheeses (\$2.95).

For a pasta course, you can have angel's hair with escargots poached in vermouth (\$4.95); linguine with salmon hash in a pesto sauce (\$4.25); fettuccine Alfredo (\$3.50) with assorted vegetables; or fettuccine and seafood with black-pepper-corn lobster sauce (\$4.50).

Entrees include grilled lamb and vegetable kabob with gorgonzola-yogurt sauce (\$10.95); rainbow trout with macadamia nuts and grape-butter sauce (\$10.95); grilled sliced New York strip (\$11.95); black bean venison chili (\$6.95).

Also: Grilled salmon on radicchio, mango and mixed greens (\$10.95); California-style bouillabaisse, with basil-redfish sauce (\$11.25); and medallions of veal with prosciutto, cheese, mushrooms and port (\$11.95). And let's not forget a "designer" pizza with baby shrimp, pesto, tomato and three cheeses (\$5.25).

A la carte

A new retail fish market-restaurant opened this week in The Waterworks, the trendy mall just over the city line from Fox Chapel. Called Abate, it's another in a growing chain of Dom Abbott-Joseph DeMartino restaurants here, which includes three Dingbat's and the new Juno's, in the Ross Park Mall ...