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*Stories*



**GUTHRIE**

From opening day, foodservice at the new Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis has been as spectacular as the critically acclaimed building. At the gala premiere, before the building was even completed, the foodservice staff served a sit-down dinner to 1,100 and desserts later to 1,500. With the 160-seat "Cue" restaurant that also houses a 30-seat bar and 50 patio seats, the 180-seat "Level Five" café, a lobby bar and catering for meetings and theater groups on any one of nine floors, the operation typically serves 850 people a day. It's not unusual to serve as many as 3,000.

What sets the operation apart isn't the number of meals it serves, but the food itself and the logistics required to purchase, prep and serve it. Menus throughout the facility feature hearty comfort food made with locally grown and raised ingredients in creative and artful combinations. The food, in fact, is a perfect complement to the new theater.

Designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, the new Guthrie has been described as "sleek and ungainly" and "sexy-ugly." Situated on the banks of the Mississippi River in an industrial district,

the building reflects a highly stylized, modern version of the flour mills, factories and grain elevators that surround it. Evoking a past that helped build the Twin Cities while giving them a thoroughly up-to-date, even avant-garde, cultural center the theater manages to be both theatrical and conservatively Midwestern.

So, too, do the menu items at the theater's restaurants. Typical fare such as fish consommé with lemon-infused oil, sweet corn, chervil and a poached oyster; Wisconsin farm-raised elk with Michigan cherries, toasted hazelnuts and grilled sweet onion; and breast of Minnesota free-range chicken with sweet-corn barley cakes are both contemporary and pastoral. The man who makes this feat look as simple as a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat is executive chef Lenny Russo.

Russo, who owns the venerable "Heartland" restaurant in St. Paul, was lured away by Bon Appétit Management Co., Palo Alto, Calif., to oversee the theater's foodservice operation. Before Bon Appétit even won the foodservice contract for the Guthrie, the company called Russo to find out if he was interested in taking on the challenge. What he brought from his own restaurant was a philosophy of creating Midwestern regional cuisine with local ingredients. He puts a lot of emphasis on using sustainable products wherever possible, a commitment shared by Bon Appétit.

"We try to buy everything locally," Russo says. "The only items that come from farther away than Michigan are things like lobster, tuna and salmon. We have about forty farmers in the mix, but no broadline distributors. When we make a purchase, we can't make just one call."

To make cassoulet recently, for example, Russo had to call four farmers to get enough duck legs and flageolet (small white beans) for the recipe. He mixes his own greens for salads from produce that comes from a local hydroponic farm. But he has a back-up supplier in Oregon just in case.

"We use as many seasonal ingredients as we can get our hands on," he says. "Pie pumpkins and root vegetables, for example, are now on our fall menu. We're using local lamb, pork, wild rice, mushrooms, cranberries and duck legs in seasonal dishes."



*Pictured left to right:*

*Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago, Inc.;*

*Kent Buell, Chef, "Cue" at the Guthrie;*

*Tom Lutz, Landmark Design;*

*Susana Robinson, Center Point Energy;*

*Tim Preiner, Hollander Company;*

*Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago, Inc.;*

*Glenna Lorentz, Landmark Design.*

*"Serving Those Who Serve The Very Best"*

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In addition to using local, sustainable ingredients, Russo and his staff make a point of using those ingredients in a sustainable manner, too. When he buys pork, for example, he buys the whole animal and uses different cuts for several menu items. Fat is rendered into lard for baking, and bones are used for stock and soups. Everything is made from scratch, and like cooks from past generations, Russo plans ahead, putting up summer products for use in the winter.

“At the end of the season, we took advantage of a deal on heirloom tomatoes and bought 500 pounds,” he says. “We made tomato jam, coulis, dried tomatoes and so forth that we can use in dishes all year.”

Using local, seasonal ingredients keeps the menu fluid, offering customers something new each time they visit. It also presents challenges. When Russo offered elk on the menu recently, he purchased all he could locally, but switched to lamb when buying more elk would have meant using a supplier outside the Midwest in Colorado.



*Keating's Miraclean® Griddle at Level Five Café is most frequently used to cook forty to fifty sandwiches at a time.*

“I try to write menus in a way that gives me an out,” he says, “like saying ‘autumn greens’ instead of describing the actual mix.”

Also challenging is the physical layout of the foodservice operations. Located downstairs alongside Cue are a prep kitchen and restaurant kitchen. The restaurant itself was designed to mimic the unusual “thrust” stage the Guthrie has been known for since the original theater opened in 1963. As a result, part of the kitchen is open to the dining area to put the staff’s culinary skills on exhibit.

Upstairs is another kitchen adjacent to the Level Five Café. The operation caters to meetings and groups on all nine levels, however, and the only dish room is downstairs. Storage also can pose difficulties for bulk purchases of items like summer produce or whole animals that will be prepped or processed and put up for future use.

In an unusual move, the kitchen spaces were designed before the menu was in place, so Russo has had to create menus with available equipment in mind. Fortunately, the kitchens are well-equipped, thanks to Landmark Restaurant Equipment and designer Tom Lutz.

Both production kitchens were equipped with Keating Miraclean® griddles. At Level Five, Russo uses the griddle for items like a roast beef sandwich with herbed chèvre or a grilled cheese and heirloom tomato sandwich, cooking 40 to 50 at a time. Downstairs at Cue, the griddle is used for a variety of dishes, but most often to sear fish.

“They’re really my favorite pieces of equipment in the kitchen, no bull,” Russo says. “They’re super hot, super fast and super efficient. For banquets or catering I can put a bunch of items on all at once, but because I can adjust the heat, I



*Practicality and theatricality merge seamlessly in the kitchen, as well as in the theater, thanks to the Keating Miraclean® Griddle.*

can keep a cool spot in the corner for sauce. I can throw 30 pieces of fish on the griddle and they’ll sear the same way every time really quickly. You can’t do that on a stove top.”

With equipment scattered all over the public space, much of it in full view, Russo also is a stickler for cleanliness and regular maintenance. Monday is maintenance and deep-cleaning day when everything is scrubbed and polished.

“My standards are very high,” he says. “Recipes are all spec’d down to the number of bones and the weight of the garni bouquet. And my kitchens are always spotless. The griddles are really shiny, which is cool, and very easy to take care of.”

Practicality and theatricality, in fact, appear to merge seamlessly at the Guthrie in the architecture, the food and even the kitchen equipment. After all, that’s what good theater is all about.

*Michael W. Sherer writes frequently about food and the foodservice industry.*



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