



## TABLE TALK

### The 2017 restaurant scene

There's a slowdown after last year's boom, but it's still lively.

By Michael Klein  
STAFF WRITER

**T**he Philadelphia-area restaurant scene seems to be showing signs of cooling. Last year at this time, more than 50 restaurant projects were on the books, and 2016 was among the busiest years for openings. This year, the crop of newcomers seems to be smaller by at least 25 percent.

"Cooling" is a relative term, of course. Since the industry recovered from the 2008 recession, growth has been utterly staggering. Now it's merely solid, but some believe a painful change is coming because of fast-rising rents, taxes, labor, and food costs.

In the Philadelphia area, the price of liquor licenses has skyrocketed as supermarket chains pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for the same piece of paper as a corner bar for the privilege of selling alcohol.

"To some, the marketplace simply seems saturated," chef/res-



Owner Saba Tedia and chef Michael Thomas at their soon-to-open Booker's, a bar-restaurant in West Phila. YONG KIM / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

taurateur Kevin Sbraga, who opened a branch of the Fat Ham last year in King of Prussia but who has no 2017 expansion plans, said: "I can go out 45 nights in a row to 45 different great restaurants."

Small-time operators have been all but priced out of many

parts of Center City, particularly west of Broad Street. "There's no small business in the city anymore," said Peggy Stephens, whose tea company, Premium Steep, enjoyed a 10-year run on 18th Street near Chestnut until her landlord pro-

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posed doubling her rent a year ago.

Stephens moved Premium Steep into an office building at 211 N. 13th St., and an eyeglass boutique ponied up the higher rent. Stephens traded her street visibility for a newly expanded online business and, she said, better hours. "I've maintained my core customers, but for somebody who didn't have a home base and clientele [and had to move], I feel bad for them," she said.

Still, there are plenty of significant projects underway in Center City, including an unnamed Korean-influenced bistro on Sanson Street in Rittenhouse from chef Peter Serpico, backed by Stephen Starr (opening date unknown); an Independence Mall branch of the New York City bar P.J. Clarke's (May); a bar-restaurant on 13th Street in Center City called Maison 208 from Top Chef contestant Sylva Senat (March); Giuseppe & Sons, a red-gravy Italian restaurant on Sanson Street in Rittenhouse pairing Michael Schulson and the Termini Bakery family (late 2017); Wiz Kid, the casual vegan drop-in next to V Street on 19th Street in Rittenhouse (late February); Tria Wine Garden, an expanded version of Tria on 18th Street near Market (spring); Keen, a long-awaited bistro at 1708 Lombard St. (late winter); a branch of the Peruvian favorite El Balconetto replacing Tin Angel and Serrano in Old City (spring); and Rooster Soup Co., a luncheonette/diner on Sanson from the Federal Donuts crew that promises to send its profits to a charity (late January).

Just as much of 2017's intrigue is outside Center City: the King of Prussia spinoff of the Princeton foodie darling Mistrál (winter); Danks, an upmarket Asian restaurant at 3601 Market St. from the team behind Nectar in Berwyn (late spring); a still-unnamed restaurant at FMC Tower at Cira Centre South from the people be-

hind the New York City bistro Re-belle (spring); Booker's, a bar-restaurant in West Philadelphia from Saba Tedia (of the nearby Aksara, with chef Michael Thomas, late January); Cheu Noodle Bar's second location, in Fishtown (spring); a Horsham branch of Cherry Hill's Farm & Fisherman Tavern (April); and chef Bryan Sikora and wife Andrea's Hearth Kitchen, a bar with an Italian menu in Kennett Square (late April). Arpeggio in Montgomery County is preparing for a move in the spring, and in Manayunk, Jake's/Cooper's is coming back shortly from flood damage.

Also on the way are at least a half-dozen brewpubs and breweries with tasting rooms, including Goose Island, near the Fillmore in Fishtown, and the nearby Fishtown Brewpub and Evil Genius; Urban Village in Northern Liberties; Second District in Point Breeze; and a Spring Garden offshoot of Chambersburg's Roy-Pitz Brewing Co. Philadelphia Distilling is getting close to opening near the Fillmore, as well.

Next to the Fillmore, where Travinia was, at Frankford and Delaware Avenues, Florida restaurateur Michael Johnigan is backing Mad Rex.

Its theme will be the apocalypse. "You'll feel like you've come to the end of the world," Johnigan said.

Mad Rex's decor, he said, will be a disaster: cracked floors and perhaps the shell of a crashed helicopter. A virtual-reality component will have patrons reclining in wheelchairs, sipping their drinks through a straw (but set up like an IV drip), while "experiencing" earthquakes and other disasters. Johnigan describes it as a "rustic, industrial but luxury setting with a survivor's menu inspired by Mother Nature." Meats will be butchered on the premises and cooking will be done on heated black rock or Himalayan salt block.

He said Philadelphia will be the first city to get a Mad Rex, and "it's ready for it."



The Rooster Soup Co., a luncheonette/diner from the Federal Donuts crew, is set to open this month on Sanson at 15th Street. The owners promise to send profits to charity. MICHAEL KLEIN / STAFF



Second District is a brewpub set to open to Point Breeze.

Next door, Johnigan is also planning Urban EEL — as in "Entertainment Eatery and Lounge." The American menu will include dishes made in a wood-fired oven, as well as sushi and pizza. And there will be an 8,000-gallon saltwater tank stocked with moray eels. Per show, not for dinner. Both restaurants are due in the spring.

Also apocalyptic: The bulk of new Center City development is

poised east of Broad Street; among the newcomers will be stir-fry/salad specialist Honey-grow, opening in the summer at 15 S. 11th St., and a branch of Wrap Shack at 112 S. 11th St.

Tenants have not yet been announced for East Market (the block facing Market Street between 11th and 12th Street) and the Fashion Outlets of Philadelphia (the former Gallery). Most, if not all, of the restaurants are expected to be chains or at least well-funded regional players.

Other restaurants on the way, and an estimated opening, include:

Blue Duck (212 S. 11th St., March): The Northeast Philadelphia bruncherie adds a Washington Square West branch with a small bar.

Bryn & Dane's (909 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr, in the spring, followed by Atwater Village in Malvern and the Franklin, on the 800 block of Chestnut Street): Healthy fast-casual.

Buena Onda (1735 Chestnut St., late spring/early summer):

Jose Garces spins off his Logan Square taqueria.

Far East Descendant (240 N. 13th St., April): Asian small plates, stylish bar, roof deck in Chinatown.

Fox & Son (Reading Terminal Market): Corn dogs are the specialty, opening in late winter.

Grace & Proper (941 S. Eighth St., summer/fall): Italian-theme bar-restaurant at Eighth and Carpenter Streets from the Hawthornes/Cambridge/Tio Flores crew.

Love & Honey (1100 N. Front St., March): Fried chicken and pies in Northern Liberties.

Otis & Pickles Speakeasy (2500 S. Third St., February): A Pennsport bar.

Poi Dog (102 S. 21st St., February): The Hawaiian theme truck comes in from the cold with a Rittenhouse storefront.

Tuna Bar (205 Race St., spring): A sushi specialist in the new Bridge retail and residential project in Old City.

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