

The Tonawanda News

NORTH TONAWANDA: From Madison Avenue to Sweeney Street.

By Neale Gulley

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— If miso glazed seabass with sushi rice sounds like a mouthful, that's the idea, long-time Manhattan Chef Scott Rossi, 43, of Queens, said.

"Seabass is my favorite dish of all time," he said from Buffalo's City Grill, 268 Main St., April 23. He and his wife Jenny took over the popular eatery in November, moving to East Amherst from New Jersey with their two school-aged children.

The couple relocated on the heels of developer Tony Kissling's latest plans on the Erie Canal in North Tonawanda, to include a new restaurant. Sometime in the next eight months, Rossi's "signature dish" will be on the menu there and residents can try it for themselves.

The culinary power couple plan to begin splitting their time here, to run the anticipated "15-Mile" restaurant on Sweeney Street later this year. Part of the overhaul of the long-dormant Remington Rand building, it's perhaps the most exciting project here in years and comes at a time when others like the Dockside Inn (across the street from Rand) and Crazy Jakes on Webster Street are already putting the downtown area back on the map. The restaurant is planned to become the first evidence of the roughly \$20 million set to convert the former 184 Sweeney St. hulk into more than 80 apartments, workspace for small businesses and numerous other creature comforts. The entire project is expected to be completed sometime in 2011, Kissling says.

The Rossis' combined experience includes running operations at Boston's Park Plaza, the U.N. Plaza's Millennium in New York and the Roosevelt Hotel on Madison Avenue to name a few.

But the new restaurant is planned to be something totally different, with a global flair around the edges of a familiar plate.

Even as they seated guests, answered phones and coordinated with kitchen staff back at City Grill recently — headquarters for the pair's newly-formed SJR Culinary Ventures and City Grill 2 Inc. — each still managed to get excited when talking about food.

There are the local wines, the ever changing flatbread sandwich menu and brand new pork wings (billed as proof that pigs CAN fly). Using seasonal produce purchased locally is a planned theme for "15-Mile."

Of the management style, they're the hands on type, Jenny said. Scott keeps an eye on the food with his many years experience as an executive chef and Jenny, who has worked for Compass Group administering services for thousands, watches the front of the house.

"If you come into City Grill, one of us will be here," she said while greeting guests around noon — business types wearing ties and sport jackets, many of them on a familiar basis with the restaurant's owners.

"When lunch starts we do whatever our staff needs us to do to support them," she said.

After years working for other people, the Rossis' dream-come-true represents a reaching out to Western New York, a place they say trumps Manhattan to raise kids and start new business.

"The support you get, people want you to succeed up here," Jenny said. "It's not feasible in Manhattan — you can't do it for any kind of reasonable startup. We realized together we could probably do the whole thing," Jenny said of their enterprise also including a two-year exclusive catering contract with Gratwick Hall banquet facility in North Tonawanda.

Also, just about every one of the 25 employees already working at City Grill were retained after the pair took ownership. The Rossis hope some of the current staff can be entrusted with management positions allowing them to spend more time in Niagara County as business grows.

"People have a great work ethic here because they don't take things for granted," Scott said of his help. "It's difficult to get people motivated when they grew up with a silver spoon in their mouth."

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PHOTOGRAPHERBUFFALO, N.Y. - Jenny and Scott Rossi took over the City Grille last November, Thursday, April 23, 2009.