



# Scaling Up

*Utah's Fine Dining Options are Bringing It All to the Table*

By Jamie Huish Stum

**I**t's 6 p.m. at upscale Park City eatery Jean Louis. Penguin-suited waiters are bustling to seat the first customers and check the specials. Renowned chef Jean Louis Montecot is poised at the entrance greeting guests as they arrive. He knows many of them by name, and asks about children and business in a flourishing French accent. By 8 p.m., the house is nearly full and the show is underway.

A similar scene is repeated daily across the growing upscale segment of Utah's restaurant industry. The state's restaurant business brings in \$2.7 billion annually and employs 74,000 people, says Melva Sine, president and CEO of the Utah Restaurant Association. Utah has the fourth fastest growing restaurant industry in the nation and Sine anticipates this year's growth rate to be about 5 percent, evident in more restaurant openings, more employees added and higher sales figures. Most notably, significant growth can be seen in the fine dining sector; officials from City Creek Center announced the mall will host at least two upscale dining options and several pricey national chains have recently taken a closer look at Utah.



"We're seeing income figures rise and everything about the quality of life in Utah improving, so we've reached a potential that some of these names will say, 'We can go in and invest in that community,'" Sine says.

Originally marketed as a celebration

## Big Name or Local Flavor

In Utah, only 12 percent of the restaurants are classified as "fine dining," which is then split between pricey chains and independents. Both segments have their strengths, Sine says. For national chains,

franchise in the chain, says Robbins. Likewise, The Cheesecake Factory experienced its busiest opening ever last November at its first Utah store, located at Fashion Place Mall in Murray.

Others aren't as enthusiastic about chains.

"Going out to eat should be exciting and you should be wowed by what's put in front of you. Independents can do a better job of that than chains," says Ian Campbell, general manager of Log Haven restaurant. "We're rooted here in the Utah soil, we have soul, we are a place you can have an experience you can't get anywhere else."

Supported by ski season business and the Sundance Film Festival, many independents have found success restaurateering in Park City. Local favorite Café Terigo is in its 20th year of business, a time during which owner Debbie Axtell says restaurants have gotten better every year. "Twenty years ago, you used to get three good months a year and everyone closed for the summer. Now, Park City has become a year-round destination. Some of our summer months are almost as busy as our winter months." The increase has led to better food with better service, she says.

Café Terigo, like many Park City eateries, has picked up its fair share of the town's star quality. When Charles Gibson of ABC World News mentioned on air that his favorite dessert was bread pudding from Café Terigo, sales skyrocketed. A recent best-seller has been homemade pasta filled with herbed cheese.

The restaurant is always full in the winter, says Axtell. Her son opened Purple Sage on Main Street two doors down from Café Terigo, but she says they never have to compete. "He's in the same situation we are; he gets busier every year."

## Culinary Craze

Remember a few years ago, no matter what you ordered, you'd always get that tiny portion of food? Or when every item on the menu listed an accompanying wine? While small plate dining and wine pairings are on their way out, dining experts say keeping up with gourmet trends are what sets an upscale eatery apart.

Leanings in today's food scene



Photo by Ryan Taylor

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**-Tom Guinney, Gastronomy, Inc.**

destination, upscale restaurants were for someone who wanted to soak in the atmosphere, the food and the service, says Sine. But the market needed a more regular customer base.

"Fine dining cannot survive characterized solely on special occasions alone. It needs to meet the daily needs of our local customers," says Tom Guinney, owner of local restaurant group Gastronomy, Inc.

At a dinner house like The New Yorker, special occasion dining represents between 10 percent and 20 percent of the restaurant's business, while the "impress the client" meal makes up about 60 percent, says Will Pliler, executive chef of The New Yorker. Business and celebration meals guarantee fine dining a secure niche in downtowns and resorts, making Salt Lake and Park City some of the latest stops on the gourmand's map.

there's buying power for products and services. Independents bring local flair, creative menus and a unique atmosphere that attracts people with a passion for exceptional food.

"It's for someone who wants to experience great food and spend some time doing it enjoying the ambiance. They're not just trying to quench their appetites, they're trying to learn about different foods or spices," Sine says.

Steak house chain Ruth's Chris came to downtown Salt Lake in 2006 and has since opened an additional location in Park City. Since the first day of opening, general manager Mark Robbins says the restaurant has been well received in Utah.

"Most of our guests have dined in a Ruth's Chris before and want to duplicate that great experience in their hometown. We're about a year and a half into it and they're still coming every night."

The location is the sixth busiest



## Service, The Old-fashioned Way

"You have the real restaurants and you have somewhere just to fill your stomach," says Chef Jean Louis Montecot. His Park City restaurant, Jean Louis, is the former. With deep round booths, eccentric drop lighting and jazz playing in the background, the eatery sets its stage for high service and delectable cuisine. Montecot believes in service akin to European restaurants of old where the chef was always on hand mingling with customers and ensuring the meal was up to par. Both owner and chef, Montecot cooks often, and spends the remainder of his time among his guests.

"People from Salt Lake City and Provo come to see me – that's a long drive. I have to make it worth it for them. If someone asks for me and I'm not here, it's a failure for me," he says.

Montecot takes handwritten notes on his customers' likes and dislikes and is always on the lookout for feedback. "I listen to the customers and it hurts sometimes. But in the end, I know it will be better for the restaurant."

The chef starts each day at 7 a.m., eating crepes for breakfast. He's at the restaurant by 10 a.m. and at 5 p.m., "Showtime," he says. Hopping between tables, flirting with customers and enjoying a glass of wine are all part of the business to him.

Opening his first restaurant in his native France at the age of 17, Montecot has worked all over the world, serving the likes of Jackie Kennedy Onassis and Frank Sinatra. He came to Utah to visit a friend 12 years ago and wound up staying, working at Sundance Resort, Inn on the Creek and the Goldener Hirsch before setting up his own shop. "Utah came at the right time in my life," he says.

The menu selections at Jean Louis reflect Montecot's world travels. Regarding an ahi tuna dish with tempura Asian green beans and chocolate soufflé, "It's easy," he says, with a wink.



Photos by Ryan Taylor

include a movement toward organic and local products, says Campbell. "If you can get product at the local level, it will be fresher and will help your local economy. Especially for the independent operator, that can be the niche market. They can say, 'I'm offering buffalo,' or other items you won't see on a chain menu."

Delicious casual food is also in, says Guinney. For example, an upscale location might feature meatloaf made with gourmet spices and specialty meats. Over-the-top presentation has gone away because the customer doesn't want to pay for it, he says. Formal dress codes have also declined a bit in many establishments; however, there will always be a standard. "If you let it go too far in that direction and don't provide the opportunity for your clientele to have fun by dressing up, you've eliminated a group of customers," Guinney says.

Global dishes are also becoming mainstream, especially among a younger crowd.

"If you ask many people their five favorite types of food, sushi would be in many of them, especially for young people," says Christopher Watkins, owner of Watkins Restaurant Group. "If young people are catching onto it, then it's not just a fad."

Sometimes, it's just about giving the customer what they love, regardless of trends. "We are 20 years behind because we will include soup and salad with our entrees, but our clam chowder is one of the major backbones of the seafood division," says Guinney. "If you put that on the menu for \$4 or \$5, we would cut consumption of that product in half and people would say, 'The fish dinner was good but something was missing.'"

### An Upscale Trek

Though things are "coming up roses" for now, Sine says that doesn't mean the industry doesn't have its down days. More than 35 percent of restaurants go out of business in the first five years of operation and Utah's businesses aren't immune. Local restaurant enterprise The Latitude Group, thought to be a major industry player, recently went off the radar with owner Gene Kwon facing numerous lawsuits. Experts say market research plays a key role in an establishment's



success, backed by solid management and day-to-day operational structure.

"It becomes a goal of [homegrown chains] to provide a whole range of cuisines and try to niche market in several places. That can be done, but you have to do the research. Latitude tried to. Either a company survives or they don't and usually it's [because of] the individual management of the company," Sine says.

Utah's stringent liquor laws have also created a hospitality hurdle not found in other urban markets. "Typically in Salt Lake, the check average is lower due to less purchasing of wine and liquor and that's hard. That's where a lot of restaurants can make it or break it in the high end," Campbell says. Alcohol can account for half or all of an upscale restaurant's profits, agrees Montecot.

The state's low unemployment rate continues to be a challenge for upscale eateries, which are always a labor-intensive operation. Campbell says restaurateurs have to be more creative in hiring, perhaps choosing candidates with less experience and grooming them to specifications. Upscale restaurants also survive rough times by focusing on retention. Creating loyalty has solved many problems in upper level positions, experts say. "Our top server has been here since the day we opened. In fact, I don't think our top 10 servers have rotated in 10 or 15 years," says Mary Runolfson, event director at La Caille.

Pricing can also be a major deterrent for potential customers, experts say. With an average meal for two without alcohol costing about \$100 at many upscale, most Utahns can't afford to eat at such spendy establishments every weekend. High end eateries insist there's a reason behind the numbers. Fine china, more servers and thought-inspired dishes are



Chepe Trejo, the executive sushi chef at Mikado in Cottonwood.

all factored into the price.

"It's no secret that traditional Utah diners are fairly frugal, and for them to pay \$35 a steak, they find that hard to swallow, or at least some of them do. But we're putting six ounces of local grass-fed beef on a plate, which is a lot more expensive than going to Sizzler and eating what they're serving," Campbell says.

Others refute the notion that all Utah diners are cheap. The area has many sophisticated diners who dine out several times a week and are well-traveled, says Robbins. People are more and more willing to fork over the money if the ingredients and products are local and of the highest quality – a Utah bison tenderloin priced at \$36 is one of Log Haven's most popular dishes.

"Utahns are willing to pay for it if it's good. They know quality and expect it. You can't pull the wool over people's eyes; they'll see through that," Watkins says.

## Cooks in the Kitchen

Behind every successful restaurant owner

is a fabulous chef, creating, taste-testing and managing. Experts say that role has become even more pivotal to the success of an upscale restaurant in recent years.

"The chef is the spine that holds everything together," Sine says. "It's their creativity in terms of menus and buying. In an individual operation, the chef is the key."

A chef can actually become the soul of a place, says Watkins. Especially in specialized industries like sushi, customers will develop a loyalty just to a chef.

"People will come back for the personality and will sit in front of the same chef at the sushi bar. We have people who come in three or four times a week because they have developed a rapport with them," Watkins says.

Being a chef is like being an artist, says Montecot. "It's in your blood or it's not." When creating a dish,

Montecot says it takes three to four weeks of hard work to perfect a menu-worthy item.

Utah's head chefs are required to constantly stay in tune with industry trends, frequently traveling to national food centers like New York, Chicago and Seattle to gather ideas. They also read cookbooks and food journals and check in on local competitors.

Executive chef of The New Yorker Will Pliler says he'll head to San Francisco or Las Vegas for quick inspiration. "I'll see something on the menu and say, 'This is a really great idea, but I can make it better. I'll use this ingredient and change the dressing and add something.'"

The quality of local chefs is also improving in Utah, putting the restaurants on the national scene as well, he says. "I think we have enough great restaurants to stand up to any major metropolitan area in the U.S. We have a great group of talented chefs and we're pretty current, more so now than ever before." **UB**