

food



Panko crumbs turn a quick pan-sautéed fish from good to great.

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LEFT: Executive chef Greg Alauzen looks over an order during the new restaurant's "soft opening" last week.

FAR LEFT: The sleek, elegant interior of the restaurant Eleven features many booths and banquettes. The Strip District spot is the 11th restaurant for the big Burrito group.

Innovative American cuisine rules the menu in the dining rooms. Adventurers and traditionalists will tuck into dry-aged New York strip steaks, Copper River salmon or seafood chowder. Seekers of comfort food will murmur over Amish country chicken, gnocchi and old country spaghetti.

Those with a sense of humor will smile over tongue-in-cheek extras such as pierogi, Moon Pies and a riff on green bean casserole.

Getting to this point wasn't easy.

Flashback

MAY 28. Fourteen days to go before the restaurant, at 1150 Smallman St., the 11th eatery for the big Burrito Restaurant Group, has its official opening. Trucks block the street. You can't walk on the sidewalk for the boards, cement blocks and wooden horses. You can't hear for the guys with the bandsaws. Short of a miracle or magic wand, you can't imagine this restaurant being open in two weeks. But plastic-wrapped furniture is in the building, the kitchen staff is making lunch and the window boxes are planted with hot pink impatiens. It's crunch time.

Food and beverage director Jack Paladino barks orders to the nearest of the 40 workers within earshot. "Know what I need desperately?" he shouts over the noise of construction. "I need a team to move those banquettes into place."

In the next few days, the curvy booths are installed, the windows finished and their glass washed. The granite bar is polished, and the lighted panels surrounding it are installed. Late-night lighting and sound checks are calibrated and refined.

Back in the kitchen, crates, sacks and plastic sheets are crammed into corners. Some 300 boxes of cookware, a generous gift from All-Clad Metalcrafters, need to be unwrapped, washed and hung on pot racks, stacked on shelves. That job alone will take a couple of days.

Amid the chaos, steam rises from cauldrons and cutlets hiss on the grills. Chefs and cooks bend over counters prepping and cooking. For three days, the kitchen (the back of the house) will cook for the waitstaff (the front of the house) to train. Half the waitstaff serves; the other half eats. Then they switch.

eleven adds it all up

NEW STRIP DISTRICT RESTAURANT OPENS TOMORROW

By Marlene Parrish
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

They did it. It works. Tomorrow the restaurant Eleven celebrates its grand opening. Handmade tables by Jim Ladner gleam. Thirty-one fabrics coordinate with 11 colors of paint. The servers are handsome in their outfits, and service is getting smoother every day. Creative food coming out of the kitchen turns heads.

You may want to go early to gawk and point. If you plan pre-dinner libation in the bar-lounge, you may not want to leave. Stave off hunger pangs with a trio of marinated hard-boiled eggs — Asian, turmeric and your Granny's beet — sprinkled with smoked salt.

The Making of a Restaurant

Last in a series.

Post-Gazette staff writer Marlene Parrish has followed Eleven since it was a gleam in the eye of the big Burrito Restaurant Group. Over four months, readers have seen a location selected, chefs hired and the menu planned. After two hectic, nail-biting weeks of mock service, Eleven is ready to open tomorrow.

Although the pressure is intense, executive chef Greg Alauzen, in jeans, open-neck shirt and freshly moussed, is Mr. Cool. "We'll be ready," he smiles. "We have a great staff."

Does he ever.

- Executive sous chef Derek Stevens, lately of the Duquesne Club, is scraping the marrow bones that will accompany the 22-ounce bison ribeye steak. "That entree is guaranteed to be the city's most coveted doggie-bag," he says.
- Sous chef Sean Kelly, Alauzen's former sous chef at the Steelhead Grill, is trimming out saddles of Elysian Fields lamb. "The loin and tenderloins will be seared and roasted and served with buttermilk polenta and a pan sauce made from the roasted ribs," he says.
- Chef Dan Mosedale, not long gone from Original Fish Market, is bent over a prime beef tenderloin, cutting portions and cracking wise to his mates. The steaks will be served with Maytag blue cheese bread pudding.
- Chef Eben Copple, after a stint as chef de cuisine at Lidia's Pittsburgh, is up to his elbows making court bouillon. "I'm the fish guy today," he says. "I work other stations as needed."

When every dessert is presented, nobody will call in sick. Pastry chef Barbara Ferguson, working in her climate-controlled pastry kitchen, has created a drop-dead luscious dessert menu.

Eleven's version of shrimp cocktail features shrimp served in a tall shot glass with clear cocktail sauce and a lime garnish.

Imagine this: Coffee and Doughnuts, a milk chocolate mocha shake with three small doughnuts fried to order; Buttermilk Panna Cotta with mint and pistachio pesto and strawberry consomme; Hot Chocolate Cake with spicy ginger ice cream, ginger confit, cocoa nib crisp and dark chocolate sauce.



"I use only El Rey chocolate," she says as she shows off her new chocolate tempering machine.

The pastry kitchen houses the bakery, where all breads, baguettes and focaccia are made. Cappuccino is made there, too, ensuring that all orders are made by the same trained person and not left to random staff.

Mock Service

JUNE 2. With nine days to go, mock service begins. Office staff, purveyors, construction workers and friends are guests of the restaurant. They order off the menu, giving the kitchen its first taste of the pace in this space.

On June 2, only 50 or 60 guests are invited. Last Thursday, the census rose to 75. On Friday, the tasting menu was introduced and the numbers bump up again.

The Chef's Table, a reservation-only six-top in the kitchen, is added to the mix. By the weekend, all stops were out and 200 covers are served both days.

Practice is over. The dumpster is gone. It's show time.

JUNE 7. Eleven is ready for its soft opening, restaurant-speak for the day Eleven opened its doors to the public without advertising. Word of mouth spreads the news. For the next four days, who shows up, shows up.

JUNE 11: Eleven celebrates its grand opening.

Eleven Contemporary Kitchen, 1150 Smallman St., Strip District, will be open 5 to 11 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays, 5 to midnight Fridays and Saturdays. Reservations suggested. Call 412-201-5656 or go online at www.bigBurrito.com.

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