

DINING

Dinner is served at Cullen's Upscale American Grille

By JENNIFER NORRIS
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Walking into Cullen's front entrance feels more like walking into a five star luxury hotel than a restaurant.

The newest fine dining experience in the Clear Lake area, Cullen's Upscale American Grille, is the 37,000-square-foot architectural brainchild of retail developer Kevin Munz, with some help from architects Mike Treadway and Associates.

It's more than a restaurant, more than a bar, more than a live music venue. It's currently in the process of becoming a banquet and reception facility, with eight private rooms that can seat as many as 50 guests, plus an expansive ballroom that has room for 200.

The kitchen's shining stainless steel counters are visible from the main dining room, where a staff of about 100 are kept busy. Munz said that number will grow to about 150 as the banquet facilities and Cullen's Live come online. The restaurant boasts its own pastry chef, baker and Munz's highly-prized executive chef, who learned his trade in one of Houston's elite kitchens.

Executive Chef Paul Lewis was hired away from Quattro, the Four Season's Hotel's elegant restaurant, where Lewis said he cooked for nine

years.

Lewis said at Cullen's, he and his staff make the sausage and pepperoni themselves, cooking, seasoning, stuffing and hanging the meat to dry in the restaurant's cooler. Lewis also directs the aging of the beef, both dry-aged and wet-aged, which is rubbed with Lewis' special spices and made into the restaurant's steaks.

"We're not trying to be a steakhouse," Munz said, "But our steaks can compete with any steakhouse in the area."

Not impressed? Munz didn't stop there. He also built an exclusive dining room, literally suspended above the main dining area, where parties who reserve will receive a private tour of the kitchen led by the executive chef, individualized attention from staff and a large lounge area filled with couches, where party members can enjoy drinks and appetizers before their meal.

And the price to reserve the room dubbed Macy's Table? Nothing, Munz said, guests are merely required to spend a minimum of \$1,500.

That may seem like a lot for a dining area that can only accommodate 12 people, but Munz said he's already had reservation requests for Macy's Table from men who plan to propose marriage in the elite room, proving that even two people can meet the



Photo by JENNIFER NORRIS/The Citizen

Cullen's Executive Chef Paul Lewis weighs one of the thick steaks he has just finished cutting.

spending requirement. The main dining room has been open for dinner since mid-March, and Munz said he hopes to spread that out to include lunch in the near future. He's only waited on serving lunch, Munz said, because he wanted to perfect the dinner menu.

Whether the menu is perfected or not, the dining area is a wonder to

behold. An elegant but modern mood rules the room, where soft lighting illuminates the dark, wide, suede-covered chairs and the high-backed "booths," which look more like swooping pieces of art than functional furniture.

Finishing touches are also still in the works for the patio area adjacent to the dining room, but that didn't

stop a group from reserving the unfinished patio for an event last weekend, Munz said.

In fact, reservations are nearly essential for a spot at Cullen's, Munz said, even in the regular dining room, which seats 250.

"We've had waits [on the weekends] of an hour, hour and a half," Munz said. "And we've had people

walk away, but that's just how much business we have."

Also under construction, is the third component of Cullen's, called Cullen's Live, a roomy, trendy bar, stage area and dance floor, scheduled to open in August, where Munz wants local and even more well-known artists to perform on weekends. Cullen's Live's second floor will be a large veranda-type area, filled with bar stools, where patrons can watch the action below over the glass railings.

But with all of the elegance and exquisite attention to detail, one has to wonder about the menu prices.

"People think we're expensive, but we're really not expensive," Lewis said, as Pastry Chef Ashley Coates nodded in agreement.

In fact, with appetizers starting at \$8 and main entrees ranging from \$18 to \$45, Cullen's is not any more pricey than other fine dining restaurants in the Bay Area.

So now we need to know - is the food good?

While I didn't get a chance to taste any of the steaks that Lewis had built up, I was invited to sample a dessert called Strawberry Symposium, a concoction of strawberry cheesecake, fresh strawberries and sorbet.

And after that taste alone, I'll waste no time in getting back to Cullen's for a full dinner.

Hamburger America: Tookies among top 100 burger joints

By MARY ALYS CHERRY
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Tookies has long had a place in the hearts and tastebuds of Bay Area residents.

Now its not just Seabrook's favorite hamburger joint, it's been named one of 100 Great Burger Joints -- America's best.

The announcement came with the publication of a new book, *Hamburger America -- One Man's*

Cross Country Odyssey to Find the Best Burgers in the Nation by George Motz.

Seabrook Mayor Robin Riley also proudly announced it last week during his State of the City Address at a luncheon at Bailey's.

Motz has traveled across the country in search of the best burger joints -- those that have survived outside the fast-food burger surge -- and has documented the rich histories and "local color" be-

hind them.

MANY IN TEXAS

The book features 100 of America's best mom 'n pop restaurants, roadhouses, diners and the favorites of college towns.

Nine are in California and eight in Texas -- the most for any of the states. It's also a good take-along item if you're going traveling this summer.

Tookies, on Highway 146 just south of NASA Parkway, was opened in 1975 by Jim Spears, who is still flipping burgers three decades later.

Rick Kogan of the *Chicago Tribune* calls Motz "nuts."

"Who is his right mind would spend years traveling the country, clogging his arteries, parting with his hard-earned money, suffering culinary indignities and belt busting insults, all in pursuit of the perfect burger."

Motz says after following two recommendations to try Tookies, he did.

HIS FAVORITE

"Tookies," he writes, serves a few unique burgers, but it's the Squealer that'll have you planning your next

trip back to Seabrook. I'd drive a hundred miles to eat a burger at this Texas roadhouse, the home of the Squealer."

What's a squealer?

"Imagine fresh ground beef mixed with fresh ground bacon, pattied, griddled and placed on a bun. The taste is expectedly sublime and ups the ante on the traditional bacon cheeseburger," Motz writes.

He thinks food writer John T. Edge described the unique burger creation best when he told Motz, "If a mule is the result of a donkey mating with a horse, then Tookie's Squealer is a kissing cousin from a

similar marriage of a pig to a cow."

ONION RINGS POPULAR

Motz also discovered another Tookies favorite, to the tune of almost 300 orders a day.

"Another must-eat at Tookie's are the amazing lightly battered and fried onion rings." You knew that, too.

Motz got one thing wrong -- he read the road sign wrong. He calls NASA Parkway -- formerly NASA Road 1 -- "a road awkwardly named NASA 1 Road."

At least, he got his burgers right.

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The seminars will provide an opportunity to learn detailed information about the program and the areas of certification offered.

Seminar Time and Date

Thursday	April 29, 2008	7:00 pm
Saturday	May 3, 2008	10:00 am

All seminars will be conducted at the Pasadena ISD Administration Building, located at 1515 Cherrybrook Lane in Pasadena, Texas 77502.

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