

EVENT PROFILE: Nicollet Island
Transformed for Starry Night Fundraiser

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holiday planning

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GREAT CATERING TIPS
DÉCOR TRENDS
FRESH GIFT IDEAS

A poached, chocolate-covered seckel pear by Lancer Catering's corporate chef Scott Tobin makes for a festive dessert. PAGE 36

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At Saffron Restaurant & Lounge, business groups have the option of a custom-designed chef's tasting menu.

Downtown Dining

NEW RESTAURANTS FOR BUSINESS MEETINGS.

BY CARLA WALDEMAR

WHETHER YOU'RE PLANNING LUNCH WITH A CLIENT or a dinner meeting with a group, here are some new high-profile downtown Minneapolis dining spots to consider. Quiet surroundings, professional service and food that is designed to intrigue with updates on classic fare make these venues ideal for business meals.

RETRO UPDATE

Harry's Food & Cocktails (500 Washington Ave. S.) is a culinary mecca for those who decay, "They don't make 'em like they used to." Well, yes, they do. Harry's, the buttoned-up new tenant in the former splashy Nochee space, has replaced the former nightclub atmosphere with a setting that is perfect for business entertaining.

Under the words "Harry's Kitchen" spelled out above the open kitchen (the place is named for the owner's grandfather, who spent a lifetime cooking in St. Paul hotels), stands the best reason to walk in here: Chef Steven Brown. The genius behind the now-shuttered Restaurant Levain, Brown has created a menu of classic American dishes taken up a piquant notch or two. For a light lunch with an out-of-town guest, consider the sandwich honoring our state's iconic walleye or the Boys of Summer salad. Entrées range from steak to old-fashioned pot roast to tuna.

Huge booths allow room for spreading spreadsheets; in fact, "there's a round booth for six that facilitates the eye contact so valued during business meals," notes Brown, who invites diners to pre-order if they require speedier delivery.

>> 612.344.7000 / www.harrysfood.com

NOT YOUR FATHER'S NORMANDY

Remember the Normandy Inn (405 S. Eighth St.) and its SRO Normandy Kitchen? Your dad will. He likely entertained business guests galore there. The good news is, the recently re-opened Normandy Inn, undertaken by the founder's grandson almost as a civic mission, features some of the same comfort food in its new **Landmark Grill**.

The room isn't a designer showcase. Instead, the spotlight is on its guests, seated at tables and booths where conversing comes easily, and overseen by GM Michael Morse, whom many a diner will remember from the days he manned the door at Café Un Deux Trois. "It's like having guests in my house," he says. "We're willing to do anything. We're small enough that we can take good care of people."

Diners of a certain age may recall the Normandy Kitchen's signature specialty, hot popovers delivered to your table. They're back, along with other classics like Waldorf salad, shrimp cocktail, calves' liver and onions, chicken pot pie and a veal-and-spinach meatloaf served with garlic mashed potatoes and mushroom gravy. They're joined by the classics of today: a simple roast chicken, steak frites, crab cakes. The café serves breakfast, too.

>> 612.455.1204

EAST MEETS WEST

Saffron Restaurant & Lounge (123 N. Third St.) recently opened in the former Jazzmine's Warehouse District space. Beneath a lofty industrial ceiling, walls of claret red shimmer amid ornamental pillars, which convey an air of subdued sophistication. And the menu follows through. It's the handiwork of talented Palestinian chef and owner Sameh Wadi, who has taken beloved staples of the Middle East and finetuned them for Minnesota palates.

"I give business groups the options of a custom-designed chef's tasting menu, which offers them the ability to taste things they might not ordinarily try, to step out of the box," says Wadi. "It gets the conversation flowing."

As you're seated, a complimentary crock of hummus speeds to your table to sate you while you peruse a list divided into small plates, mezzes and entrees. The small plates can compose a tapas-style meal—think slow-braised beef ravioli with eggplant and harissa; a duo of veal and tuna carpaccios in brown butter vinaigrette; or scallops sautéed with clams, artichokes and saffron.

Mezzes—medium-sized plates that can double as modest entrees—range from blue crab salad to an elegant foie gras with pistachios and rose-petal jelly. Full-blown entrees include duck breast with sweet potato couscous; a salmon-and-clam tangine (aromatic Moroccan stew); and strip loin with a smoked-potato gratin, oyster mushrooms and fondue of taleggio cheese.

>> 612.746.5533 / www.saffronmpls.com