

ST. LOUIS



BILL GREENBLATT/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

# Taste of two cities

## A FLAIR FOR MEXICAN IN THE HOT SPOTS OF A CHANGING PILSEN

BY KEITH O'BRIEN | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CHICAGO — Years ago, working late at her diner, where the huevos con chorizo are served up cheap, spicy, and delicious, Martha Solis took out the trash and found a dead man in the alley. He had been shot.

"I was in shock for two days," says Solis, 66, the owner of the Parkview Restaurant & Grill in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood for the last 16 years.

Solis, a moon-faced and jolly native of Ecuador, shakes her head at the memory. Then, with a wave of her spatula, she leaves her customers sitting around the Formica counter at the Parkview and returns to the eggs cooking on the grill.

Crime is still part of life here in Pilsen, one of Chicago's largest Mexican neighborhoods. To recognize that, one need look no further than the small, blue blinking lights suspended above some intersections near Pilsen's main artery, 18th Street. There are surveillance cameras up there and police are watching.

But Pilsen, nestled amid the interstate highways a few miles southwest of downtown, is changing — and fast. Condo developers are moving in. Rents are going up, according to a recent study by DePaul University, and some working-class people are moving out.

This historic port-of-entry immigrant community — home first to Czechs, then to other Eastern Europeans, then to Mexicans — has finally been discov-

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At Red Moon in St. Louis, top, the French-Asian cuisine includes togarishi spiced ahi tuna, below. Wild boar ravioli is among the Italian-Northern California fare at Eleven Eleven Mississippi.



## AN URBAN RENEWAL AND A NEW WAVE OF CHIC EATERIES

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ST. LOUIS — I wasn't supposed to like it.

Not enough variety. Mediocre quality, at best. Certainly not sophisticated enough. And that from friends who grew up here. Say again, they wanted to know, why I was traveling from Chicago, a city with a rich culinary resume, to check out the St. Louis dining scene?

After all, they had left St. Louis behind a decade or so ago in search of post-college, twentysomething adventures. And they were not alone.

The US Census Bureau estimates the city's population in 2003 was 332,223, down 4.6 percent from 2000. From 1990 to 2000, the population shrank by 12.2 percent, falling to well under half of its high point of 856,796 in 1950. (The city's image had shrunk, too. Hollywood director John Carpenter, searching for a believable postapocalyptic setting for his 1981 science fiction thriller, "Escape from New York," chose St. Louis.)

But rather than retreat into a self-pitying funk, something remarkable has happened in St. Louis: A city and its people mobilized and took action. Noting a surplus of commercial and industrial buildings and the infrastructure for contemporary loft-living developments, the Missouri Legislature in 1998 enacted legislation that provided a 25 percent tax credit for the

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CHICAGO



PHOTOS BY JOE TABACCA/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Restaurante Nuevo Leon, which started as a taco stand in 1962, and an 18th Street laundromat, where Carla Lee Castillo, 4, graces the window, remain fixtures in Pilsen.



# Foodie's delight: a spin-off and more

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rehabilitation of historic buildings in downtown St. Louis.

That, coupled with the city's 1999 commitment of \$1.2 billion in mixed public and private money for downtown improvements, "galvanized the city," according to Rollin Stanley, the city's director of planning and urban design, encouraging local entrepreneurial and financial investment, an important first step toward civic revival. "The results were nearly immediate," he said.

Consequently, the St. Louis that frightened moviegoers in the '80s and that prompted my friends' departures in the early '90s scarcely resembles the St. Louis of today. The \$1.2 billion originally earmarked for improvements by the city has ballooned to \$4 billion, resulting in widespread and dramatic change. Since 2000, more than 6,600 apartments and condominiums have been built or are in the planning stages, and thousands more people are projected to live downtown by 2008.

Those figures have attracted the attention of restaurateurs nationwide, many wishing to find new outlets to showcase their culinary talents before an ever-more sophisticated and expanding client base. "I'm seeing far more of my clientele coming from New York and Chicago," said Steve Komorek, owner of the city's highly acclaimed Trattoria Marcella. "This, plus the influx of young professionals living in the city — diners are open to trying new items, they're requesting tasting menus, and exploring new things."

In the past two years, more than five dozen restaurants have opened in the city, 32 of them downtown. Collectively, it has created an energetic climate that offers a variety of appealing dining options. This reflects the changing downtown demographic. "Today, 37 percent of St. Louis's population is in their 50s and 26 percent is in their 20s," said Stanley. "This translates into restaurants that are busy both between 6 and 9 p.m., and then again from 11 until midnight or 1 a.m. It provides unprecedented growth opportunities."

Yes, there are growing variety and many quality offerings, but the restaurant scene doesn't come close to matching the quantity and



PHOTOS BY BILL GREENBLATT/GETTY IMAGES/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Lunchtime at Eleven Eleven Mississippi, a former shoe factory with an open kitchen, above, and the Sydney Street Cafe, which offers contemporary American food in Benton Park.

diversity of Chicago's. "There's no real comparison," said chef and restaurant owner Eddie Neill, a 15-year veteran of the St. Louis restaurant scene, who also spent considerable time living and working in Chicago. "Population density is so high in Chicago, it's a completely different animal."

Even so, St. Louis has made remarkable progress, and a recent visit proved that even the most demanding foodies will find things to celebrate. "The quality of the food here is very, very good, prepared by chefs who are well trained and creative," noted Neill. "And it's only getting better."

Here is a sampling of some of the city's best venues:

### Red Moon

I have long been a fan of Jerry Kleiner's Chicago restaurant triumvirate, Marché, Opera, and Red Light, and was only too eager to visit his new St. Louis venture, Red Moon. The verdict: In every way, Red Moon matches up favorably with its Chicago siblings. The interior is hip, vibrant, and chic, as sophisticated as any big city stop. The French-Asian cuisine is impeccably presented by a staff that is knowledgeable and friend-



ly, and the atmosphere is vibrant yet cozy. Co-owner Steve Friedlander raves about the city's progressive clientele. "Considering the size of the community, it's a sophisticated food crowd that responds positively to new and different ideas."

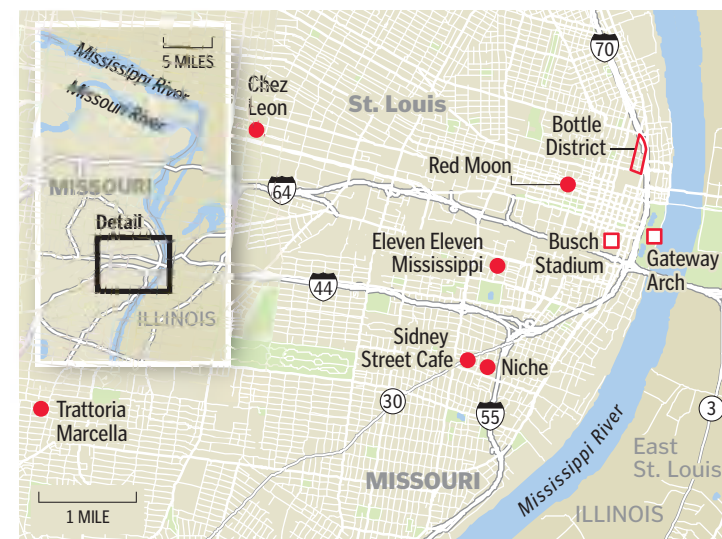
1500 St. Charles St.  
314-436-9700  
redmoon-stl.com  
Monday-Thursday 5-10 p.m.,  
Friday-Saturday till midnight.  
Entrees \$13-\$29.

### Chez Leon

Featured on the Food Network

as one of the nation's top prix fixe restaurants and recognized by Bon Appetit as one of the nation's "great neighborhood restaurants," Chez Leon has been wowing patrons with its savory and traditional French bistro fare from a Central West End storefront that more closely resembles a Parisian boîte. Executive chef Eric Brenner is thrilled by the city's elevated dining palate. "People are more educated and their expectations are higher," he said. "The quality has got to be there, and the food must be interesting." It is a challenge that Brenner consistently meets and exceeds; he was named the city's 2004 chef of the year by Sauce magazine readers.

4580 Laclède Ave.  
314-361-1589  
chezleon.com  
Tuesday-Thursday 5:30-



SOURCE: ESRI, TeleAtlas

JOAN McLAUGHLIN/GLOBE STAFF

10 p.m., Friday-Saturday till 11, Sunday 5-9. Entrees a la carte \$22-\$36, three-course prix fixe dinner \$35.

### Eleven Eleven Mississippi

This self-proclaimed "Wine Country Bistro" in the city's historic Lafayette Square neighborhood places equal emphasis on its fresh, innovative Italian-Northern California fare and its impressive, generous wine list, earning rave reviews from a faithful following. The vibrant, open space (formerly a shoe factory) features a frenetic, open kitchen, affording guests an intimate look at the production process. Those with sweet teeth are well-advised to try the gooey butter cake, a \$4.95 local specialty that is served — appropriately — with a cold glass of milk.

1111 Mississippi Ave.  
314-241-9999  
1111-m.com  
Monday-Thursday 11 a.m.-  
10 p.m., Friday till midnight, Saturday 5 p.m.-2 a.m. Entrees \$14.95-\$23.95.

### Niche

This 40-seat Benton Park newcomer serves up New American dishes in a cozy, unpretentious bistro-like atmosphere. Its constantly changing menu ensures contemporary, fresh selections, and its very popular \$35 three-course menu keeps the crowds loyal and growing. Save room for dessert; the pastry chef doles out scrumptious chocolate and homemade ice cream creations.

1831 Sidney St.  
314-773-7755  
nichestlouis.com  
Tuesday-Thursday 5:30-9 p.m.,  
Friday-Saturday till 10; Veruca at Niche dessert and wine bar, Friday-Saturday 11-1:30 a.m. Entrees \$18-\$23, three-course prix fixe dinner \$35.

### Sidney Street Cafe

Rated tops in both popularity and quality in the 2006 Zagat sur-

vey, Sidney Street Cafe offers its guests an indulgent and polished fine dining experience, with innovative contemporary American dishes served in a smart, yet romantic Benton Park space. It has developed a loyal following among both couples and expense-account types, each attracted to the restaurant's top-quality product and dotting customer service. Though the restaurant falls on the expensive side for St. Louis venues, you can still eat comfortably for under \$50 a person (drinks, taxes, and tip excluded). By Chicago standards, that is considered a great find.

2000 Sidney St.  
314-771-5777  
sidneystreetcafe.com  
Tuesday-Thursday 5-9:30 p.m.,  
Friday-Saturday till 10:30.  
Expensive.

### Trattoria Marcella

A perennial St. Louis favorite that predates the city's late '90s revival, Trattoria Marcella has been packing in locals (and now tourists) since 1995 with flavorful, rustic Italian dishes served up at reasonable prices. Chef-owner Steve Komorek descends from nearly a century of restaurateurs, and his food passion carries over into every aspect of his patrons' dining experience. "We work hand-in-hand with local farmers, using locally grown lamb, pigs, and produce, ensuring our diners are getting the freshest ingredients," he said. Komorek's dedication continues to pay off. "We used to be just local, but I now see regular customers from Chicago and New York." Good news spreads fast. Call ahead for reservations.

3600 Watson Road  
314-352-7706  
trattoriamarcella.com  
Tuesday-Thursday 5-10 p.m.,  
Friday-Saturday till 11. Entrees \$12.99-\$17.50.

Jerry Soverinsky, a writer in Chicago, can be reached at jerrysov@sbcglobal.net.