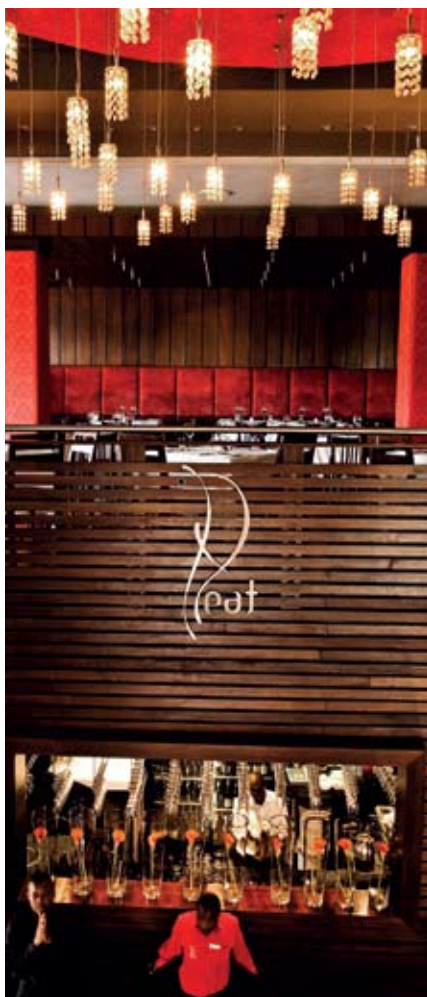


Hot stuff

Heat Grill Room is the real deal type of steakhouse, and this is what keeps Pretoria diners returning for more.

By Anna Trapido



PRETORIA'S HEAT GRILL ROOM SERVES UP A DELICIOUS DIET OF OLD STEAKHOUSE FAVOURITES

in an uber-glamorous dark wood and leather milieu. The decor vibe may be contemporary chic, but rest assured that avant-garde eating is not on the menu. This is the kind of place where the shrimp cocktail has enough Marie Rose sauce to take you back in time, the onion rings are delectably crisp and the smoky pork spare ribs are worth getting greasy for.

When co-owner Michael Corcoran refers to the steaks as 'man-sized', it's clear that Mike Tyson is the man he has in mind. If you haven't had to lean back and undo your top button by the time you make it through one of Heat Grill Room's gargantuan portions, you really ought to consider a career on the competitive eating circuit. So, how do all those salt-slaked chips and retro-chic pink peppercorn sauces get from kitchen to customer?

9 am

The day begins at 9 am when Michael unlocks the doors on his carnivorous kingdom. Rather than putting on the kettle, his first act is to turn on the ovens in the kitchen. He says, 'We are famous for our crunchy-skinned baked potatoes, none of that microwave rubbish here. And if they are to be ready for lunch there is not a moment to lose.'

While cleaning lady Linda Ncube polishes the wood fittings and Bernard Ngwenya sweeps and mops the floors, Michael spends the next half hour with his ear glued to the phone, ordering cream, vegetables, dry goods, meat and fish.

By 9:45 am the meat delivery has arrived and kitchen manager Jackson Sibanda is hard at work checking that weights received match those recorded by the supplier. Task complete, Sibanda labels each new bag of vacuum-packed sirloin, rump and fillet with an arrival date and then stacks them in the fridge to wet age for the next 26 days. 'You can't rush good meat,' says Sibanda. 'Those 26 days, they are why our meat is so, so tender. No juices can be lost in the airtight plastic and the results can be seen in happy customers and empty plates every day.'

While meaty measuring is going on in the kitchen, the morning shift of waiters has started setting up for lunch service. Sindiso Dube polishes cutlery and glasses until they shine. The restaurant has an all but encyclopaedic, multi-award-winning wine list and as such it is vital that all liquid refreshments are transported from table to mouth in tip-top vessels.





11 am

Late morning sees kitchen griller Shelton Skosana hard at work combining red wine, garlic and olive oil into basting sauces and whipping up rosemary-laden marinades. He observes that 'Pretoria people know meat. You can't take chances or serve poor quality. They know if you do that.' Michael agrees: 'They know what they want but they are also very loyal if you give it to them. In Joburg people are always after the next trendy spot, but in Pretoria once you have earned their respect they keep coming back.' Undoubtedly the busiest man in the kitchen is Foster Ngubeni the potato peeler. 'On a busy day I peel twenty 10 kg bags. That is a lot of potatoes. A lot, a lot, a lot.' By 11:30 am he already has an impressive pile of peeled vegetables in front of him and an even bigger pile yet to go.



11:45 am

As the morning edges towards midday, early-bird customers who skipped breakfast begin to slip into the restaurant. Lunch can be ordered any time from 11 am and by 11:45 am the kitchen has already sent out a Caesar salad and a bone-marrow-topped porterhouse steak. The early trickle of customers turns into a lunchtime flood of hungry diners. The kitchen has become a furnace of activity as the chefs sear and sizzle steaks to perfection. By 12:30 pm waiter Hamilton Masinda has his arms full with hearty portions of lamb shank, tiger prawns and, of course, T-bones laden with monkey gland sauce, which he serves with a smile. Asked for a recommendation, Masinda suggests the tandoori prawn starter with such enthusiasm that an entire table follows his advice.

3 pm onwards

The lunch rush subsides but Heat Grill Room's kitchen doesn't close in the afternoon and a group of jubilant businessmen arrive at 3 pm and sit down to celebrate a success with cholesterol-laden treats followed by Cognac and cigars on the restaurant's wooden deck. The business boys are not the only ones on the deck. As late afternoon edges towards evening, those seeking sundowners start to arrive and barman Michael Tobeni is on hand to shake up rose petal martinis, basil and cucumber daiquiris and watermelon margaritas. Evening eating has a more formal feel than the casual ambience of daytime trade. Romantic couples cuddle up in the corner booths and the mood is as mellow as the music. By 1:30 am the last customers have taken their full bellies home to rest and all that is left to do is cash up and clean up in preparation for doing it all again tomorrow. ①

Heat Grill Room is a Diners Club Winelist award-winner. To book, call ☎ 012 997 3959 or Diners Club Concierge on ☎ 0861 DINERS (346377).