

CHEFS FIND IT HARD TO GET A TABLE IN WASHINGTON

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Byline: Jen Haberkorn

May 19--Would-be restaurateurs, pull up a seat at a crowded table. A landlord might be with you in a moment.

Downtown's growing restaurant reputation is luring chefs from near and far, while allowing landlords to get more selective.

"There are about half a dozen prime restaurant spaces available right now in the city, and the landlords are taking their time trying to decide who they want to put in there," said **Tom Papadopoulos, an owner of Papadopoulos Properties**, a D.C. real-estate firm that deals exclusively with restaurants.

"For every one of those spaces, there are 10 restaurants who want to be there."

The best downtown restaurant space is sitting around a bit longer, while landlords wait for the best offer. Ginger Cove/Ginger Reef, on E Street Northwest, and Signatures, on Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest -- both of which served their last meals in the fall -- are still sitting vacant.

"In the past, it's been snapped up. Now [landlords] will take their time because they have a bigger pool to choose from," Mr. Papadopoulos said.

That pool is growing to include a number of out-of-towners, lured by the District's growing restaurant reputation.

Chef Laurent Tourondel plans to open his first restaurant outside of New York City -- BLT Steak, on I Street Northwest in August. Il Mulino, another New York restaurant, plans to open a new location on Vermont Avenue Northwest.

And one of the best-known celebrity chefs, Wolfgang Puck, is scheduled to open his first East Coast restaurant in the District. The Source, in the Newseum's Freedom Forum building on Pennsylvania Avenue, is slated to open in late 2007. Other New York chefs may follow.

Eric Ripert, known for his work at Le Bernardin in New York, is in talks with the Ritz-Carlton to open a restaurant in its West End hotel, said a Ritz-Carlton spokeswoman.

They are competing for space with the established hometown chefs who are striking while restaurants are hot. The District collected \$233 million from restaurants' sales tax last year, up 14 percent from 2004, according to the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington.

Robert Wiedmaier, chef and owner of Marcel's on Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest, plans to open a casual-fare restaurant, Beck's, on K Street Northwest later this year. He had been looking for a location for three years.

"It took a long time to nurture a spot," he said. "It's a lot of work negotiating, finding the right location, the right landlord and the right concept to make the magic happen."

Chinatown and Penn Quarter are experiencing a large part of that growth.

"Years ago, you couldn't give away place in Chinatown," said Joe Spinelli, co-founder of Restaurant Brokers & Developers Inc. in College Park. "Now you can't find it under \$65 per square foot."

With demand high, landowners are in the driver's seat. They're able to wait and hold their space for the best offer as more hopeful restaurant owners are chasing fewer restaurant spaces.

Heritage India restaurant has two locations, in Glover Park and Dupont Circle, and has been looking for the right downtown location for a year and a half, said broker Stephen Combs, managing director at Newmark Knight Frank in the District.

"Landlords are in a good position where they can pick and choose the right restaurant for their building," he said.

At the site vacated by Ginger Cove, "we had a list as long as my arm," said broker Bill Miller, director of retail leasing at Transwestern Commercial Services. "We're picking and choosing."

Had the space been available five years ago, the situation wouldn't have been as fruitful.

"It was less of a pick-and-choose situation," he said. "People were interested if you had the right corner and right real estate."

Developers say the number of hopeful downtown restaurant owners has been climbing for years and is reaching a peak.

"We've hit a critical mass where [the Washington restaurant industry] has a lot of attention and even more people. There comes a point where there are more people interested than space available," Mr. Miller said.

He says the area's strong economy, education levels and well-traveled citizenry has filled

in the number of restaurants downtown.

"We're really emerging as a restaurant town," he said. "We're supporting them as a marketplace when people thought Washington could only eat a steak or a hamburger."

Peter Smith, former chef at Vidalia, says the growth is great, even as he prepares to open a modern American restaurant at 900 Seventh St. NW this fall.

"There's a lot happening ... all over the city," Mr. Smith said. "It's great for downtown."

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