

Chef Q&A Claus Schmitz

Mosaic Modern Fusion

George Mahe



He's cooked for royalty and presidents, but what's really interesting about Claus Schmitz is his fresh perspective on the restaurant industry. Two years ago, on a side street downtown, he opened the tapas-inspired Mosaic, at a time when such a move was charitably described as risky. Several "Best Of" awards later, his focus is now on Kirkwood, where he plans to open a second location of Mosaic. Here he divulges several secrets for running a successful restaurant. Those who pay attention will succeed. Those who don't may feel their skin turn clammy as they realize that they took their best shot and missed.

So how did a Culinary Institute chef from Frankfurt end up in St. Louis? My father was in the hospitality business; my older brother Frank waited tables, and I was told to go work in the kitchen. So I was a "reluctant" chef. My father made me do it.

Will the tapas idea translate to family-centric Kirkwood? For us, I see an urban product and a suburban product, done with uniformity. I will not change the concept but rather adjust it for the suburbs, so you will see a modicum of \$15 larger portions and kids' offerings, as well as items that appeal to the older diner.

Will the design take on a suburban feel? Although our model is 4,000 square feet and seats 125, the bar in Kirkwood will be smaller, and there will be more booths, convertibility to larger tables and an extensive secluded courtyard—but the color palette and atmosphere will be the same. The new mosaic wall, however, will have glass tiles and be even more dynamic than the one downtown.

Why Kirkwood? Kirkwood is accessible—it is a demand-generating locale with tremendous drawing power, especially mid-week. A significant amount of our business downtown comes from this area already. We've just made it more convenient for parents and families.

Did the Highway 40 renovation affect your decision? Sure. All downtown businesses will be adversely affected. That's no secret.

What's the most common mistake people make in this business? Many ego-driven restaurateurs can't hear anything beyond their own voice. I've come to realize my shortcomings and have hired senior people to fill the gaps of my own incompetence.

You say that opening a restaurant is like Russian roulette. Any advice for the guy who still wants to pull the trigger? If you're not business-savvy, find a partner who is. That being said, choose your partners wisely.