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BUSINESS LIVES: POSTED: 8:00 p.m., May. 31, 2009

Culinary tours serve up new perspectives on metro Detroit

Sitting outside on a sunny afternoon at Corktown's latest rave, Le Petit Zinc, Taste-Full Tours co-founders Laura Gononian and Laura Romito explore its French menu, letting the culinary descriptors fly.

After much debate, Romito decides on crepes with champignons (mushrooms), adds chicken to her salad and chooses a beurre-sucre (butter-sugar) crepe for dessert. Gononian orders a crepe with feta cheese and épinards (spinach) and a dessert crepe filled with Nutella, a mixture of hazelnut and chocolate.

Neither sticks to her own dish, and intense conversation ensues.

"We usually have a table full of food for the two of us," says Gononian, 44. "We want to try everything."

The two are evaluating the restaurant as a potential stop on an upcoming tour.

A Taste-Full tour always begins in Royal Oak. From there, clients board a 30-seat private bus and are whisked away on their culinary adventure. The tour benefits all parties, they say. While clients soak up the new experience, business owners get face time with potential customers.

Tour prices range from \$65 to \$75, including samples and transportation. It's been five months, and earnings so far have been reinvested.

The tours, limited to 28 people, are gaining popularity. Because June is almost booked, Gononian and Romito are thinking of adding more dates or offering tours all year. Right now, they average two to three tours a month.

Kim Klaft, a human-resources consultant at the Southfield branch of Denver-based Watson Wyatt Worldwide, has already signed up for her second tour.

"It's definitely worth the money," Klaft says. "By taking the tour, you get to see places you normally wouldn't, and you get to go to multiple places in one day."

Last month, BASF Corp.'s Wyandotte office scheduled a private tour.

"Even though many of us have lived in the Detroit metro area for most of our lives, Taste-Full Tours provided us new insight into our own hometown," said Dan Arce, social event coordinator for BASF's Employee Activity Association.

"They do the tasting and testing ahead of time, so it kind of takes the danger out of going to places that aren't worth the money. I would go back to every stop on the tour," Arce says.

The group already booked another tour for July.

"Restaurant owners have even started calling us to get their restaurant or store highlighted," said Romito, 41. "But we won't compromise our standards to accommodate just anybody."

Featured businesses must be locally owned, serve exceptional products and have interesting stories behind their success.

It doesn't take long for Gononian and Romito to deem Le Petit Zinc worthy.

Owner Charles Sorel has a perfect blend of story, product and passion.

He was born on the French island of Martinique in the Caribbean and was raised in Paris. He opened a successful restaurant in New York but moved to Detroit for love.

After a short conversation and a compliment to the chef, the pair approach Sorel to gauge his interest. He accepts the offer, so long as the tour comes at a convenient time.

"I think this could be really good, not just for my business but for the city of Detroit," Sorel says. "They are bringing 20 people to my restaurant next week. Hopefully, they'll see that Detroit can be charming and realize they won't get robbed if they come here."

"The importance of what we do is easy to recognize when you understand its impact," Gononian says.

"We kind of went from saying, 'Man, this is fun,' to 'Man, this is important,'" Romito says.