

SMALL BUSINESS

FROM THE CALENDAR: Beyond start-up, 4:30 to 6 p.m. Wed., 1000 LaSalle Av., Minneapolis. Free. Call 651-962-4400. Sponsor: University of St. Thomas. Complete calendar listings on Monday.

One heck of a restaurant

The path was a long and difficult one, but two chefs have found success with their downtown Minneapolis lunch spot.



Dick Youngblood

the poor inspector.

Then he did a smarter thing: He called his wife, Cynthia Gerdes, who knows a thing or two about solving business problems as owner of the six-store Creative Kidstuff chain. She called a mechanical contractor and not only got him to take the job on a rush basis, but also persuaded him to accept payment over an 18-month period.

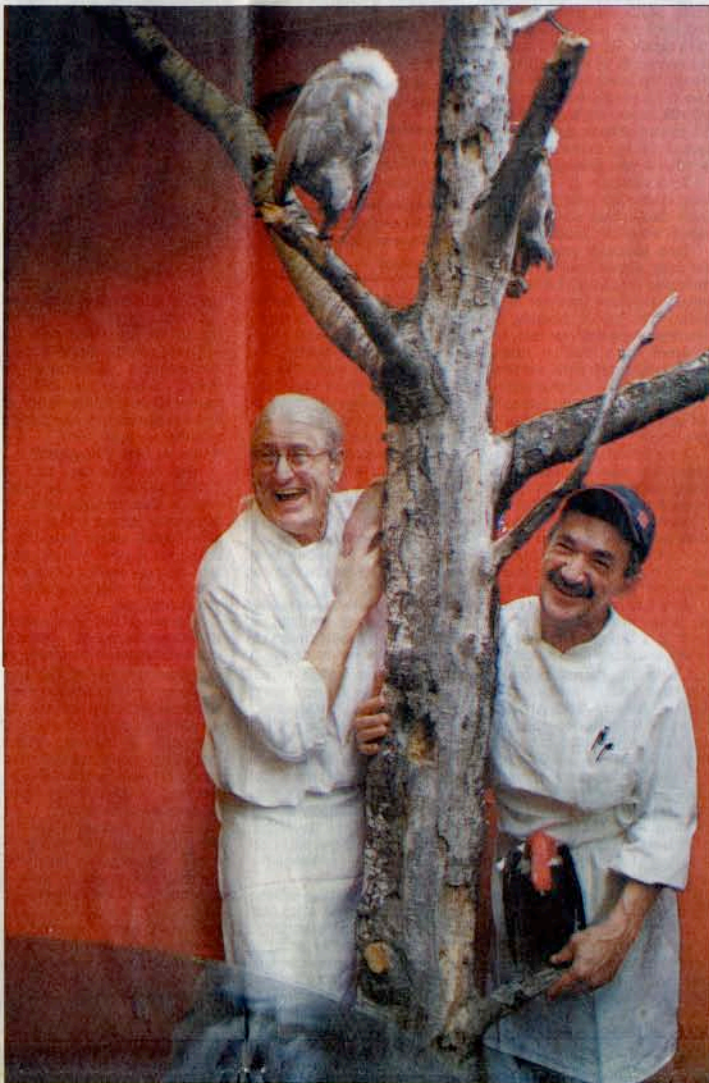
Two days before the opening, another inspector ordered Omer to install a second kitchen sink and a more expensive dishwasher, work that involved tearing out some walls and flooring at a cost of another \$7,000. So he decided to sell his car and two motorcycles to cover that expense and pay the rent, staff salaries and utilities during the ensuing two-week delay.

He didn't sell one of the motorcycles quite fast enough, however. Three weeks after the opening, he had an accident on one of them that shattered his right leg and kept him away from the business for six months. To add indignity to injury, his wife — who advises the restaurant on financial matters — decreed that if he wasn't working, his salary would go to hire a replacement cook.

Three months after he returned to work, Omer was back in the hospital for surgery on a perforated ulcer, undoubtedly a dividend for the previous 12 months of turmoil. You don't even want to know about the broken ankle that came later.

Throw in the fact that their first customer tried to sneak out without paying and add a break-in that cost them \$1,200 and an 800-pound safe, and you might understand why they chose the vulture as their corporate mascot and installed a section of poplar tree with several carrion-like figures stuck in the branches.

Meyer, who had invested



Mitch Omer, left, and Steve Meyer hanging out with some of their vulture "mascots" at their Hell's Kitchen restaurant in downtown Minneapolis.

\$25,000 in a minority interest, winds up as the hero of the saga, having been forced to shepherd the restaurant into business almost singlehandedly, losing 25 pounds in the process.

Considering that Meyer, a mustachioed gent who re-

sembles Mario, the video-game character, stands just 5 feet 6 inches and weighs 135 pounds, there wasn't a lot of excess paunch to be lost.

Hardest worker

"Steve is the hardest-work-

ing person I've ever met," said Omer, a 250-pounder who stands 6 feet 4 inches, wears his graying hair in a ponytail and completes the partners' image as the Mutt and Jeff of the local restaurant scene.

While Omer spent 20 of his 30 years in the business as an

Hell's Kitchen

Business: Downtown Minneapolis restaurant
Founded: 2002
Owners: Mitch Omer and Steve Meyer
2003 revenue: \$880,000
Web site: <http://www.hellskitchen.com>

executive chef, and Meyer had 10 years in that post, neither of them knew much about running a restaurant outside the kitchen. Fortunately, both had made intelligent marriage choices: Gerdes advises on the esoterica of financial controls and Meyer's wife, Kim, owns a degree in hotel and restaurant management and handles the staff and dining room operations.

Omer and Meyer have known each other for 20 years, having cooked together at such well-known spots as the Lowell Inn, Pracna on Main, the Pickled Parrot and the New French Cafe.

This first-class experience helps account for a menu stuffed with such delicacies as lemon-ricotta hotcakes, scrambled eggs with shrimp, eggs Benedict made with bison flank steak and topped with tangerine-jalapeno hollandaise sauce, wild-rice porridge laced with blueberries, cranberries and hazelnuts and crab cakes made with backfin lump crab meat and topped with poached eggs and red bell pepper hollandaise.

All of which adds up to solid, if so far moderate, success: Sales for eight months of 2002 reached \$315,000 and the business finished the year with positive cash flow. Sales in 2003 approached \$880,000 and returned a modest net profit.

This raises the question of why Hell's Kitchen is not open for the more remunerative dinner hour (although it hosts private evening parties several times a month). Omer has a very practical reason for the decision.

"I burned through two marriages working the dinner hour," Omer said. "I finally figured out it's better to be home with your family at dinner time."

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