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Bargain whets appetites

The Baltimore Sun

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First-ever effort packs restaurants at normally slow time
By Andrea K. Walker

Sultry summer days usually mean slow business for restaurants because people are on vacation, at cookouts or holed up inside their air-conditioned homes.

But thanks to fixed-price deals offered as part of a first-ever city promotion, Baltimore restaurants have been reeling in the customers this week.

Timothy Dean Bistro on Eastern Avenue had to shut off reservations because it's booked to capacity. Restaurant Tio Pepe downtown has been fielding more calls for reservations than ever. And one of the owners of the Black Olive in Fells Point had to turn away a good friend because there were no seats left.

"I know his feelings were probably hurt, but there were no tables," said Pauline Spiliadis, who owns the Greek restaurant with her son and husband. "Sometimes you have to do what you have to do."

About 60 city restaurants are participating in Baltimore Restaurant Week, which offers three-course dinners for \$30 and two-course lunch specials for \$20 - a bargain at high-end spots like Prime Rib and The Capital Grille where entrees alone can cost \$20 to \$30. The promotion started Monday and ends today.

A sample dinner menu at Oceanaire in Harbor East featured red chili calamari with Asian slaw for an appetizer, grilled salmon with sun-dried tomato pesto as an entree and a tin roof sundae for dessert.

At the Black Olive yesterday, lunch patrons could order as one of their choices a mushroom gyro with baklava for dessert.

City promotion and business officials got the idea for the special come-on from similar programs in cities such as Philadelphia, New York and Washington that have used them for years to lure diners during slow periods or promote tourism to their areas.

They distributed fliers, bought ads and set up a Web site to tout it. City garages offered \$3 parking after 5 p.m.

While there aren't yet hard numbers on reservations to quantify the impact of the program, the packed dining rooms and beaming restaurant owners all over town are enough to tell the story. The city is thinking of expanding the promotion to two weeks next year.

"It's been phenomenal," said Michael Evitts, spokesman for the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, which helped coordinate the program. "It's gone better than any of our initial expectations."

Said Francisco Lobo, the maitre de at Tio Pepe restaurant on East Franklin Street: "It's been very, very big the whole week. It's more than we can handle - even on Monday, which is normally empty on a regular basis."

Restaurants such as Pazo Restaurant, Petit Louis Bistro, Prime Rib, Velleggia's-Tours D'Italia, Da Mimmo Finest Italian Cuisine and Aldo's Ristorante Italiano are extending the specials on their own through next week, according to the Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, which has been working on the program.

Saffron will offer the specials through the end of August, while the Black Olive and Oceanaire said they plan to make the fixed-price specials a permanent part of the menu.

Timothy Dean, owner of the French bistro with the same name, said he began to worry last week when he hadn't gotten many phone reservations. But when he checked with his online partner, Opentable.com, he was astonished to find he was booked to near capacity every day of the week.

"I had to slow it down," Dean said. "They had booked all of our slots up."

Though the restaurants don't make as much money on the special-priced meals as they normally would, they still benefit. They fill up their restaurants during a normally slow period. And many of the diners order high-profit drinks and wines.

The biggest perk, they say, is drawing new customers to their restaurants.

"We're not going to lose money," said Nate Beachler, general manager and operating partner of Oceanaire. "We won't make our normal margins. But it's more important to have people come in. We want as many people to come in and get to experience what Oceanaire has to offer."

Baltimore tourism and promotion officials say the week is a chance to showcase neighborhoods and eating establishments in the city. They have promoted Baltimore's event in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Washington and Virginia.

Yesterday more customers than usual were lunching at the Black Olive, where the owners said about 80 percent of their customers this week have ordered off the special menu.

Among them were Margaret Cook and Christine Gray, retired state government workers who have been friends for 30 years.

"We're able to come to a restaurant we haven't been to and have the opportunity to experience it at a good price," Gray said.