

Where Everybody Will Eventually Know Your Name

A joint venture by a couple of seasoned restaurateurs aims to please in Ardmore.

By Mike Madaio

Nothing about The Saint James' debut in early October suggested that it was entering the frame discreetly. From the prime location in a renovated section of Ardmore's Suburban Square to the meticulous attention that was devoted to the interior design, a comfortable blend of modern and rustic that was inspired by the 1920s, every aspect of the presentation of the self-described "American bistro" exudes thoughtful consideration.

Which could explain why it required more than a year of planning.

The 120-seat Saint James is a joint venture of local veteran restaurateurs Michael Schulson and Rob Wasserman. Schulson rose to fame through Sampan, his contemporary Asian small plates restaurant in Center City, and iza-kaya, his modern Japanese pub in the Borgata, Atlantic City, New Jersey. Wasserman and his wife, Maggie, own the Rittenhouse Square darling, Rouge, where the American appetite meets the classic Parisian bistro.

The friends had been casually discussing opening a restaurant together until they were separately approached about the Suburban Square space. The conversations then developed some urgency. Wasserman describes it now as "the right time and the right place."

Just as the sky-lit foyer, exposed brick, leather- and wool-covered booths and natural wood convey an obvious warmth, the menu is designed for mass appeal. Executive chef Matt Moon, who worked alongside Schulson for the last year and, prior to that, at Talula's Table and Talula's Garden, reinvented a host of comfort-food touchstones: a roasted half-chicken with lemon marmalade and celery, a grilled flatiron steak with shallots and compound butter and beef short ribs with horseradish and potato dumpling.

A limited raw bar lends a contrasting air of refinement.

"We really just want to create a place where people can come in and relax," Wasserman says. "And to think of it as an extension of their own homes, where they can focus on enjoying the time they have with friends and family."



RESTAURATEURS EXTRAORDINAIRE MICHAEL SCHULSON, LEFT, AND ROB WASSERMAN.

The Saint James, 30 Parking Plaza, Ardmore; 610-649-6200; www.saintjamesphilly.com.