



A bird's eye view of Corvino's Supper Club & Tasting Room 4:05



Chef Michael Corvino opens Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room in the Crossroads with his wife, Christina, and many of his former American Restaurant employees. The handsome, double-duty restaurant offers "seasonal" and "shareable" plates and a tasting room, plus a stage for live music and a nostalgic late-night menu. The Star's food editor Jill Silva got a front-row seat for the birth of KC's latest high-profile restaurant. Story by Jill Silva. **Tammy Ljungblad** - The Kansas City Star

RESTAURANT NEWS & REVIEWS

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The Corvinos' new restaurant will be a place for wagyu ribeye & \$8 cheesburgers

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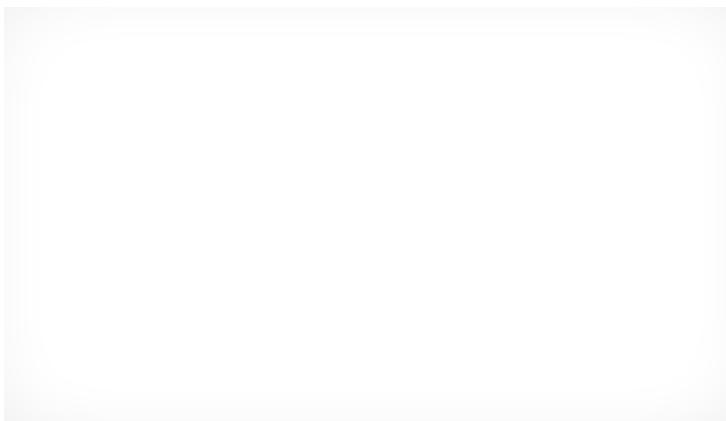
Chef Michael Corvino and his wife and business partner, Christina Corvino, are as nervous as new parents.

It's a chilly evening in January as they stand on a roughed-in plywood stage inside the shell of Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room at 1830 Walnut St. From a stage built for live music, they can look out on the 5,320-square-foot restaurant space. For nearly two years, they have been dreaming about what their new baby will look, smell and taste like.



The 16-foot ceilings, supported by four massive concrete pillars, hint at strong bones. Invited guests pore over blueprints and logos, as if that will help them divine the place's personality.

ADVERTISING



The group of Kansas City designers, architects, investors and key members of the staff are gathered to toast the impending success of — yes, that dreaded phrase bandied about by food media — “one of the most anticipated restaurants of 2017.”

Over the next three months, the details come into focus with visits to KC Urban Potters, where Michael runs his hands over a collection of shapes and surfaces to pick the perfect cups, plates and bowls. There are consultations with a theatrical lighting designer known for his work with Quixotic Fusion dance company. The goal: to put dramatic focus on the plates. Meetings with an acoustic designer help ensure that the live musicians will enhance rather than detract from the overall dining experience.

“Two years ago, when we started thinking about what we wanted, we said we better pick a restaurant that we want to spend all our time in,” says Christina, who will handle the public relations and special events. “The supper club side is where we would want to be most nights of the week. It’s big and boisterous, with tons of foods you can try. You can eat the full menu at the bar, which we like to do when we’re traveling.

“There’s cocktails. Of course, really good bubbles because that’s our favorite, and then we have live music every night. Some of our best friends are musicians and we love live music, so we wanted it to be part of the sensory experience that you get at Corvino Supper Club.”

A star is born

A self-described punk-skater kid, Michael started his culinary career working in a pizza joint back in his mid-teens. He quickly found he was fast and good at the work, eventually leading him to train at an impressive list of fine dining restaurants, including Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek in Dallas.

Michael’s fine dining resume easily translated to The American Restaurant, which for more than 40 years had attracted high-profile executive chefs from such culinary centers as New York and San Francisco and tasked them with creating a legacy for New American cuisine. He started there in 2013.

But when Michael announced he was leaving the American last summer, fans of Michael’s artfully precise and delicious tasting menus held their breath to see where the newly married chef and his wife, originally from Arizona, would ultimately put down roots.

READ MORE: Art, elegance and magnificent ingredients define the American Restaurant

“From the beginning, Michael and I knew there was nowhere else we wanted to be than the Crossroads,” Christina says. “And, in fact, we had some people tour us in other locations, and we really just did it out of being nice, because we always wanted to be down here.”

Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room takes a large chunk of the first floor of Corrigan Station. The 10-story building, a block off the Main Street streetcar line, was built by the daughters of Thomas Corrigan in 1921 and, over the years, housed a post office and a Nelly

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Don garment factory.

The Corvino's hired Kansas City-based Hufft Projects (also the design-builder of Port Fonda in Lawrence) and created a space that includes personal touches that say Corvino, such as murals of giant ravens in flight by Kansas City artist Jeremy Collins. Corvino, it turns out, means little raven in Italian, and ravens are curious, inquisitive birds that like to collect shiny objects.

Two shiny objects on the Corvino Supper Club menu: \$10 beet toast — which Corvino jokes is his riff on ultra-trendy avocado toast — and a \$65 a wagyu ribeye with huitlacoche sauce. (Yes, corn fungus.)

Michael shies away from the catch-all term “New American” to describe his style, although it is a “fusion” of classical French techniques, Asian and locally grown farm-to-table ingredients. He calls the menu a collection of “seasonal” and “shareable” plates.

My take on the menu a week after the restaurant opened in March? Call it “approachably eclectic.” The bulk of the dishes run from \$8 to \$24. Then there’s the bowl of king crab with miso, shaved turnips and green almonds (\$25), the vegetarian dish of maitake mushrooms with smoked eggplant, pistachio and ramp pesto (\$28) and black cod with sea urchin, chantarelle and chicharron (\$40).

But if you can’t quite get into those, check out the \$8 after-hours cheeseburger that is getting plenty social media hype.



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Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room

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@michaelcorvino 's soon to be famous cheeseburger @corvinokc
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‘The room where it happens’

Eater.com calls Corvino Supperclub & Tasting Room an example of a trend toward the “double-duty restaurant”: a chef-driven space offering casual and fine dining concepts under one roof, with the casual customers driving the bottom line.

The 74-seat main dining room is striking for its handsome, cool, gray-and-black interior. The only pops of color are the yellow buds in wooden vases made by Michael’s first chef mentor, now a woodworker. The effect is both minimalist and darkly clubby.

Those who book the 18-seat tasting room, set to open in May, will revel in tasting menus and a view of — to borrow a lyric from the Broadway blockbuster “Hamilton” — the room where it happens. However, the tasting room’s adjacent kitchen is hardly the sort of back room where most chefs and line cooks toil.

The semi-open kitchen is notable for giant picture windows and an abundance of natural light. One of the best vantage points to witness the kitchen choreography comes from the second floor of the parking garage just east of the restaurant.

“It’s really great and really weird,” pastry chef Amanda Schroeder admits. “Sometimes I look up and I’m like, ‘Oh, there’s people walking by. I forgot about that.’ ”

As The American ceased being a full-service restaurant, Michael brought along many of the members of his former kitchen staff, including Schroeder, sous chef Andy McCormick, general manager Keith Goldman and sommelier Ross Jackson, as well as cooks, bartenders, servers and dishwashers.

Michael compares hiring staff to “building a family”: “I want a team of talented people, and we’ve got some of the most talented people in this city,” he says.

The experience they bring has the new restaurant up and rolling in a matter of days. An hour before a family and friends group is about to arrive for the first night of service on March 29, Michael is more focused on sending out dishes for a photographer to style for the website than working his staff into a lather.

The calm before the storm is, well, utterly calm. When I ask line cook Devin Campbell if the pulse ever quickens, he assures me they are all professionals with a job to do. And, indeed, there is no race-walking, yelling or profanity.

Meanwhile, the Corvinos intend to extend what veteran server Jennifer Daugherty refers to as an “American level of service” but without “stuffiness” or “pretension.”

“That completely changed at The American (under Corvino’s leadership),” she says. “I don’t think enough people knew that.”

Working man’s burger

Michael and chef de cuisine Dina Butterfield, who moved to Kansas City from Dallas, spend much of the dinner hours poised with tweezers in hand. Tweezers are a common sight in the fine dining world, for precise artistic placement of microgreens, edible flowers and other garnishes.

But when the late-night menu kicks in — starting at 10 p.m. and catering, so far, to hospitality workers — the kitchen pivots to serve snackier foods more typically eaten by hand than with a fork and knife.

There’s fried chicken, crispy pork ribs, oysters and egg sandwiches. But few things are snackier than the restaurant’s exquisite \$8 cheeseburger.

“First of all, it’s everything I want in a burger,” Michael says, pulling off the line for a few minutes to place a palm-sized burger in front of me. “It’s not a big, thick gourmet burger. It’s — what do they call it? — a diner burger. A working man’s burger. I call it a one-handed burger because you can pick it up with one hand without all the lettuce and tomatoes falling out.”

Michael doesn’t like lettuce or tomatoes on his burger. “It’s just too much. This sets a perfect ratio — the crispy pickle, the sour, the fat, the charred aromatic of the onions.

"The patty is fresh ground chuck. We just get whole chuck. We grind it and smash them really thin and we have a plancha (griddle), like a Spanish plancha that's super hot and caramelizes the outside of the patty so it's super crispy."

Add charred onions, house-made sour dill pickle slices and Muenster cheese, which has close to the same meltability as American cheese but is less processed.

"We make the bun, which is probably the most important piece. It's very similar to a Parker House roll. It's not brushed with butter on top but it's squishy, it's fluffy, with a little sesame seed on top."

Credit for the bun goes to pastry chef Schroeder, who used Town Topic's bun as a culinary touchstone.

"It's all of that goodness, but you don't feel like complete garbage the next day," says Michael, who grew up with a mom who was into healthy eating. "It's not that dirty-ass grill and four-day-old fry oil. But it's the same thing, it's just really clean, quality ingredients."

And, yes, you can get fries with that for a separate \$8 charge. They're fingerling fries served with aioli and a green garlic XO sauce.

"We're just going to have fun with that menu," he says. "We have those little teeny sheet pans so maybe we start playing around with little tiny pizzas."

Schroeder is still tweaking the bacon fat-turtle (as in chocolate and pecans) popcorn. Already on the menu: her spot-on ode to that quintessential childhood treat, the ice cream sandwich made from sticky chocolate wafers. It's wrapped in paper but begs eaters to lick their fingers.

Joys of co-parenting

Even though Michael is the head of a restaurant family, finally opening Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room has turned the 35-year-old April Fool's baby into a kid again.

None of the guide books could have prepared the chef and his wife for everything, big and small. "The entire process of entrepreneurship is a stream of surprises," Christina says.

Decisions. Decisions. From the lease negotiations, fine print in contracts, lawyer meetings, investor relations, construction time tables — down to what he and Christina refer to as "the water service."

"We've spent hours upon hours on: How will the water service go? Sparkling or tap? Do we use a different glass? Is there a water guy? Michael loves (sparkling) water," Christina confides, so it's on tap at the bar, at no extra charge. Indeed, Michael can be seen leaving the line to head to the bar where he refills his glass.

If the gestation was grueling, the birth offers the new parents a shot of adrenaline just in time for all those sleepless late nights to come. The exhaustion, pride and emotion are palpable in Christina's voice as she speaks.

"We weren't quite sure how we would feel when we could actually open the doors because we were so tired and stressed, but as soon as the keys were handed over and we had our health department certificate, out of nowhere we just both got incredible adrenaline and had so much happiness being in here," she says.

Christina had only worked as a waitress in college, but she dove into a new industry knowing that life married to a chef would require a different kind of commitment than her previous marriage, which gave her two children, Ethan, 19, and Brooke, 16.

"There's a lot written about chef relationships, and they really go one of two ways. As a spouse, you either have to be fine with being on your own. A lot! And there are people who are happy like that. Or (there's) the complete opposite: Like you just have to work together, because that's where you have such a huge shared passion.

"Michael had said he didn't ever want to have kids because this industry is not good for them," she continues. "And so when we got married and he took on my teenage kids, he said, 'This is the best of both worlds. I didn't have to miss out on the little stuff because of my job, or strain my marriage with that. But now I have a family.' "

Jill Wendholt Silva is The Star's James Beard award-winning food editor. Reach her at jsilva@kcstar.com. Tweet her at @kcstarfood or chowtownk.

FAVORITE DISHES

Christina Corvino's favorite dish: Carrot and avocado salad

"My favorite dish is probably the one that seems the most normal or not exciting, and it is the most delicious and the most surprising. You'll see when (people) order one and they have it, they'll order a second. The carrots are roasted in different ways and the avocado adds that luxuriousness to it. There's citrus and olive oil and various types of mint in it, and it's just such a beautiful summer dish."

Pastry chef Amanda Schroeder's favorite non-dessert dish: Beet toast

"I'm especially fond of it because it's right here next to my station and I can get it almost any time. If there's ever burnt toast, I know where there's a home for it."

Fun fact: It's built on Farm to Market rye, the only bread Schroeder does not make in-house. It is topped with mashed peas and beets, drizzled with yogurt, sprinkled with quinoa and garnished with delicate pea shoots.

Rieger chef Howard Hanna's favorite dish: Carrot and avocado salad

"I feel like I knew how good other things would be. The carrot dish surprised me because it was simple and approachable, but everything about it was thoughtful and really well executed. If you have a meal that includes crab, oysters, super-high quality beef, etc., and you go away thinking about how great the carrots were, you can be sure that the kitchen staff knows what they are doing!"



Chef Michael Corvino (left) works with cook Matt Stowe on a dish of black cod, chanterelle and chicharron at Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room in the Crossroads Arts District. Corvino and his wife, Christina, spent almost two years planning every of their new, hotly anticipated restaurant. **Tammy Ljungblad** - tljungblad@kcstar.com



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