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Upscale diner in Orange grabs customers

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By Pamela McLoughlin, Register Staff

ORANGE — James Doukas comes from a traditional Greek diner background.

But he also has a keen eye for trends and experience in running his own upscale restaurant.

So Doukas combined the best of those worlds and created the Equinox Diner at 285 Boston Post Road, where customers can get eggs and pancakes any time of day, but can also get a dinner of Ahi tuna with champagne wasabi cream sauce.

“This generation is very educated when it comes to culinary cuisine,” Doukas said. “No disrespect to fellow operators, but over the years diners have slipped in their attention to detail and quality ... I believe it’s all about the customer.”

Equinox isn’t open 24 hours a day, but it is open seven days a week for long hours, catching both the early breakfast crowd and the nightclub set.

The kitchen is led by chef Donald Whitney, who was trained at Johnson & Wales Culinary School.

Then there are the 52-inch plasma televisions.

Doukas, who lives in Westchester, N.Y., with his wife, Francine, and their three children, opened the 175-seat diner in April. In a few weeks, he will open a 300-seat Equinox Diner in Mystic.

Doukas says business at the Orange diner is booming, despite the ailing economy, because he offers an upscale product at diner prices, hoping to make up in return customers what he loses in per-plate markups.

Doukas said he fell in love with Orange when he first looked at the spot where the Red River Grill sat, even though he practically rebuilt the structure.

He said the presence of so many restaurants nearby doesn’t trouble him a bit.

“I like competition because I like to show my customers I can do better than the next guy,” he said.

Customer Raymond Ragaini of Ansonia eats at Equinox frequently at various times of day. He raves about everything, from the way customers are valued to the ease in asking for special items like extra salad dressing.

“It’s a better feeling than a normal diner — I’d call it a diner plus,” Ragaini said during a late lunch at Equinox.

Doukas does a lot of traveling these days between Westchester, Orange and Mystic, and he’s no stranger to the laborious 17-hour work day the restaurant business often demands.

His dad, George Doukas, first opened a diner in 1969 in New Hyde Park, N.Y., in an old railroad car, and today owns the award-winning Eastchester Odyssey Restaurant Diner in New York.

James Doukas worked long hours for his dad as a kid. He remembers busing tables, making coleslaw and batter for onion rings, and planned to be a lawyer someday.

He graduated from St. John’s University with high honors, but got sidetracked from law school when he fell in love with the diner business while helping out at his father’s place. He went on to open restaurants on Long Island and in Scarsdale, selling the latter in 2006. He was building a larger Equinox Diner in Mystic, hoping to get the tourist crowd, when a broker there told him a space had become available in Orange.

He and Francine chose the name Equinox because their wedding anniversary is the day of the fall equinox, Sept. 23.

He also gave his three children dishes on the menu: Paige’s children’s menu, named after their youngest daughter, 5; Austin’s salmon, named after their son, 13; and Dakota’s pork chops, named after their 14-year-old daughter, who isn’t thrilled with the dish chosen for her, James Doukas chuckles.

“This is a new kind of diner; the pace is fast and the food is fresh,” Whitney said. They also have a bakery where scrumptious desserts are created daily.

“I think from the outside looking in people might perceive this as a glamorous business, but it’s a lot of hard work and dedication,” James Doukas said. “It’s a labor of love ... I love seeing my customers leave with a smile.”

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