

# The Times Herald

## Paladar brings Latin flavors to King of Prussia Town Center

Gary Puleo

UPPER MERION >> Unique restaurants are shaping up to be the lifeblood of King of Prussia Town Center, and none is more suited to the adventurous culinary climate here than Paladar Latin Kitchen & Rum Bar.

Founder and CEO Andy Himmel named his growing chain after the term that traditionally invokes the neighborhood mom-and-pop eateries of Cuba, but with its nod to the flavors of Central America, South America, Cuba and the Latin Caribbean, Paladar takes the family notion of food and hospitality to a whole new realm.

Diners will find a fearless but easygoing lunch and dinner menu featuring avocado deviled eggs (\$5), blackened fish tacos (\$16), banana leaf roasted cod (\$21), rum-glazed Cuban pork (\$18) and jerk chicken skewers (\$8.50) that tempts their taste buds with familiar flavors paired up in new ways, noted executive chef Nelson Rodriguez.

“This is not like your mom and pop restaurant. What we do is take those dishes from Central America and give them an American-style twist. We use the foundation like the tacos, but then we do our own thing and put our own stamp on them,” said Rodriguez, who came to Mexican cooking through his love of Italian and French cuisines.

“Mexican is a cuisine that’s really growing, and we use all the same ingredients but don’t take a cookie-cutter approach to it. We use organic meat from a local farm and really offer Latin comfort food that people love.”

A midday favorite, the two-tacos-and-a-side option is a mainstay of the \$9.95 lunch combo menu, beginning at 11 a.m.

Moving to the weekend, Paladar entices the brunch crowd with Latin-accented entrees like maple pulled pork and fried eggs (\$13.50) and scrambled egg and chorizo soft tacos (\$15) Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

It’s not just the food that is nuanced for maximum appeal to a high-end American palate, but also the striking, colorful ambience and the drink menu, springing from a bar stocked with dozens of rums — white, gold, spiced and dark, inspiring a variety of South American cocktail creations.

The sixth restaurant in the Paladar chain, which arrived in Pennsylvania by way of Himmel’s native Ohio, has found the perfect home in the heart of King of Prussia Town Center, noted manager Paul Foglia, who had previously taken the helm at such Bucks County establishments as Revolution House and Triumph Brewing Company of New Hope.

“King of Prussia is definitely a vibrant community, and we can’t wait to see where things will be next year when the center is fully opened,” he said. “While there are a lot of restaurants opening, which would seem to be competition, the busier the Town Center is, the busier we’ll be. I think each restaurant offers their

own flair and their own favorites. We were excited to introduce a Paladar to this area because nobody ever heard of it and we're quickly making a name for ourselves. Besides the food and drink, hospitality is really what sets us apart," Foglia added. "We want you to have a dining experience that's so different than what you're used to right now, so we hire people that have hospitality running through them, and we can train them with the technical aspects."

Himmel credited company chef Joe Tis with tying the knot between the expanding Paladar Restaurant Group and a prime piece of King of Prussia real estate.

"King of Prussia is Joe's hometown, and he's worked at restaurants there like Morton's and The Bamboo Club. It's always been his goal for us to open a restaurant in King of Prussia," said Himmel. "We never really saw ourselves as a mall concept, so when this property became available, we had already done two other deals with (developer) JBG Companies, so it got us into King of Prussia with a landlord we already knew. We were excited that there were small companies coming to the Town Center that had the sophistication and the resources that were different and unique, not just cookie cutter concepts that you see everywhere."

After launching in Cleveland nine years ago, Paladar's evolution was fairly robust, as the concept adapted to various tweaks, Himmel recalled.

"We're still evolving. The last couple of projects in Maryland really represented the branding and the design finally coming together, and King of Prussia was building on that. King of Prussia is a pretty serious market and there were some hurdles for us to overcome, being an out of state company."

Another challenge was hiring a staff suited to the task of helping to run an operation built on elements of fine dining, Himmel allowed.

"Being new to the market, it seemed that a lot of people we wanted to hire were already working at successful restaurants, but we slowly hired a great team, and we're still hiring servers. The hardest part in the beginning is that it has to be the right experience and it's hard to train someone who doesn't have that experience quickly for an opening."

Working with local business organizations made the transition to an unfamiliar environment go much more smoothly, Himmel said.

"One of the things that surprised me the most is that I've never worked in a community that had organizations whose sole purpose was to grow the business and the revenue in a specific market, and by that I mean the Valley Forge Tourism and Convention Board, King of Prussia BID, the Main Line Chamber and the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce. They were amazing to work with and could not have done more to help, and that's rarely the case. The success and continued growth of King of Prussia is certainly not an accident when you see how well these organizations are run."

Being a small chain operation doesn't leave any room for branches that don't click with the dining-out set, Himmel noted.

"We don't have hundreds of restaurants where one can be unsuccessful. Each restaurant we open needs to be successful, and we put all the resources that we can into it," he said. "With everything we have in place in King of Prussia, if we don't succeed we have to take a look at ourselves. But we feel that we have built a place where the local business people are coming for Happy Hour and for lunch, the local residents come for dinner and brunch on the weekend ... and we hope our hospitality shows through."

Paladar Latin Kitchen & Rum Bar is located at King of Prussia Town Center, 250 Main St., King of Prussia.

