

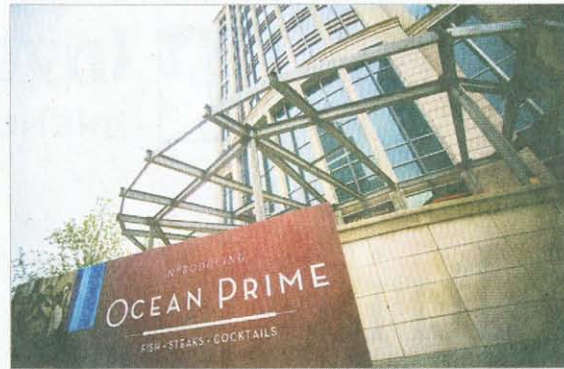
# The Dallas Morning News

## Business

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### RESTAURANTS

# Time to scale up



BRANDON THIBODEAUX/Special Contributor

Ocean Prime opens next month at Rosewood Court.



Knauer Inc.

The 10,000-square-foot Ocean Prime, shown in an artist's rendering, is billed as a "modern American supper club."

## Eateries buck trend, make the most of downturn's wide open spaces

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Friends of Cameron Mitchell, head of an Ohio-based restaurant company, wondered what — or if — he was thinking.

Mitchell told them he planned to open a 10,000-square-foot fine dining restaurant in Dallas next month —

the largest of nearly 30 restaurants in his company.

The response? "What, are you crazy?" joked Mitchell, president of Columbus-based Cameron Mitchell Restaurants.

Mitchell and his friends know the new Ocean Prime restaurant — opening in mid-November in the Rosewood Court building in Uptown — is expansive, and going big runs

counter to the downsizing trends dominating today's new restaurants.

And it will cater to an upper link in the food chain — competing in the segment perhaps hit hardest by an intractable recession.

But Mitchell, and other local restaurateurs who are opting to live large, see now as a good time to move into spaces that might not be available

during boom times. If they can start building their clientele, they said, they'll be better positioned to prosper when the bulls bust out of hiding.

"This recession is not permanent," said Mitchell, whose company received a "Golden Chain" award last week in Dallas. The award, recognizing 18 months of positive financial

# Local restaurants going large



BEN TORRES/Special Contributor

General manager Brandon Davis estimates that Ocean Prime could need as many as 70 staffers on its busiest nights.

growth and industry leadership, was given at a trade show sponsored by *Nation's Restaurant News*.

"We're trying to move forward with our business and take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves. Fine dining has been hit hard, but it's not dead."

While opening almost any restaurant is a gamble, some risks are exponentially greater with an eatery the size of a warehouse.

It must be designed so patrons don't feel they're spending more than \$100 a couple to dine in a gym.

And the requisite staffing can rival the size of a graduating class.

Brandon Davis, Ocean Prime's general manager, estimates that up to 70 staffers — from cooks to managers — could be needed on the restaurant's busiest nights.

But if you build it and patrons don't come, labor costs alone could bite your bottom line.

"It's always risky to open a 10,000-square-foot anything," said Kevin Moll, chief executive of Denver-based National Restaurant Consultants. "The biggest challenge in an operation that big is maintaining that tight control, knowing the status of each and every table."

Mitchell concedes that "there's a lot of risk involved" in the opening — the first in Texas for his privately held company.

"We're not making this investment lightly," he said, estimating he'll spend \$4.3 million to open.

Billed as a "modern American supper club," Ocean Prime

will offer a menu ranging from truffle deviled eggs and oysters Rockefeller to prime seafood and steaks. The cocktail lounge will offer live music nightly, which will be played throughout the dining room.

Mitchell estimates the average diner will spend about \$80.

Aside from the great indoors — which includes four private dining rooms — there's a covered terrace with an additional 2,500 square feet.

"The space has a lot of flexibility," Mitchell said. "You can't achieve all that in a small space."

Taking a large restaurant and creating many minis is a key to success, several restaurateurs said.

Chad Willis' AMPM Restaurant-Lounge opened July 6 in the Mosaic Building on North Akard Street with soaring ceilings and 8,000 square feet of interior space, plus a 500-square-foot patio.

After spending about \$400,000 to open the restaurant, Willis said he is spending an additional \$80,000 to install a partition and glass doors to separate parts of the dining room.

With the current configuration, the bar and dining room could be full but an empty mid-section seemed to drain some of the energy, Willis said.

Section off part of the dining room and move the action into the middle ground, "then you're talking about a lot of energy," said Willis, who also is president and co-founder of energy investment firm Texas Energy Holdings in Dallas.

"If it's a gym, you're going to have challenges," he said.

Willis said AMPM is doing well, although about 70 percent of its profit is from large events

rather than daily dining traffic, which can become scarce after about 8 p.m. He expects restaurant traffic to pick up following last month's lunch launch.

One of the most ambitious projects coming to the region is the new Love & War in Texas, which is expected to open by early January across from the new Cowboys Stadium in Arlington.

The restaurant, which will be styled to look like the mission at the Alamo, takes up residence in an old grocery store measuring about 18,000 square feet, said Tory Phelps, who runs the restaurant company with his big brother, Tye.

"It looks like we're just idiots over there," Tye Phelps said jokingly about the third outlet in the Texas-themed chain. "We've developed an events-type operation. To tell you the truth, we don't have enough event space," given the growing corporate events business and the draw of live music.

The restaurant features foods from throughout the Lone Star State, including chicken-fried steak and an all-Texas wine list.

Tye Phelps said a big plus is the new outlet's setting — directly across from the \$1.5 billion stadium.

Location also initially drew restaurant operator Jack Baum to the space that is now home to Ocean Prime. But he and businessman Mort Meyerson dropped plans to open a restaurant there when the economy headed south and Baum focused more on his restaurant technology business.

Still, Baum sees the Ocean Prime site as "a world-class space" that will benefit from having the Rosewood Crescent

Hotel across the street and an office crowd nearby.

"The biggest void in Uptown is white-tablecloth seafood," he said. "The space, I think, is going to be utilized well."

Both Baum and Mitchell said they were also drawn to the location by the opportunity to work with the landlord — the Hunt family. The 19-story Rosewood Court houses the headquarters of the Hunt family's Rosewood Corp. investment firm and other tenants.

"We like the location there a lot," Mitchell said. "We like Dallas a lot."

"This [recession] will end just like the boom time ended," he added. "We want to be here for 20 years. We're in it for the long haul."