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News

Taking The Dining Experience To The Big Screen

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Published: October 21, 2010

By Louis Llovio
Media General News Service

By combining white-tablecloth dining with the latest Hollywood blockbusters, CinéBistro looks to change the way the Richmond area gets its entertainment.

"We have built a 360-degree [entertainment] experience," said Matthew S. Russell, general manager of the new CinéBistro at Stony Point Fashion Park in South Richmond.

The theater is set to open tomorrow.

CinéBistro, which combines fine dining and movies under one roof, is about 30,000 square feet. It is next to Dillard's in space formerly occupied by Copeland's Cheesecake Bistro, which closed nearly two years ago.

The entrance to the theater is through the interior part of the mall. There is no access from the north parking lot.

CinéBistro has six screens that show Hollywood blockbusters as well as art-house and independent films on digital systems. Along with movies, it will host special viewings, such as opera, sports, music and cultural programming. However, leave the kids at home. The theater is designed for those 21-years old and up to enjoy dinner and a movie or just dinner.

Each theater is equipped with high-backed reclining leather chairs and wood tray tables attached to the seat arm. Diners can reserve specific seats online or at the theater.

CinéBistro has a lobby bar and outside patio serving wine and cocktails where patrons do not have to catch a film to experience the menu.

Employees working at the concierge desk greet moviegoers when they walk into the elegantly decorated movie house. The staff can give advice on the best place to sit, the movies themselves and the menu.

The theater will have about 60 employees.

Because of its higher-end menu and service levels, the operation must work with pinpoint timing to be successful, Russell said.

Patrons are asked to show up at least 30 minutes before the start of the movie to take advantage of the entire experience, Russell said.

Once a moviegoer is seated, a server takes the food, drink or dessert order.

That's where the precision comes in. "It's tight," executive chef Matthew Woodward said of the time frame.

The server punches the order into a handheld device. The order is beamed to the kitchen, where it pops up on a series of screens. The kitchen staff then gets to work as runners bring out drinks.

CinéBistro's menu features chef-prepared American Bistro cuisine.



"CinéBistro's menu features chef-prepared American Bistro cuisine." - photo by Elizabeth Farina

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General Manager Matthew S. Russell, left, and head chef Matthew Woodward at CinéBistro. - photo by Elizabeth Farina

For appetizers, the menu includes guacamole and chips (\$8) and crab dip (\$13). For a main course, there is pan seared salmon (\$19), New York strip steak (\$23) and crab cakes (\$23). The desserts include a deconstructed peanut butter pie (\$8) and a chocolate cake (\$9).

Woodward said the average meal makes it to the table within 15 minutes after ordering -- and he's working to speed up the time. Runners deliver the meal so servers don't need to monitor what's happening in the kitchen.

Once the movie begins, the table service ends so not to disturb the feature film. Customers can still get food or drinks from the bar, where they get a beeper for when the food is ready for pickup.

Aside from the menu items and drinks, CinéBistro also sells popcorn and candy.

Russell, the general manager, said the key to CinéBistro's success is its focus on the restaurant experience.

"We're a white-tablecloth restaurant that happens to show movies," he said.

CinéBistro is owned by Alabama-based Cobb Theatres, which has been operating movie theaters since 1921.

The company has 210 screens at 17 theaters in the Southeast.

The company introduced the CinéBistro concept in 2008 and now has six locations, including one in Hampton. The Hampton location includes a nine-lane bowling alley.

Chief Operating Officer Jeremy P. Welman said Cobb decided to try the concept as a way to capture customers who wanted to see a movie but wanted something different from the standard movie experience.

"This is something beyond that. . . . It goes far beyond the local cineplex," he said.

Louis Llovio is a columnist for the Richmond Times-Dispatch



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