

Sunday Free Press

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2024 | FREEP.COM

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Columnist
Detroit Free Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

Film traces Detroit's restaurant resurgence to stars of the 1980s

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Maybe you've watched "The Bear," the FX series about a Chicago restaurant where the chefs' average decibel level is a shout. Or you've seen anything with Gordon Ramsay and thought, "Jeez, that's intense."

Compared to the kitchens he learned in, says Keith Famie, "That's kindergarten."

And that's not a complaint. It's more of an ode, really, to an era that couldn't be repeated today, but in Famie's telling, helped turn Detroit into the restaurant destination it has become.

Famie, 64, was part of a bold, hot generation of chefs who made names for themselves in the city in the 1980s and '90s. Now he's a documentary filmmaker, doing battle with lighting and finances and deadlines while swatting down occasional thoughts of a return to his old job.

His latest work, "Detroit: The City of Chefs," debuts on multiple screens Monday night at the Emagine Theatre Novi, then airs on WTVS-TV at 9 p.m. Thursday. It's built around history, interviews and even clay representations of the chefs, hosts and writers who made the era something worth commemorating.

"This one's a little personal," Famie says, "because I lived it."

For those who didn't — for those who don't remember the buzz around the opening of a new restaurant from chefs like Jimmy Schmidt of the Rattlesnake Club, Brian Polcyn of Five Lakes Grill, Shawn Loving of Loving Spoonful or Mary Brady of Diamond Jim Brady's — he says it's relevant anyway.

Their influence, he contends, can be felt and tasted throughout southeast Michigan today, and it's the atmosphere they helped create that keeps drawing talent to what used to be a culinary flyover.

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Chef Keith Famie demonstrates how he prepares a dish. PHOTO PROVIDED BY KEITH FAMIE

Rubin

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The story starts, as most do, with immigrants, bringing the tastes and flair of their cultures to Detroit. It continues with what he considers the culinary Big Three.

They were the professionals, he says, who raised the game of everyone around them: Milos Cihelka from Czechoslovakia, best known for the Golden Mushroom in Southfield, who's in the film; French-Canadian Douglas Grech, known as "Chef Duglass, Duglass"; and New Zealander Yvonne Gill.

Cihelka, now 94, was the general, or maybe more accurately the drill sergeant.

"It was very militaristic," Famie says. "But you know what? Maybe that structure was something we needed."

A calling, and a connection

Famie barely made it through Farmington High School. If not for a counselor who suggested the Southwest Oakland Vocational School in Walled Lake, he probably would have joined the military, an honorable step but not one that would have put him behind a camera decades later.

"I was a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant," he says. "I thought, 'I like to eat. How hard can this be?'"

Exceedingly, it turned out. But it was also mesmerizing.

His classmates included Polcyn, Marcus Haight and Jeff Baldwin, who all became renowned chefs or educators or both. "We were misfits. Real misfits," he says, until they found their calling.

As for Famie, he found more than that. His late father, a Ford engineer, "was always disappointed in me," he says.

Then came the night his first restaurant opened. Raphael's at the Sheraton Oaks Novi Hotel was small, only 42 seats, but it was packed, and when the 22-year-old chef walked through the dining room, the customers stood and



Chef Milo Cihelka, of the Golden Mushroom in Southfield, sharpens his knives on May 16, 1976.

HUGH GRANNUM/DETROIT FREE PRESS

cheered.

"It was the first time my father said he loved me and he was proud of me," Famie says.

Chalk it up to the power of food.

Ingredients for a movie

Now comes "Detroit: The City of Chefs," with its Novi debut a fundraiser for the Rainbow Connection and four other local charities. Tickets to catch it on the big screen are \$20, and include a stroll through a Chef's Alley with vendors offering samples and authors signing cookbooks.

The movie has moments of humor, Famie says. It has stop-motion chefs, automated by students from the College for Creative Studies, clambering down a cake baked by culinary arts students from the renowned program at Schoolcraft College. It has appearances by the likes of Paul Grosz from Cuisine and Luciano DelSignore from Bacco Ristorante in Southfield, closed in March and already demolished and missed.

Jill Jack contributed a new song, "Legends of the Stove," and she blended in the three words Famie uses to define his era — daring, dedicated, defiant.

"It's not about cooking," Famie says. Rather, it's about people and progress, and how a first wave of celebrity chefs helped create a city that's rightly celebrated for what's come next.

Neal Rubin has reservations Sunday at one of those new Midtown restaurants that's already drawing raves. Reach him at NRubin@freepress.com.



Clay figurines of the chefs, hosts and writers who made the Chef Keith Famie's filming era something worth commemorating are assembled as a group.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY KEITH FAMIE