

# AJW Food & Dining Guide

A Special Advertising Supplement to the American Jewish World

## Wildside Caterers opens kosher event center in St. Paul

By MICHAEL MEYER

Wildside Caterers is the exclusive caterer to the stateily and historic St. Paul event center, 317 on Rice Park. Many of you will recognize the building as the former Minnesota Club, which was refurbished in 2000. This new space is a wonderful place to hold an event — yet the real news is not the space but the kosher food program being offered.

At the beginning of the month, Wildside Caterers began distributing their kosher catering menus to clients who have patiently waited for up to three months. Of course, a kosher menu is nothing new, as several caterers offer kosher items on their menus. So, what is it about this company and this menu that would be worth the wait? The answer, in a word, is quality.

Wildside Caterers is managed by Morrissey Hospitality Companies, the same company that gave the Twin Cities the Saint Paul Hotel, St. Paul Grill, Pazzaluna Urban Italian and Tria Restaurant in North Oaks.

### Key players

Spend a few moments with Rabbi Asher Zeilngold and you will be readily apparent: his passion for his faith and his zeal for life. He has a quiet demeanor — often speaking just above a whisper — yet his exuberance is undeniable. He directs

The UMKosher Association, an organization that has provided kosher supervision and certification for over 200 food service companies throughout the U.S. since 1970. He knows kosher!

Michael Harper epitomizes the word “chef.” He has the pedigree, serving as the executive chef at the Fisher Island Club, a private island resort just 10 minutes by boat from Miami. He has the training, serving as an intern with the great chefs of Europe, and he has the attitude: “We strive for perfection and accept excellence,” he says.

Keith Reardon, general manager of Wildside Caterers, is a quiet unsung man who lives in a world of controlled chaos. His company serves as many as 75,000 people over the course of a weekend, yet Reardon demands attention to the most minute details. Wildside Caterers provides premium food and catering services to Xcel Energy Center, RiverCentre and 317 on Rice Park.

Last July, these three men embarked on a journey to create what they hoped would be the finest kosher dining experience in Minnesota. To accomplish their goal, they spent countless hours in the kitchen, untold hours on the phone and several days in New York. They are confident the outcome was well worth their efforts.

### Why kosher?

Reardon, a 15-year veteran of



Aaron Smith

**Rabbi Asher Zeilngold, Chef Michael Harper and Keith Reardon collaborate on Wildside Caterers' kosher menus.**

the premium catering industry, attends countless events throughout the Twin Cities and U.S. He was constantly told that kosher food, for whatever reason, was all but ignored in the Midwest. He was once told “good” kosher food is an oxymoron; it simply does not exist outside of New York. Intrigued, he decided that his Wildside Caterers could succeed where others failed and he launched an ambitious plan to become the region's finest kosher caterer.

Reardon was challenged by Bill Morrissey, president of Wildside Caterers and Morrissey Hospitality Companies, to do something special. He immediately turned to his executive chef, Michael Harper, to explore opening a kosher kitchen in 317 at Rice Park. Reardon ini-

tially thought “kosher” simply meant preparing a kitchen, investing in some china and silver, and printing menus and brochures; but he soon learned that providing a quality kosher menu would take a whole lot more.

Chef Harper contacted a rabbi he had worked with once before, Rabbi Zeilngold, one of the leading authorities on *koshrut*, Jewish dietary laws, and someone who loves good food.

“It was an interesting process from the very beginning. We knew we had an opportunity to do something special and we were equally committed to doing just that,” Reardon recalls.

During their first meeting back in May, they devised a plan to prepare the kitchen, create a menu and begin marketing the program to the Jewish community. They had the kitchen set aside and it seemed this would be an easy transition. Equipment was ordered, advertising space reserved and everything seemed to go as planned — until they began to create the menu.

“Everything was going great, until we began the menu creation process,” comments Reardon. “We came to realize why good kosher food is very hard to find. Most of what was available was prepackaged and lacked the taste profiles we demand of the products we serve. The products we tried were expensive or just not

very good.... If we were going to provide kosher, then we were going to do it right or not at all.”

Zeilngold informed Harper and Reardon that the kosher products needed to create a menu from scratch were not readily available in the Twin Cities. They would need to find vendors that could consistently provide the raw products desired by Chef Harper in the quantities, qualities and prices needed to create foods fresh in his kitchen.

“Michael is very gifted,” Zeilngold says. “He and Keith know what excellent food is and they are determined to make sure what they create is very enjoyable. What they tasted did not excite them, so I told them that we can prepare the kitchen but to find food vendors we would need to go to Kosherfest in New York.”

### Kosherfest

Kosherfest is an event that provides an opportunity for one-stop shopping, where you can sample thousands of kosher products on one show floor. The event offers a first look at new kosher products, face-to-face meetings and networking opportunities with suppliers — the trade show draws 350 exhibitors from around the world.

“I met Rabbi Zeilngold in New York and we walked the entire floor,” Reardon says. “We spent

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## KOSHER DINING HAS A NEW HOME AT 317 ON RICE PARK

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the whole dry tasting products and speaking to vendors. It was a tremendous experience. Rabbi Zeilngold explained the various foods, the tradition and importance of certain foods for different holidays."

"It is a wonderful event," explains Rabbi Zeilngold. "Kosher foods have come a long way.... We tasted new wines, pastries, desserts and kugels — noodle and potato kugels — it was just wonderful."

Zeilngold and Reardon returned from New York with reams of materials on products from vendors throughout the world. The team then began the process of creating the menus, negotiating with vendors, arranging shipping to ensure both freshness and timeliness. Over the next two months, Harper and Reardon worked diligently on the details of what they conceived of as the premier kosher catering service in the Twin Cities.

Finally, on Jan. 28, seven months after they first met with the Rabbi Zeilngold, more than 10 months after Reardon proposed his plan to Morrissey at MHC, Wildside Caterers brought their kosher service to market.

"I am both excited and relieved," says Reardon. "I remember sitting in my office back in August, feeling completely drained... after six months we

were no closer to providing this service than we were in July when we ordered the china. In hindsight, I wouldn't have had it any other way. My staff and I have learned so much, not merely about the food but about the tradition and history. We feel we can truly partner in their events, not merely provide catering."

"It has been a very pleasurable experience," Zeilngold observes. "Our religion, our tradition is important. We have worked hard to make sure our community has a resource to help them in their faith, in their celebrations.... It's my hope that our community realizes that our religious practices and traditions are important and they embrace what we have worked so hard to create."

The kosher service at 317 on Rice Park will proudly display the UMKosher emblem, which is accepted and respected by all the major kosher organizations. Products bearing the UMKosher seal of kosher approval are marketed throughout the world.

For more information on Wildside Caterers and 317 on Rice Park, contact Melody Haines, director of catering, at 651-726-8819, or visit the web site: [www.wildsidecaterers.com](http://www.wildsidecaterers.com).

For information on UMKosher, contact Rabbi Asher Zeilngold at 651-698-8300, or go to: [www.umkosher.com](http://www.umkosher.com).

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Michael Meyer is a local freelance writer.

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