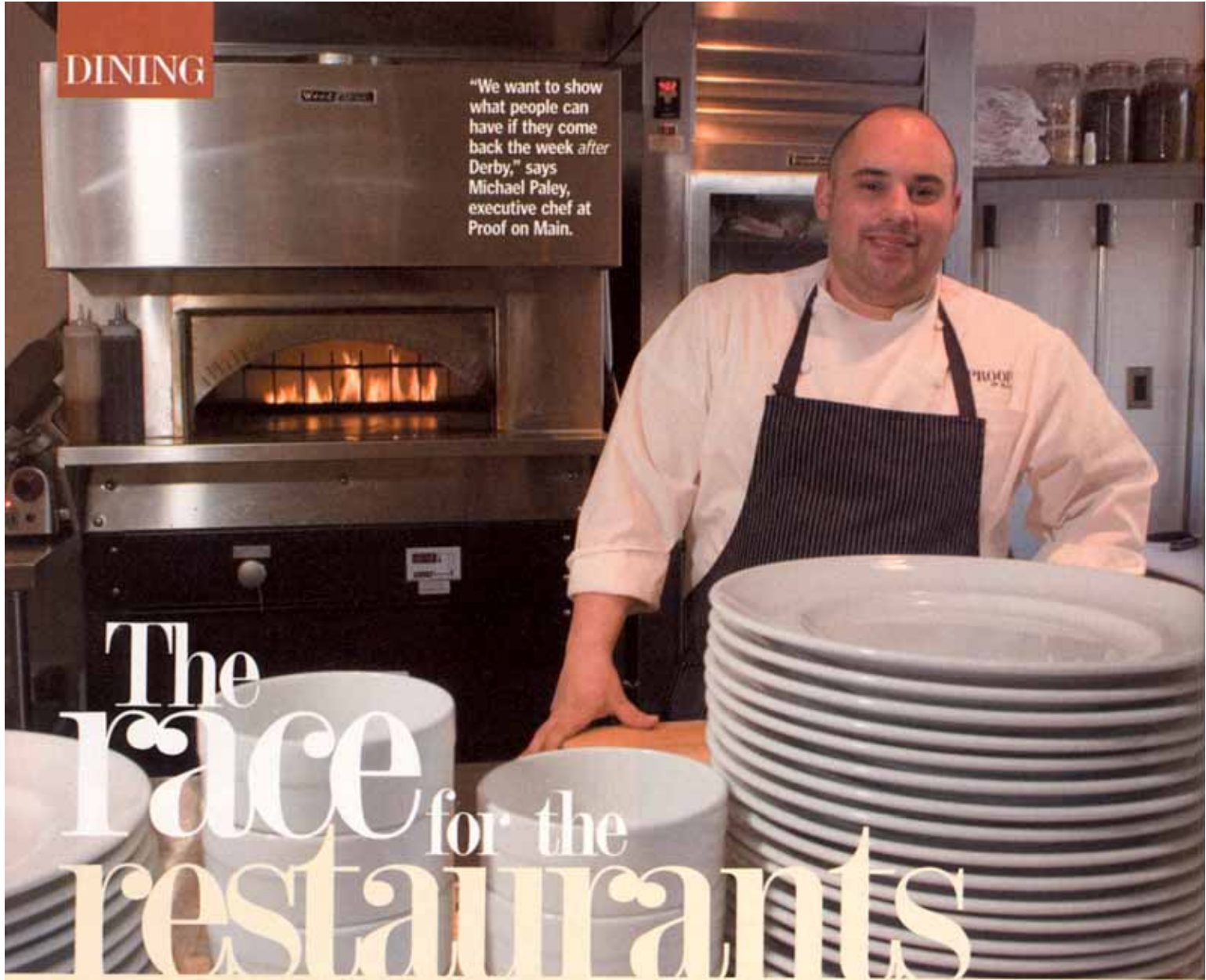


"We want to show what people can have if they come back the week after Derby," says Michael Paley, executive chef at Proof on Main.



The Race for the Restaurants

CHEF MICHAEL
PALEY KNOWS
THE FRENZY
IS COMING ...
AND HE'S READY

WRITTEN BY RON MIKULAK |
PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANKIE STEELE

FOR Louisville restaurateurs, it's the one week when you absolutely must be at the top of your game.

The Derby still is a month away, but the city's chefs already know what's coming: Hungry out-of-towners will jam the reservation books, longtime customers will expect to show up with their friends, tables will be full, service will be stretched thin and kitchens will be slammed. Reputations will be won or lost.

And yet, with only one Derby under his apron strings, Michael Paley isn't flustered at the prospect of the frenzy that hits Louisville during Derby week.

In fact, the executive chef at Proof on Main is looking forward to the challenge that Derby time presents.

“ONE great thing about Derby is it’s spring-time,” he said. “All the local food producers are up and running.”

One of the joys of his job at the upscale restaurant at 702 W. Main St. is working with smaller local farms to get the vegetables he prefers. “Here I can talk to the farmers and work together with them,” Paley said.

One might think that in Florida, where Paley last worked, getting good local produce would be even easier, but it isn’t so. “In Florida, there are few small farms growing specialized produce,” Paley explained. “It’s all high-quantity production that goes out of state.”

Among the locally grown ingredients Paley looks forward to incorporating are fresh new peas, small stalks of asparagus, great local greens and even wild leeks.

“Derby is an opportunity to showcase some higher-end products,” Paley said. He hopes to fly in some fresh fish from Europe this Derby and is looking for some special meats, “grandiose things,” as he put it, for the restaurant’s Saturday night prix-fixe dinner.

But the real trick, he says, is to strike the right balance between the high expectations of out-of-town guests, his own desire to showcase the talents of his kitchen and staff, and the style of cooking that his regular patrons have come to enjoy.

Both Paley and house manager Jeremy Beck look forward to their local fans bringing in guests from out of town, so while they want the menu to be special, they don’t want it to be out of character. “We want to show what people can have if they come back the week after Derby,” Paley said.

A similar balance must be struck on the service side of the restaurant. The four or five days surrounding the race are among the busiest of the year for restaurants. “It’s like Christmas season,” Beck said, “only really condensed.”

Proof seats about 100 and, Beck noted, “Everyone wants to eat at once. And no one wants to wait in the bar for two hours for a table.”

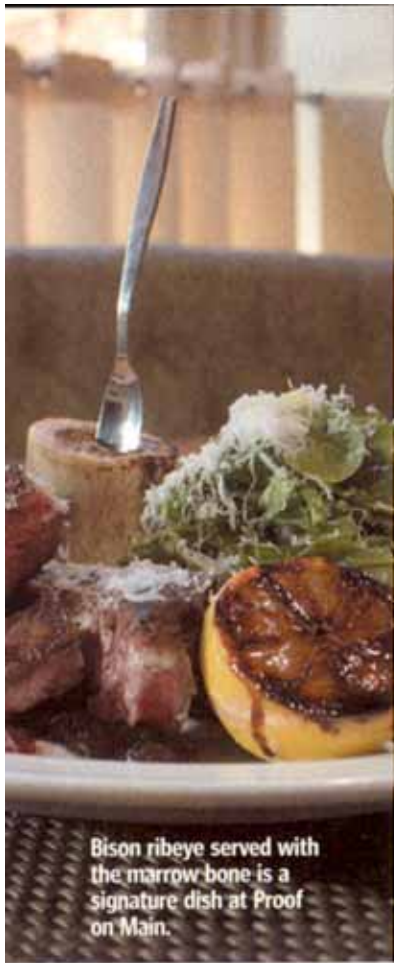
The logistics of reserving, serving and turning over tables for the next party of diners tests everyone’s personal resolve and teamwork during Derby week.

Beck’s service staff will be working longer hours to meet the demands, and simply hiring more servers isn’t an answer: They’d need to be trained to understand the menu and beverage service, then let go in a week or two.

Here is where belonging to a restaurant group can be of value. The Myriad Group, which manages Proof, can call on a task force of managers and trouble-shooters from other restaurants in several states to help out when needed. Such a group came in last March to help open the restaurant.

“The Breeders’ Cup showed us that the restaurant had gotten a lot of buzz,” said Beck. Paley added, “The kind of clientele that come to town for those races, and for the Derby, have a level of expectation that the restaurant will have to work to meet.”

He knows that after the dust settles on Churchill Downs’ home-stretch, the real stampede begins.



Bison ribeye served with the marrow bone is a signature dish at Proof on Main.

PROOF SURVIVED ITS FIRST DERBY

WHEN Proof on Main opened in March last year, executive chef Michael Paley and house manager Jeremy Beck had no idea what would be in store for them a mere two months later.

Neither is a Louisville native, and neither was familiar with the peculiar intensity that accompanies the Kentucky Derby for high-end restaurants.

Their memory of their trial by fire, however, is rather sanguine.

“I anticipated more high maintenance and drama than actually occurred,” Paley said.

And Beck can recall only one moment when simmering personality conflicts in one large dining party resulted in shouted

insults, a brief flurry of shoving and several in the party storming out of the restaurant.

“It had nothing to do with the food or the service,” Beck said. “It was all about people at one table getting steamed at people at another.” Beck righted the remains of the parties, assured other diners that everything was under control and got the evening back on track.

Perhaps it was Paley’s experience cooking for demanding customers at upscale Florida resorts or Beck’s 10 years working for a variety of New York City restaurants that inured them to the Derby crush.

Or perhaps two months was not long enough for the buzz about Proof to have attracted the Derby faithful.

THE GREAT UNKNOWN: ROOM SERVICE

AT Proof on Main, the Derby challenge won’t just be in the dining room. There’s also room service.

An integral part of the boutique ZIC Museum Hotel, Proof’s food service is likely to feel pressure again from that direction.

Last Derby, house manager Jeremy Beck said, “After a long week of partying, quite a few people opted to stay in their rooms after the race and have comfort food deli-

vered to them.”

This year he plans to devote one server to nothing else.

Executive chef Michael Paley is concerned about snags, too.

“Everything is made-to-order for room service,” he explained. “And the carts are small; they can only hold two orders at a time.” He figures there could be a lot of hustling if large room-service orders come in all at once.

STRATEGIES FOR DERBY DINING

► **Book early:** Start inquiring of your favorite places early in the new year. Many top tables are filled by mid-February.

► **Call often:** Keep in touch with reservation managers to let them know you are still interested and want to be called as soon as there is a cancellation. Several managers said waiting lists can give you as much as a 40 percent chance of getting a table.

► **Dine in small groups:** Limestone already has booked a party of 100 that will take over the main room. But if only 90 actually show up, there is suddenly room for five couples or two parties of four or five. Be on a waiting list (or two), make known the absolute size of your party, and call a day or two before to remind the staff that you are ready to jump if there is a cancellation.

► **Dine early:** Especially on Saturday, restaurants expect their crowds after the Derby has run. If you can eat earlier, you might find tables available.

► **Set your sights lower:** Louisville has many good restaurants. Try newer ones that have not yet developed a reputation or tradition with out-of-town diners.

► **The best nights:** Some restaurants say Friday, Derby Eve, is their big night; others are filled to the brim Saturday. Some say Derby fans often are partied out by Saturday, and business is not as hectic. Almost everyone says Thursday of Derby week is good for partying too, but often there is not as much of a crush. Call around, be flexible, and plan your big night out accordingly.