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## Circa owner fills his Plates

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Restaurateur David Mantelmacher just came off his worst quarter. So why is the owner of Center City's posh Circa opening two suburban restaurants?

It's simple: He's following his customers.

Mantelmacher opened Plate in Ardmore's Suburban Square last month and is finalizing plans for a second helping of Plate in Wyncote's Cedarbrook Hill Apartments, where the owners are spending at least \$10 million on renovations and retail additions.

"Things have changed in Center City. We've had 10 years at Circa. But we're feeling the effects of the convention center and the economy," he said, referring to



**David Mantelmacher wanted to bring dining options to the 'burbs.**

the drop in bookings at the Pennsylvania Convention Center.

"Our regular customers are nonexistent. Many of them live on the Main Line. They're telling me, 'We never go to Center City anymore. There's the [high cost of] parking...' I just had my toughest quarter ever," Mantelmacher said.

Corporate business, recruiting dinners, convention business has all dried up, he said.

His lease at Circa is coming up for renewal and, he said, if he can get a "reasonable deal," he'll stay and overhaul the restaurant.

"We had a great run here," Mantelmacher said. "We were one of the original guys on the street," along with Le Bec-Fin, Striped Bass and Susanna Foo. Since then, the stretch of Walnut Street, from Broad to Rittenhouse Square, has become known as "Restaurant Row," and has added Alma De Cuba, Brasserie Perrier and Pasion!

Yet Mantelmacher, who is 39, married and lives in Penn Valley with his wife and two young children, said many of his contemporaries live in the suburbs. It's a natural that they would

want restaurants closer to home.

"I didn't want a city concept in the suburbs. I didn't want to detract from what's going on in Center City. I didn't want to compete with Center City," he said.

His first suburban venture, Plate, opened last month in the former La Parisienne restaurant, which closed 18 months ago.

While Circa is housed in a cathedral-like former bank, Plate would have to make the best of a one-story suburban building; while Circa offers ginger-crust Ahi tuna at \$25 a plate, Plate offers entrees like slow-smoked beef brisket at \$16.50. In short, Mantelmacher wasn't trying to extend Restaurant Row westward.

Mantelmacher even veered somewhat from the original design, by Center City-based DAS Architects, which last year designed the total makeover of Le Bec-Fin. Instead, he incorporated his own ideas and those of John Bolle of John Bolle Design Inc. into the DAS design.

They blew out the wall that separated two dining rooms, and added an outdoor seating area

and huge oval bar. Circular track lighting suggests the shape of a plate.

The name “Plate,” incidentally, was Mantelmacher’s idea. “I wanted a cool name — something to do with food, but not something with ‘French’ or ‘Mediterranean’ in it.” There is no connection to Fork, the Old City restaurant owned by Ellen Yin.

“A lot of people are confused. I don’t get it,” Mantelmacher said.

While restaurants of this size and magnitude often cost in excess of \$1 million, Mantelmacher was able to keep the budget in the “mid-to-high six figures,” he said, because the previous owners had made the major investment. The sprawling, well-equipped kitchen saved the restaurateur \$350,000 alone, he said.

The restaurant also came with a “stone-fired” stove — a huge, open furnace-like oven much like wood-fired ovens used in some pizza places. The oven, which juts into the dining room, was relatively new and worth several thousand dollars, so Mantelmacher and executive chef Tom Harkins decided they would incorporate it both into the decor and also the menu offerings.

To learn how to cook with the giant oven, Harkins and

chef Gerald Petrus trained at manufacturer Wood Stone Corp.’s headquarters in Bellingham, Wash.

With the menu, Mantelmacher and Harkins hoped to offer reasonably priced food — what Mantelmacher calls “modern American comfort food.”

“It’s ‘comfort’ with a twist, contemporary with a twist,” Mantelmacher said.

Appetizers range from deviled eggs, served with smoked salmon and black bread, to “spicy Ahi tuna flatbread.” Entrees include sesame-crusting tuna and “porcupine” shrimp made with filo and remoulade.

On a recent Friday night at Plate, the 110-seat restaurant had a long wait for tables. The round bar area overflowed with patrons.

Among those eating there were David Lipson, publisher of Philadelphia magazine; Stephen H. Gartner, chief operating officer at the Bala Cynwyd real estate firm Michael Salove Co.; and Adam Deringer, managing director of Brownstein Group’s Fingerprint Interactive division.

The clientele befits a lifestyle mall which has a mix of shops made up of Williams-Sonoma, Renovation Hardware, Ann Taylor, Coach, Banana



**Plate at Surban Square in Ardmore.**

Republic and others.

Suburban Square, which is owned by Dallas-based Amerishop Real Estate Services LP, is in the process of adding 55,000 square feet to the current 250,000. The additional space will house a Trader Joe’s store and allow for the relocation of the Farmers Market, as well as 17,000 square feet of retail space in a separate location.

Mantelmacher’s other venture, in Wyncote, is expected to be nearly entirely financed by the manager and partial owner of the Cedarbrook Hill Apartments, Stamford, Conn.-based Ceebraid-Signal Corp., which bought the property two years ago. The property includes three towers of at least 14 stories and a mix of retail.