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## Tastes of Arkansas tempt diners

**BY LAURA STEVENS**

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LITTLE ROCK — What could be the biggest change during the extensive renovation of the Capital Hotel has nothing to do with construction.

It's the menu.

Don't go in expecting to be able to order your old favorites at Ashley's restaurant or the Capital Bar and Grill. While the cuisine used to have a continental European flair, it's now going to focus on being Arkansan with an upscale twist, executive chef Lee Richardson said.

As much food as possible will come from the state, and it will have a foundation in Southern culture and tradition, Richardson said. For instance, they'll serve a succotash, but it will be in a vinaigrette rather than cooked down to a mush-like consistency. Also: buckwheat pancakes with caviar and creme fraiche.

There may be some initial resistance from customers accustomed to the old menu, he said. People also might be wary of the unknown - such as the meat pies with ranch dressing on the Capital Grill's menu, basically fried empanadas.

"I expect that, and I expect a real battle," he said. "People don't know that we have a very different identity that we've created.

"Trust is the most important thing."

While the menu will be Arkansan, it won't necessarily be what you expect, Richardson said.

For instance, instead of making corn meal fried catfish for the Capital Grill, the restaurant will grind up Arkansas rice and use that to bread the fish.

"We start off with the foundation of wanting an artisan product," Richardson said. "That sets us up to pay tribute to Southern food."

Richardson said he was won over by Little Rock when he visited the River Market's Ottenheimer Market Hall and started seeing some of the food produced in-state by farmers, such as buckwheat flour, grits, cornmeal and cheddar cheese. He said the hotel is trying to buy from small growers, "the heart and soul" of Arkansas.

In the same vein, the hotel is making much of its food inhouse, including fruit spreads, yogurt, ricotta cheese, pasta, sauerkraut, soda crackers, pickles, sausage and cured meats, as well as pastries, including croissants and even its own version of Moon Pies. "Most people buy [pastries] frozen just because it takes so much time to do it well," he said.

Richardson, who grew up in Louisiana, said Arkansas has a rich culinary tradition because it borders so many states and incorporates both Delta and Ozark cuisine. He called the state an "American cultural melting pot," although different from Miami or New York.

Ashley's will have four rotating menus, but it will be an organic change from season to season, he said.

"The blackberries and the peaches don't talk to each other about going out of season," he said.

The menu will be fixed price for a number of courses. Prices will start at \$18 for breakfast, \$25 for lunch and \$45 for dinner.

"Total private dining pricing is based upon a price tier rather than the entree so that the guest doesn't have to select the 'chicken dinner' to achieve their price objective," Chuck Magill, director of marketing for the hotel, wrote in an e-mail. He said each price point includes a selection of poultry, seafood or meat, and the pricing differences will be based on the ingredients and complexity of preparation.

"Value is important," Richardson said. "We didn't just have an expensive renovation and now we're going to stick it to everyone."

Dan O'Byrne, chief executive officer of the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau, said both Ashley's and the Capital Grill were welcome additions to the city, "and I'm sure they'll be bigger and better than ever." Plus, it's always good to add variety to Little Rock's restaurant offerings.

"In the restaurant business, more and varied is better," he said.

Richardson said while he expects Ashley's will now be the best restaurant in town, the menu at the Capital Grill will compete with any other restaurant.

"This is not an argument I'm going to win verbally, but if I can get it in your belly, the conversation's over," Richardson said.

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