

# Bethesda

## MAGAZINE

### Raising the Steaks

Bethesda now boasts four choice steakhouses. Are there are enough beefeaters to go around?

By Kathryn McKay

**B**ig beef has come to Bethesda. Ruth's Chris arrived first in 1996 and had the market to itself until June 2004 when local rabbis blessed the opening of the kosher Red Heifer. Morton's, the Steakhouse opened in February 2005. And Old Homestead, an institution in Manhattan since 1868, opened in May.

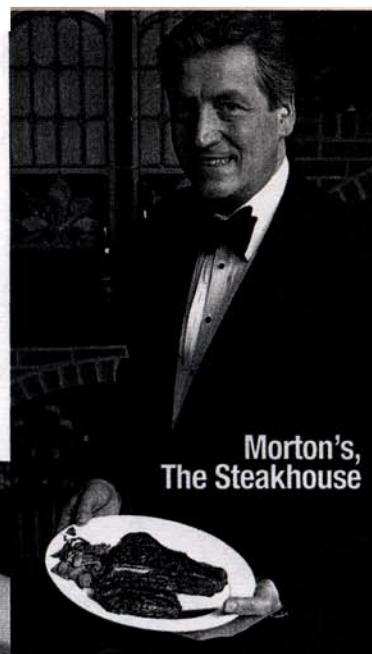
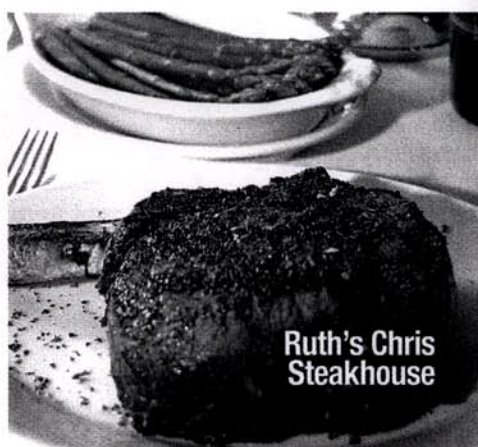
Is Bethesda really a steak kind of place? In a town known for diverse international cuisine, will enough diners dig in for an expensive meal of beef and potatoes? The beef battle has begun.

"The big steakhouses are pretty aggressive," says Clark Wolf, international restaurant consultant in New York City. "Beef restaurants' expansion to Bethesda is the next logical step for upscale dining. People are eating closer to home. Visually, people might be thinking of grilling in the back yard as they're pulling up for valet parking at a steak restaurant."

"We love Bethesda," says Gus Foranis, regional vice president of Ruth's Chris. "We have 89 restaurants around the world. Bethesda is one of our top 10 restaurants."

General Manager Bob Moroney, a Maryland native, says, "Even though we're a chain, people here tend to think of us as their local restaurant. On a Saturday night, probably 70 percent of our business is repeat customers. It's almost like a club."

The Red Heifer has yet to catch on in a big way. "We need more people coming through the door," says John Welfeld, the restaurant's manager, who took over in January. "Now, thank God, we're turning this cow around." Following strict orthodox Jewish guidelines, the restaurant is closed during prime time—Friday and Saturday nights. Welfeld estimates that 80 percent of his clientele is Jewish. As for his new neigh-



STACY ZARRIN PHOTOS

Theatre, Wallick says.

The influx of upscale steakhouses brings mixed reviews from other restaurants. Jason Tepper, owner of La Miche, extends a welcome. "We're not that small of a city anymore," he explains. "It's not like Wal-Mart coming in and tak-

ing away Kmart's business. These places would do well in the middle of a desert." While Tepper doesn't consider the beef restaurants as competition, he says, "I have a better steak. I'll go head to head any day."

Jacques Nawar, owner of Café Europa says, "I'm worried that the independent restaurants that Bethesda is famous for will get swallowed up. These chains come in with their corporate advertising dollars and it's hard to compete. I see the restaurant business as a pie. Corporate chains come in and get a bigger piece. Some of us may end up with crumbs." "The reality is that restaurants in Bethesda come and go," says Jeff Black, owner of Black's Bar and Kitchen. "If you open in Bethesda, you've got to compete." He acknowledges that these "big guys will draw business because of their names."

Suzanne Matteson, general manager of Persimmon, is surprised that so many steakhouses are moving in. "I didn't perceive Bethesda as a meat and potatoes kind of town," she says. "We could end up with overkill. Time will tell."

Freelance writer Kathryn McKay has lived in Bethesda since 1987.

bors, Welfeld isn't worried. "We're a rare animal," says Welfeld. "We're the only glatt kosher restaurant between Miami and New York that offers fine dining. I'm reaching out to the Jewish community, but we'd like to reach more gentiles too."

With the opening of its Bethesda location, Morton's now has more restaurants in the Washington area than in any other metropolitan area. "We want people to find comfort in the same décor and same menu whether you're in Toronto, Singapore or Bethesda," says Ned Mirkovic, general manager of the Bethesda Morton's. Mirkovic, who has lived in the Bethesda area since 1987, says, "I've always thought there was room for Morton's here. And our feedback shows we have the stamp of approval."

Old Homestead seeks to be a little different. "We're not looking to be a typical old boys' steakhouse in Bethesda," says Tom Wallick, director of operations. The menu is similar to its other locations in Manhattan and Atlantic City, but the décor is lighter and brighter, and outdoor dining will attract customers, including patrons of its neighbor, the Round House