

By Julia M. Klein

Sing no swan song for Steve Poses, Philadelphia restaurateur to the masses, inspiration to a generation of chefs, owner of the once-chic, now-defunct Commissary.

"You should not be worried that I'm starving," says Poses, 45, as he presides over the transformation of his gourmet cafeteria at 1716 Sanson St. into a storefront for his lucrative catering operation. "Although I can tell you that I've lost a small fortune in the last number of years."

Let's tick off the losses: "City Bites 1st Second and Walnut Streets probably cost us a million dollars. Prog's closing probably cost us a quarter of a million dollars, and the last two years of the Commissary probably cost us well over \$200,000 — so you can add those things up," Poses says, disdaining the calculation. "It's a big business that is easy to make money on in the first six months. But after that it gets hard — and you can lose money in a hurry."

Once, though, when the fabied Philadelphia restaurant renaissance and Poses were both young, it seemed everything the man touched turned into ... food. With strange new spices and interesting sauces, in settings creative and different. The Commissary, for example, was a cafeteria remanaged, an inexpensive, a la carte way to dine well in a room loaded with low-key charm.

But not only the landmark cafeteria, closed Oct. 25 after more than 14 years, is gone.

So, too, says Poses, is an era of explosive restaurant growth and adventurous dining. In fact, proclaims Poses, the Philadelphia restaurant renaissance, which he did so much to spark, is over. "I think the era ended some time ago," he says. "We're now discovering that it ended."

So there is, after all, a valdictory to be said.

"We had a very special time," says Poses, who ventured into the business by opening Prog in 1973 and whose Shooting Stars Inc. still operates 16th Street Bar & Grill, two restaurants at the Franklin Institute, the Commissary Market and the new 35-seat Market Cafe.

"You had baby boomers who were well-educated, cultured, who were looking for alternative lifestyles, who were willing to open restaurants. You had an economy in which you could still open a restaurant for not too much money... and then you had a ... customer base that was just discovering food," he explains.

"And it was a wonderful partnership between the economic times, the restaurateurs and the dining public that is unlikely to occur again." At least, Poses adds, for 15 more years.

The aging of the market, a population shift to the suburbs, an emphasis on forming families rather than dating, even just a lack of newness — all these have contributed to the demise of the restaurant



The Philadelphia Inquirer / MICHAEL O'BRIAN

Poses, at the still-open Commissary Market and its new cafe recently, is casting his lot with catering: "We'd like to become the Ikea of home entertaining."

boom, Poses says. For the Commissary's death, blame also a host of more specific factors: the Gulf War, the recession, the movement of offices north of the city center, increased competition from other nearby restaurants and the Liberty Place food mall.

"I think that, in some measure, food was a trend," Poses says. And there was no question that, in its day, the Commissary was trendy. It was a common Center City meeting place, right up there with the Clothepin; it spawned a popular cookbook, and it was a training ground for, among others, the chefs who founded Odeon, Roller's in Chestnut Hill and Jawsy's in Manayunk.

It was also a low-priced alternative to the food that baby boomers grew up with — in a way, part of their rebellion against the status quo.

Poses and his peers were raised on "reasonably cooked home food ... homogenized American cooking." And then, he says, "we, together as a generation ... traveled and discovered French food, Italian and, my God, that food came. It was like suddenly discovering a whole new set of toys ..."

This epic of discovery in the 1970s and '80s had all the excitement of a new romance, Poses says. "When you first fall in love, it's like, 'Wow, this is pretty hot. And then it settles into something different."

And I think people first fell in love with all this great food, interesting food — coriander and tamarind and all these new flavors. And after a while, it's, 'Oh, I think I'll have coriander tonight.' But it's not the same as, 'Oh my God, a fiddlehead fer! I've never seen one of those before.' (See **POSES** on 4-E)



The Philadelphia Inquirer / APRIL SALA

City Bites at Second and Walnut Streets: Born 1983, died 1987. It "probably cost us a million," says Poses.

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As dining scene changes, Poses is still cooking with catering

POSES, from 1-E
fore."

Some Philadelphia restaurateurs prefer to talk of change rather than decline. "I don't think it's over," says Rick Buscavage, general manager of Meiji-En, the three-year-old Japanese restaurant on the waterfront. "I think there's going to be a shakeout period of people who are currently in the business."

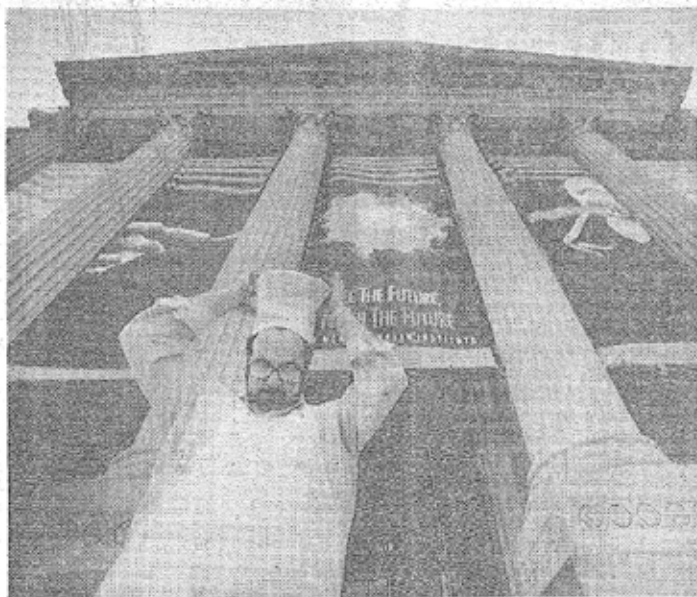
But, he says, a new movement is under way. "It's back to basics," he says. "People are going out to eat, and they're looking for a value. ... My philosophy is, quality never goes out of style."

Says Jack McDavid, owner of Jack's Firehouse in Fairmount: "The renaissance that started in the early '70s ... may be tapped out" because restaurateurs "were too scared to take chances; they just sat on their rockers." But, he says, "now I think there's a new restaurant renaissance, and I think it has a lot more ability to succeed."

It is, he says, fueled by "young, aggressive American, European and Asian chefs ..." for whom raspberry sauce on fish is out, and bison and venison are in. They are cooking "hearty foods and hearty flavors that are still light in calories and light in cholesterol."

Bill Hoffman, owner of Carolina's and general manager of Catalina, has yet another theory: He says demographic changes have made restaurants today both more consistent than at the height of the renaissance, and more cautious. "There's a much greater financial risk for getting too far afield from mainstream tastes," he says.

Poses says he was, perhaps, too cautious — too slow to make changes



The Philadelphia Inquirer / RICK BOWMER

Poses at the Franklin Institute, where he runs two restaurants.

that might have helped keep the Commissary, burdened with low profit margins and high labor costs, fresh and appealing. A last attempt to tinker with the cafeteria in January, he says, just ate away at its magic. "Sometimes," he says, "you fail to appreciate all of the special things about a place until afterwards."

But Poses says he is not looking back — not, in any case, for too long. He has a new concept, he says, to fit people's new lifestyles: "We'd like to become the Ikea of home entertaining." So he is developing a catalogue of catering menus and an event-planning guide that will help make entertaining at home simpler and more

cost-effective. "Years ago," says Poses, "we said our goal was to help people eat — we didn't care where we did it, whether it was a restaurant or an off-site location, or catering it in their home." In fact, catering, before the cafeteria closed, represented 75 percent of his company's profits.

"But I guess I have a concern," says Poses, still wearing his white chef's apron. "The cafeteria was so much what people thought of as the Commissary, the word out is, 'Oh, the Commissary closed.' Well, the market's open and we just opened a cafe, and we're reaching out in other ways. "The Commissary," he says, "lives."