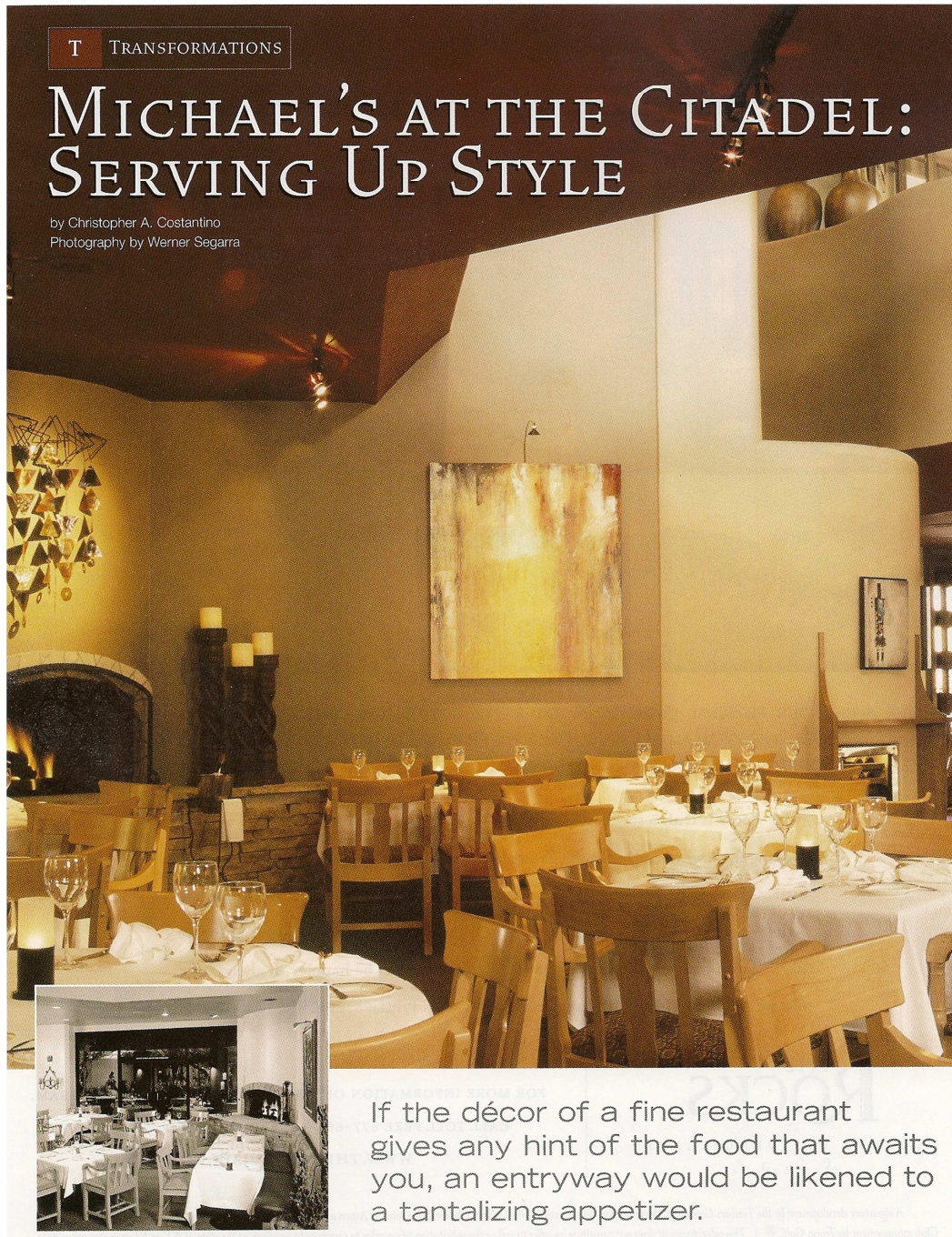


MICHAEL'S AT THE CITADEL

Serving Up Style

By Christopher A. Costantino

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MICHAEL'S AT THE CITADEL: SERVING UP STYLE

by Christopher A. Costantino
Photography by Werner Segarra

If the décor of a fine restaurant gives any hint of the food that awaits you, an entryway would be likened to a tantalizing appetizer.

Nestled into a picturesque oasis in the lush, high Sonoran desert of North Scottsdale is the acclaimed restaurant, Michael's at the Citadel. If you haven't visited recently, a return trip will have you wondering if you're in the same place at all. Having undergone a magnificent metamorphosis, this trendy spot has transformed itself from pleasant to downright magnetic. The delightful outcome is credited to a complete translation of textures; eclectic fabrics, buttery leathers and passionate paint-hues, combined with elegant carpeting, sophisticated lighting, blended metals, modern furniture and classy artwork defining a comprehensive conversion that's nothing short of *au courant*.

Surprisingly, there were no structural alternations involved in the re-design. "We were blessed with a great building and great architecture," co-owner Harlan Berman remarks. Built in 1985 by Vernon Swaback, the Citadel was originally a bank. Purchased by business partners Michael DeMaria, Harlan Berman and Brandon Maxwell in the spring of 1997, the trio confidently opened Michael's in September of the same year. Eight seasons later, it was time for an update. "We were ready for a fresh new look," admitted Berman.

A bit like falling off a cliff, the partners weren't exactly sure what to expect when they set out on the transformation path. "We needed somebody to push us off the edge," DeMaria said. Deneice Hase, designer for Robb & Stucky studios, turned out to be that "edgy" somebody they needed to pull off the look. Even though this was their first foray into commercial interior renovation, the team at Robb & Stucky appears to be off to a winning start.

If the décor of a fine restaurant gives any hint of the food that awaits you, an entryway would be likened to a tantalizing appetizer. The foyer at Michael's certainly stepped up to the plate in fulfilling its tempting role. Former unremarkable grey concrete flooring was rendered into a crimson-stained aged walkway. Created by dipping a rag into a color-dyed marble and granite mixture, then "washing" the floor with it, the result is subtle and soothing. Unusual built-in banquettes, designed by Nick's upholstery, make it a pleasure to wait for delayed dinner guests. Strips of smooth, reddish-brown leather, and texturized pony-hide were sewn together and stretched at an angle over the sofa. (A special acid-treatment applied to the pony-hide removed the hair at certain places, leaving a variegated fluid-course fiber.)

To display their extensive wine selections, a cellar was created off the foyer: four Sub-Zero silver wine coolers tucked away in ash cabinets around the base of the staircase. Oenophiles will happily pour over a list of more than 500 total selections – 200 of them with a case production of less than 1,000. Fit for its function of receiving guests, the new reception desk expertly weaves together veins of copper, granite and gold running through a walnut veneer cabinet base for a peek of the patterned elements to come. The most striking focal point of the foyer is an impressive 23-foot water wall built by Berman and DeMaria.

Once in the dining room, spicy hues such as paprika, gold, green and rust tones mirror the colorful ingredients used in the kitchen. "This kind of talent is inherent, not learned," expressed Berman. Such skill comes from Robb & Stucky's own Ernesto Garcia, a member of the American Society of Interior Designers who worked directly with Hase on the project. With a Master of Architecture, Garcia has delighted clients in Argentina, Spain, and France, as well as

firms on both coasts in the United States. A signature wall sculpture, hung on display at the staircase, showcases Garcia's genius with sheer creamy fabrics stretched over a geometric wood frame – again alluding to the materials used in the re-design.

Expertly blending traditional and contemporary components, the dining room is a feast for the eyes. Banquettes and chairs are finely clothed in mix-and-match patterns of classically understated floral and geometric square, clean line, and dotted polyester prints. Previous color schemes of tame sandstone and tan hues created minimal contrast between the walls and ceiling. Now, brushed over by a deep rust color with Clydesdale-brown undertones, the rich ceiling draws in a cozy atmosphere like a warm blanket on a damp afternoon. Woodsy green walls enhance the beauty overhead.

Southwestern art hit the trail and was replaced with an eclectic mixture of 3-D art and canvas pieces from the Phoenix Art Group that practically jump off the walls. It's a far cry from the former look that yawned in agreement with the overall "before" *mise-en-scene*. While the adjustable track lighting makes the walls pop with adornment, delicate teardrop pendants gracefully gave the boot to 80's style "can" lighting. Hand-blown Murano glass chandeliers from Hinkley's Custom Lighting sparkle exquisitely, holding their own style-show throughout the dining area.

The chef's table at Michael's offers requisite views of the kitchen, but the room is uniquely self-contained in glass so outside noise is minimal. Seating six to ten people, it's available for five or seven-course tasting meals paired with wines. Additionally, the cooking studio with seating for 12-18 offers wine and beer dinners, as well as Friday night social dinners where guests can watch the preparation process then retreat to the newly-renovated private dining room to enjoy the meal in up-scale surroundings.

For the *al fresco* crowd, choose from Michael's three updated patios. Let the soothing sounds of the water wall transport you while dining near the crackling fireplace or charming pocket window on the north patio; breathtaking views of Pinnacle Peak soaring above the upstairs patio are enhanced by a stunning firepit; guests on the south patio sink into padded wrought iron seating in stimulating reds, rusts and oranges.

"We've had incredible positive feedback with regards to the remodel," admits Berman. Never missing a beat, Michael's doors remained open to guest during the entire renovation. The process (three-and-a-half months in duration) was done one room at a time. Whimsical details of this remarkable rejuvenation greet you at every turn, but just like the innovative dishes coming from the kitchen, you'll have to discover them as you dine. Berman reveals, "What we've done on the interior reflects what's on the plate. Michael has always been an artist with respect to the culinary side. We want people to enjoy the atmosphere as much as the food." With a slight grin, he adds, "We also wanted to just let people know that we're still here."