

'Dairy Planet' shooting for the stars

By IRIS M. SAMSON, Assistant Editor

I won't go so far as to say that "The Dairy Planet" -- the new kosher restaurant that opened last week in downtown Pittsburgh -- is "out of this world."

I will note, however, that people who have eagerly awaited a kosher restaurant in Pittsburgh for almost a decade will be pleasantly surprised by the number of menu selections, the restaurant's cleanliness, and its potential.

The Dairy Planet is located at Seventh Avenue and Smithfield Street; it opened to banner-sized crowds. And while the newly-opened dairy and vegetarian eatery admittedly has a few problems -- includ-

ing a staff that is unfamiliar with many menu items, a lack of advertised foods and lapses in the service itself -- it has many more pluses than minuses.

Styled after "The Dairy Planet" in New York City, the restaurant carries a huge selection of items that tempt not only the kosher palate, but the non-kosher one as well. Included on the menu are fresh fish dishes, seven kinds of pasta and 16 entrees -- notably vegetarian chili,

vegetarian goulash made with soy substitute, protose steak (also a soy substitute), salmon croquettes, stuffed peppers and eggplant parmigiana. For those watching their weight, the restaurant offers eight diet meals and 13 different kinds of salads, including tuna, lox, Israeli-style and eggplant.

What dairy restaurant would be complete, however, without some old standbys like blintzes and noodle dishes? The blintzes are delicious; the Dairy Planet's feature a heavier consistency dough filled with a rich cheese, potato or blueberry filling.

The cheese has just a hint of vanilla, adding the appropriate sweetness without being cloying.

The Dairy Planet goes a step further, adding a Pittsburgh flavor with pirogues in several varieties on the menu.

Why did Naftalie Feldman, the owner of the Dairy Planet in New York, decide to open a restaurant in Pittsburgh? Manager Rabbi Eli Rothman explains that Feldman had already established a Pittsburgh connection: his son attends Yeshiva Achei Tmimim's high school here. Rothman approached Feldman for advice on opening a kosher restaurant; he visited the New York facility, the two men began discussions, and they decided to try out the Pittsburgh market.

The restaurant is located in the Chamber of Commerce building -- which, incidentally, is owned by two Jewish men from New York. The downstairs was once occupied by a Winky's Restaurant; it stood vacant for several years. The owners urged Feldman to open up his restaurant, to "fill a void in dining in Pittsburgh, offering to the Jewish and general community," Rothman explains.

The owners are happy, too, that the addition of the restaurant has added to the number of tenants in the building. "We're trying to

strengthen the New York-Pittsburgh connection," assures Rothman, "and we feel that now is a good time to develop that."

While the Dairy Planet is a strictly kosher restaurant -- the food is made with Cholv Yisrael products (strictly supervised milk and cheeses), is under the kashrut of Rabbi Dan Yoel Levy of the O-K Laboratories and the supervision of Rabbi Yosef Itkin as well as Rabbi Rothman -- it does not advertise itself as such. The owners are down-playing the kosher connection to attract general customers and the downtown lunch crowd.

To appeal to the kosher crowd, the owners have decided to keep the restaurant open in the evenings and on Sundays. Hours at the present time are Sunday, 12-9 p.m.; Monday through Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Friday, 11:30 to 3 p.m. Rothman adds that in a few weeks the restaurant will be open at 7 a.m. for breakfasts.

Seating in the art-deco motif restaurant accommodates 150-160 patrons. The Dairy Planet will soon open a mezzanine area that will seat an additional 120 people, and they hope to open a lounge that will specialize in kosher wines, brandies and liquors.

How is the food? When we tried the Dairy Planet, we

were pleasantly surprised by both the ambiance and the food -- and the moderate prices, far below those of New York restaurants. Chef William Saunders, who trained at the Dairy Planet in New York and has been transplanted to Pittsburgh, at times has a heavy hand with the spices, but the meals in general are inventive, bountiful and filling.

Rolls accompany all meals, and they, too, have a different flavor -- heavier than a buttermilk or crescent roll, yet memorable with a hint of onion and spice. A special touch -- the rolls and baked goods are baked right on the premises.

The fish meals have been well received by patrons, who note that it is neither dry nor disguised in sauce. Specialties like eggplant parmigiana, vegetarian chili, vegetarian goulash, stuffed peppers and "Protose steak" were outstanding in both flavor and presentation. Blandness is not a problem at The Dairy Planet; a lighter touch might not hurt most meals. Finally, top off your dinner with the New York style cheesecake -- it comes with cherry or blueberry topping, and is truly a treat.

What awaits the future? Notes Rabbi Rothman: "We don't have any schedule as yet. Our main goal is to make this restaurant excellent."

Foundation makes job grants

In response to severe cutbacks in government funding, The Pittsburgh Foundation has made a \$200,000 leadership grant to provide 150 summer jobs for disadvantaged youth in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. The Foundation acted after learning that the State Department of Labor and Industry has recently cut more than \$2 million from the budgets of city and county agencies that operate summer work programs for thousands of economically-disadvantaged youth.

According to Sholom Comay, chairman of the Distribution Committee, "The Pittsburgh Foundation has

jobs are critical to young people from low-income families who learn job skills and earn wages that are a tangible reward for the work they do.

"We hope that other pri-

vate funders and employers will join us in addressing this issue, which has serious implications for developing a stable work force in this region."

