

The Last Act

LocoMotive to close its doors.

Regulars know that every meal at the LocoMotive ends gracefully. The food in this last act shines: deep, rich caramel pot de creme, a poached Bosc pear, an exquisite dish of Lee's signature lime-coconut ice cream, Oregon Snow. Eitan might bring you a glass of Meursault as a gift to accompany your chocolate terrine, or perhaps he'll visit with you as you finish up, warming your hands around a cup of coffee.

This New Year's Eve, that last act will truly be the last. Eitan Zucker and his wife and partner, Lee, announced in September that the restaurant will not open in 2005. The closing is the end of a successful nine-year run for the LocoMotive, whose organic, vegetarian dinners have earned them a loyal following and a place among Eugene's finest restaurants.

The Zuckers came to Eugene in 1995 to start a restaurant with their daughter, a UO graduate who loved Eugene. They had traveled the world with a sharp sense of what fine cooking is about and were in a good position to begin a restaurant that appeals to a range of tastes, vegetarian and otherwise. The restaurant opened in January 1996, offering worldly, organic vegetarian food in a market where, at that time, vegetarian food was surprisingly scarce. After a year, their daughter bowed out. "She said it was too hard," Eitan says with a laugh.

But the pair remained: Lee at the helm in the kitchen, Eitan in the dining room greeting



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customers, giving menu and wine advice, and serving as an ambassador of imaginative food.

The restaurant is open only for dinner Wednesday through Sunday. But Lee and Eitan are busy all the time — maintaining their website, supplying recipes to inquiring customers, carefully thinking through the menu for the upcoming week.

Although cooking vegetarian is at the core of their philosophy, it's not the only defining characteristic. "You can't cater to vegetarians," Eitan says. "You have to cater to people who love food — that's how you bring people in to a restaurant like this." Many a skeptic

omnivore has been won over by the menu's staple dish, portobello mushroom with red wine reduction and mashed potatoes. But it is the Zuckers' insistence on quality, organic food prepared with the utmost attention that has brought them a steady line of regulars who border on fanatics.

Since their announcement, the phone has been ringing off the hook. The New Year's Eve celebration was booked full within a week. Thanksgiving was just as packed, and business has been booming. Regulars are coming twice a week now, and fans from out of town are making the trip to enjoy one more

miraculous carrot soufflé, one more bowl of pecan-chipotle soup, one more salad dressed with Lee's incredible tahini dressing. "We've been here as much as we possibly could over the last few months," says long-time LocoMotive admirer Melissa Davis, who's been requesting recipes from the Zuckers since the restaurant's 1996 beginning. "It will be a sad day when it closes."

But even with the thriving business, the Zuckers are looking forward to some time off. They're not sure what's next — perhaps cooking classes, small dinners, a book. Eitan has been collecting e-mail addresses from regulars, and the LocoMotive website will remain up and running after the restaurant's doors are closed. But for now, it's time for a break. "Lee has been here since 8 am from the beginning," Eitan says. "She needs to rest." It's been a great deal of work for both of them, but worth it — mostly because they've proven how successful a community contribution a restaurant like the LocoMotive can be. "You can satisfy all of your foodie cravings without killing animals," Eitan says.

The last act for the LocoMotive will be just as graceful. The mushroom will be there, a cannelloni dish, a curry. Eitan will move from table to table, laughing and visiting with his friends, giving wine advice, talking about where each onion and tomato was grown. People are coming to celebrate from California, Washington D.C., and elsewhere to ring in the new year, feast, and thank the Zuckers for nine years of splendid food and good company.

We have been nourished, and we loved it. **EW**

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