

EATING, OLD TAKOMA: A RESTAURANT DESTINATION

A MARKET SNAPSHOT OF THE OLD TAKOMA RESTAURANT LANDSCAPE

BY

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THE PROSPECTS

When capturing a market snapshot of the restaurant landscape in a community to determine what the prospects are for existing and future food and beverage operations, it is good to start with an analysis of density: How many restaurants populate the landscape? How many like-minded concepts compete against each other? How many more eateries can the neighborhood support?

When considering density, the make-up of the marketplace is an important factor. Historic Old Takoma Park is a well-heeled, branching, federal-designated Main Street community. It is home to a community-centric, well-educated, liberal population with a median household income of more than \$78,000 and a median household value of \$495,500. Old Takoma is a thriving, sustainable “walking” Main Street with currently 103,000 sq. feet of retail supported by a forward-looking, hands-on Old Takoma Business Association. The OTBA is keen on promoting residential expansion to support new businesses that will fill more than 67,000 sq. feet of additional retail space. Out of the gate, the demographics, the economic infrastructure and development strategy of Old Takoma all look good.

DIVERSITY: PROTECTING OLD TAKOMA EATERIES

There are currently close to two dozen eateries in the Old Takoma Main Street quarter. Remarkable is the variety, the *diversity*, of independent, locally owned concepts; they go the gamut from vegan to deli cold cuts, gelato to cheesecake, Middle Eastern to American cuisine. Remarkable too is the scarcity of like-minded culinary concepts, the most repetitive being three pizza-themed businesses and even these are not locked in head-to-head competition. What this diversity suggests is that Old Takoma administrators have concept density in check, having put together a conservative, diversified foodservice portfolio. The town leaders seem at this point committed to stay the course of protective selection when welcoming new F&B operators.

FEEDING THE HUNGRY GENERATIONS

It is safe to say that Old Takoma is an educated palate: More than one-in-two residents have BA degrees and nearly 31% post graduate credentials. It is also safe to say that many Old Takoma residents probably have cash in their wallets since the average household income is close to \$107,000. Considering that recent polls show the most frequent diners today are the well-fed 20-to-40-somethings, restaurateurs like the ripe generational mix here with ages 21 to 64 making up 64% of Old Takoma’s population. Another interesting statistic is the Consumer Expenditure index. Overall, both “food and beverage store sales” and “foodservice and drinking places sales” in Old Takoma are disproportionately less than they are in a one to three mile radius. These lackluster Consumer Expenditures sales figures could be better. If there is a restaurant density here to worry about, it may be the lack of it. Not only can Old Takoma handle more eateries, the stats suggest that Old Takoma may need more eateries.

FEEDING TWO MARKETS

So far, the market snapshot of Old Takoma’s restaurant landscape has been viewed from a narrow perspective: the view of Old Takoma as a small, local neighborhood. On the other hand, Old Takoma is a designated Main Street community making it a regional attraction, a *destination* for visitors and tourists. Call Old Takoma a *destination* and the customer-base mushrooms quickly; so do the identity of its eateries.

Generally speaking, restaurants may be classified as either *neighborhood* restaurants or *destination* restaurants. Neighborhood restaurants primarily serve the locals. Destination restaurants are generally thought of as “special occasion” restaurants that serve special events shared by the public-at-large. Main Street restaurants like those in Old Takoma are unique because they work both ways: as *neighborhood restaurants* because the locals go there to mix it up with their neighbors; and *destination restaurants* because out-of-towners go there looking for *the* local experience.

Old Takoma Main Street breaches and attracts consumers from two districts, Takoma Park, MD and Northwest D.C.; when the Takoma Park Metro station opened, suddenly Old Takoma Main Street stood to draw visitors from other more distant places in the Washington/Baltimore metro region. Consequently, its eateries feed not only local neighbors but also diners traveling the Red Line from remote neighborhoods, making Old Takoma restaurants *destination restaurants*.

RAISING THE BAR

The past several years have seen successful, high profile, well-capitalized, multi-unit operators from the DC metro area eyeing Old Takoma Main Street, including Black Restaurant Group (Republic) and Andy Shallal’s Busboys and Poets. Old Takoma diners have embraced these polished, professional newcomers and consequently raised Old Takoma’s customer expectations; in doing so, the Old Takoma diner has set a new dining standard against which all eateries, old and new, are to be judged. The path has been cleared for other professional F&B operators to capitalize on the healthy prospects in enterprising Old Takoma Park.

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A senior producer and creative director (jgarrettglover.com), Garrett produces films and TV programs for, among others, the Food Network, and develops digital content, marketing/branding, Social Media and interactive media for clients.