

# NEIGHBORHOODNOSH

BY MARY S. GILBERT  
PHOTOS BY MELODY FARRIN

## WELL-SEASONED SUCCESS SALT OF THE EARTH



On the main floor of the restaurant, dinner is served exclusively at communal tables (top). The balcony (above) features individual tables.

Being called the “salt of the earth” is an admirable designation. Fundamental. Representing the best. Highly respected. No affectations. A chef who calls his new restaurant Salt of the Earth—and depicts it graphically as NaCl, the chemical formula for sodium chloride—is sending a definite message about the eatery’s character, tastes, and intentions.

And so it is with Kevin Sousa. After much anticipation and a protracted two-and-a-half-year nascence, Sousa and business partners Doug and Liza Cruze are in full swing since opening their Penn Avenue restaurant in Garfield this past fall. The reservation line is ringing off the hook, as thousands of people have been seeking out a singular culinary experience in many ways a perfect fit for our local communities.

“People have always said that Pittsburghers are hardworking, the salt of the earth,” Sousa observes. “It’s also a religious term.”

Indeed, it’s easy to see how eating at Salt of the Earth could become an almost religious experience. The concept of the restaurant is exceptional dining minus the unnecessary pretense and added cost of conventional fine dining.

“I’ve spent my career mostly in fine dining restaurants with fine dining prices,” Sousa says. “It would have to be a special occasion for me to go to those restaurants. I got tired of working in places that I wouldn’t frequent. With Salt of the Earth, I wanted the same

quality of food, drinks, service, décor, and ambience, but not the expense.”

A native of McKees Rocks, Sousa’s culinary path began in the kitchen of his family’s homey Italian restaurants. Salt of the Earth is built upon his experience from later stints at The Duquesne Club, Kaya, Soba, Red Room Café, and Bigelow Grille, where he ran the more avant garde Alchemy (“a restaurant within a restaurant,” he says).

Sousa says he is a chef with ideas and sound technique, adept at pairing flavors that might not be thought of as going together. That creativity manifests itself in a menu like no other in the city—even in the physical sense, since it is presented exclusively on a giant chalkboard.

“We take whatever best product we can find and we do our thing with it,” he explains. “We treat it a little differently. There should be no chance that you’d make it at home.”

Case in point is his signature venison tartare—probably the most unusual item on the menu with a seemingly discordant mix of ingredients, yet very popular and typical of his passion for procuring local, seasonal products in their prime. He describes it as a dish borne of flavors specific to western Pennsylvania, including raw deer meat, Douglas fir, white chocolate, blood orange, and pumpernickel streusel.

Sousa eagerly anticipates this summer’s wild edible season, when he will forage for greens like purslane that others regard as weeds. He feels no compulsion to serve the more traditional beef filet, crab cake, or veal chop. There is no bread service. No decaf coffee. He creates food specifically for this restaurant, with accommodations made only for allergies.

And no menu item costs more than \$23. “We try to keep it accessible, but interesting, where people can have an exceptional meal for not a whole lot of cash,” he says.

The main dining area has three long, wooden communal tables that seat about 12 people each and a small bar, along with counter space open to all the workings of the kitchen. Upstairs is a quieter balcony available for reservation.

Start your meal with lettuce wraps of lamb shoulder, sheep’s yogurt, and pickled ramps (\$11) or a spicy miso tomato soup (\$6). Recent entrées have included the hanger steak prepared with Japanese-style broth, udon noodles, peanuts, and chili (\$21) and Arctic char served with couscous, pomegranate, coconut, and cheddar (\$19). Vegetarian diners have delighted in the tofu with udon, Brussels sprouts, mushrooms, and bok choy (\$14).

Among the dessert options (\$8) are a cheese platter and “white chocolate,” which consists of goat’s milk ice cream with lavender and raw honey along with a soft cup of lavender-infused white chocolate. This originality also extends to the cocktail menu, where you can enjoy a gin and Campari punch with orange blossom, hibiscus, lemon, and kumquat (\$10) or one of the many carefully selected offerings of wine by the glass.

Sousa’s distinctive culinary concept demands the proper setting, and he applauds the Cruzes—both architects—for artfully realizing his vision of communal tables and a transparent kitchen from what was essentially a shell of a building.

In the midst of their plans, the economic downturn intervened. Undaunted while waiting for financing, Sousa used the empty space as a virtual test market to determine the final look and flow of his dream restaurant—and as a promotional opportunity to attract a future clientele. He produced a series of themed guerilla dinners, hooking up a six-burner stove to propane tanks, managing without hot water, and attracting a crowd via his blog. The response was a sure sign of what would happen once the restaurant came to fruition.

“In the dead of winter, we did seven courses for 100 people, and foodies were getting the best food in the city off paper plates and folding tables and chairs,” he says. “The day we opened for real was busier than we ever hoped it could be. We’ve exceeded even the optimistic, inflated numbers we came up with for our business plan. No, make that demolished.” SA

*Salt of the Earth is located at 5523 Penn Avenue in Garfield. Hours are Monday through Saturday, 5 p.m. to 1 a.m., with the kitchen closing at midnight. Reservations are taken for the mezzanine level. For more information, visit [www.salttpegh.com](http://www.salttpegh.com) or phone 412-441-7258.*



The artfully prepared venison tartare is a Salt of the Earth signature dish.

VERA WANG FINE PAPERS

*Nota Bene*

FINE PAPER BOUTIQUE

CUSTOM STATIONERY  
PERSONALIZED INVITATIONS  
UNIQUE GIFTS

9 BRILLIANT AVENUE  
ASPENWALL  
412.782.6300

WWW.NOTABENEPAPER.COM

i pledge...

to be your very best friend

**Petland**

Pittsburgh Village of Eastside  
(412) 262-PETS • 6401 Penn Ave  
[www.petlandvillageofeastside.com](http://www.petlandvillageofeastside.com)

Now Adopting Puppies, Kittens ASAP with our Animal Shelter Adoption Program.

**Come fall in love with our adoptable shelter pets.**

We have a large selection of quality Tropical & Marine Fish and Fish Supplies!