

Salem's eatery boom creates a new Restaurant Row

By Tom Dalton Staff writer

SALEM — When Cafe Polonia, a Polish restaurant, opens next month in Lappin Park, it will give this city an oddity of eateries.

Nine restaurants, all in a row.

Restaurant Row starts at the New England Soup Factory, 140 Washington St., and extends all the way up Washington Street and around the corner to Gulu-Gulu Cafe, 247 Essex St.

In between, one after another, like courses at a banquet, are Ristorante Gioia, Cafe Kushco, O'Neill's Irish Pub, A Taste of Thyme Cafe, Fresh Taste of Asia, Cafe Polonia and Upper Crust Pizzeria.

In an area about the size of a mall food court, a diner can begin with an appetizer of broiled squid, down a bowl of Guinness beef stew, unfold the linen for an entree of veal piccata, leave room for chocolate mousse cake and wash it all down with a Czechoslovakian beer.

The row, in a way, is a metaphor for the city, which may be setting a local record for food-per-square-foot.

By unofficial count, there are 65 eating establishments currently open or about to open in the downtown, including coffee shops and ice cream parlors. The sample area includes lower Lafayette Street and reaches all the way down Derby Street to In a Pig's Eye. Restaurants account for about two-thirds of that total.

Is it a good thing?

"Oh, I think it's a wonderful thing," said Patricia Zaido, executive director of The Salem Partnership, a group of business and municipal leaders. "... People tell me (Salem) is just the place to come."

That is the overwhelming conventional wisdom. The restaurant boom, many say, has brought life to a once-moribund downtown, helped fuel the city's continuing growth and created a buzz that other municipalities envy. It was only a decade ago, some remember, that one side of Washington Street, the "restaurant row" side, was virtually empty and partially boarded up.

Most restaurant owners seem to like the crowd.

"We are really thrilled about having all these other restaurants here because they are so diverse," said Steve Feldmann, the owner of Gulu-Gulu, which opened three years ago.

"... It's actually something I learned doing my MBA. My professors would always talk about 'the more the merrier.' The more stuff there is, the more people will be driven to a certain area. ... That's why Burger King will set up shop right across from McDonald's. This has become a destination point."

"I think it's great, myself," said Angie Silva, who for the past decade has been the day manager of O'Neill's. "They're all different. It gives people an opportunity to visit other places. ... If they like a place, they'll find you."

While that may be the majority view, not everyone is cheering.

"I don't think this is a good thing," said Frandy Xu, the owner of Fresh Taste of Asia.

There is a limited number of area customers that can sustain the restaurant business year-round, he said, and only so many ways the pie can be divided.

The downtown needs more balance, Xu said. It needs to increase the number of quality retail stores and parking to become a "one-stop spot" for shopping, dining and drinking.

Tim Sala, the owner of A Taste of Thyme, said he hopes all the restaurants make it but says things have been difficult with the "double whammy" of a faltering economy and a dramatic increase in the number of local restaurants.

"It's great for the city, it's a popular place," he said. "But right now, if you're an owner, it's tough."

George Harrington, who has run The Lyceum for more than 20 years, sees the current boom in a longer perspective.

"I think the number of restaurants is growing faster than the market is growing," he said, "but I think it will catch up."

As with most everything, time will tell.

"The market will dictate whether it's too many restaurants or not," Feldmann said. "We'll see what happens in a year or two."