

WE VENTURE AS FAR NORTH IN METRO DETROIT AS WE'VE EVER GONE TO FIND THIS YEAR'S HONOREE

2026

RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR

By DANNY PALUMBO

Photos by JACOB LEWKOW



At Rudy's Prime Steakhouse, you can order your steaks and chops with enhancements like bone marrow (left), roasted and topped with herbed breadcrumbs and lemon brine.

RUDY'S PRIME STEAKHOUSE

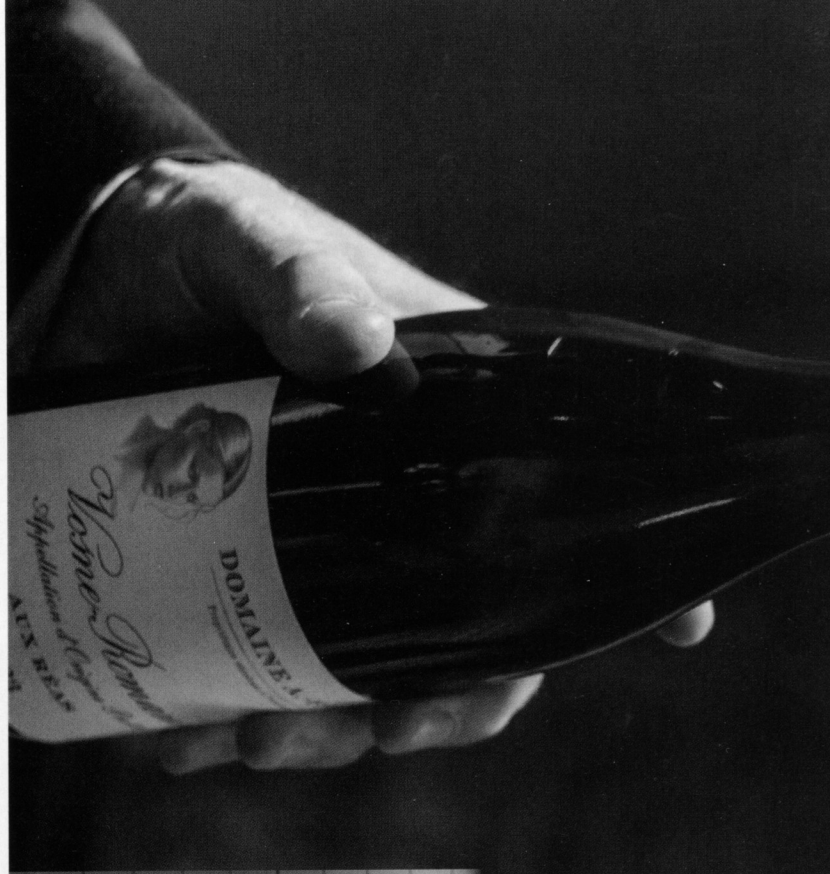
ON MY SECOND VISIT TO RUDY'S PRIME STEAKHOUSE, I DID SOMETHING I HAD NEVER DONE BEFORE

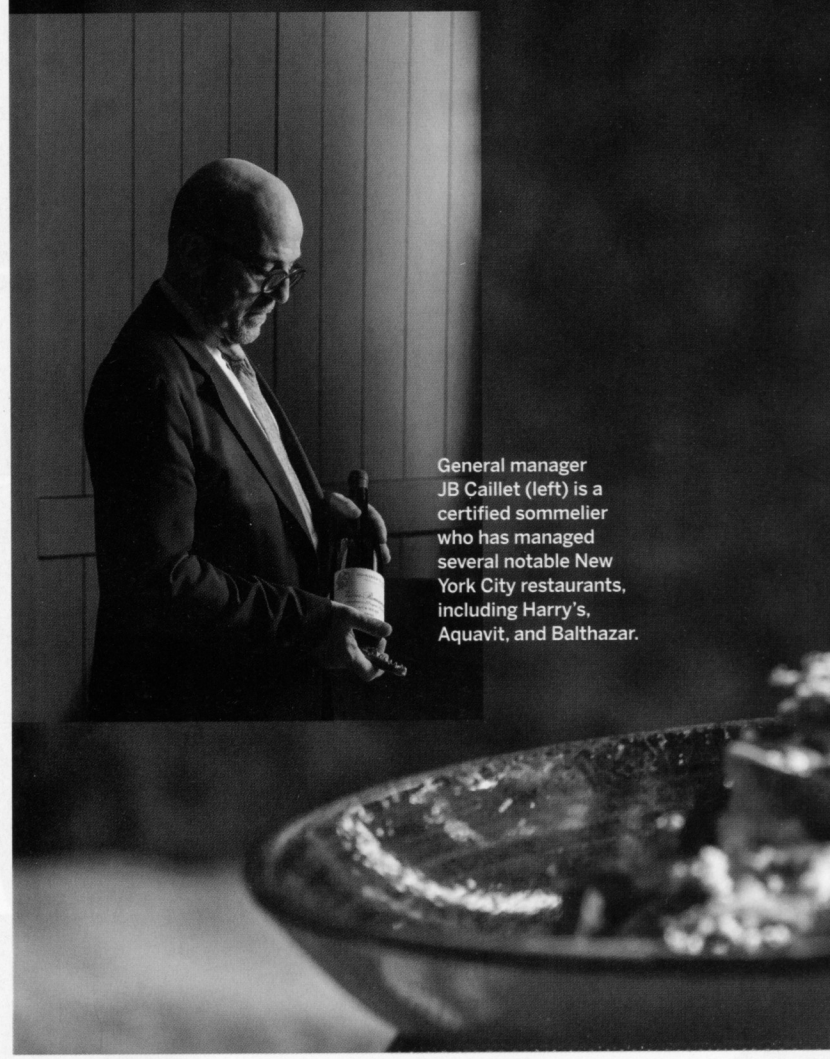
I locked my keys in my truck. While it was running.

That's how excited I was to get back to Rudy's. I wasn't thinking straight. I was stupefied. I was daydreaming about a well-made Paper Plane cocktail, drooling over the thought of a superbly engineered steak frites and an iceberg wedge salad with jammy tomatoes. I remembered that, upon request, chef Josh Stockton will add bacon jam to his already decadent mac and cheese. I also recalled that there was a severely underappreciated burger housed within the confines of this former grocery store turned into a modern steakhouse cathedral.

As I stood there mortified, watching the Oakland County sheriff shimmy his way into my vehicle using a burglar's toolset, I realized that there is indeed something arresting about this restaurant, something that causes a person to become galvanic and flush. From the classic steakhouse menu full of insider secrets to the distinguished cocktails to the unparalleled service and exemplary wine program, Rudy's has earned the right to be *Hour Detroit* magazine's 2026 restaurant of the year.

Opened in 2024, Rudy's Prime Steakhouse is a quiet luxury. I say quiet because the restaurant sort of tiptoes around. It's not loud. It's not boisterous. It doesn't smack you with pretentiousness and heavy-handed entrées. It's a steakhouse, but one that's been reimagined for a more inclusive, modern world.





General manager JB Caillet (left) is a certified sommelier who has managed several notable New York City restaurants, including Harry's, Aquavit, and Balthazar.



The Rudy's take on a traditional wedge salad (below) features baby gem lettuce hearts, bacon lardons, blue cheese dressing, and slow-cooked cherry tomatoes, also known as "overnight tomatoes."

RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR



The fried chicken consists of Bell & Evans chicken pieces brined in buttermilk, fried until crispy, and served with pepper vinaigrette.

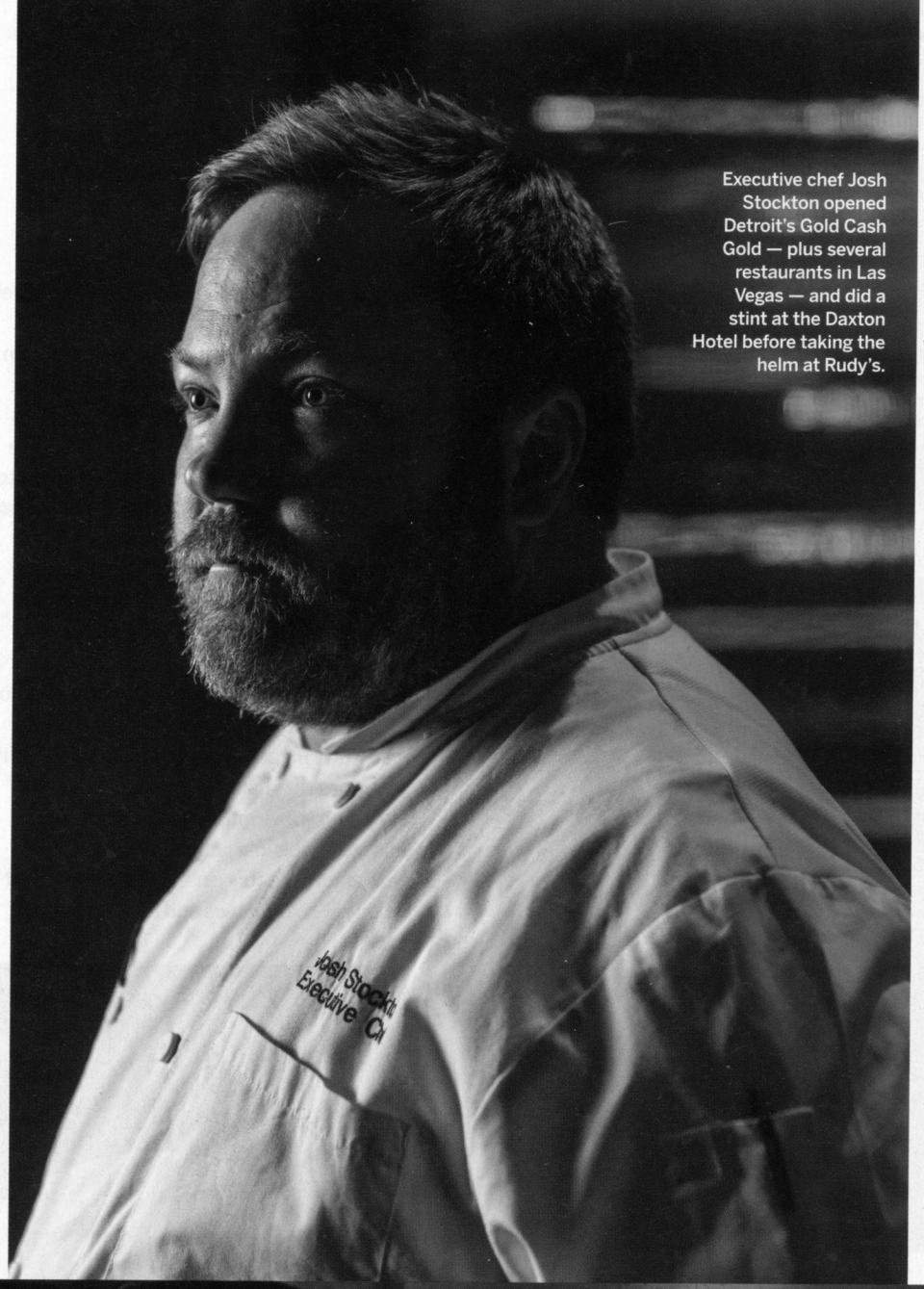
Above: The creamed spinach is a savory blend of béchamel, black truffle, Parmesan, white truffle oil, and herbed breadcrumbs.

Left: The mac and cheese at Rudy's has thick mezzi rigatoni in place of macaroni. It's served with Gruyère, Parmesan, and crispy breadcrumbs.

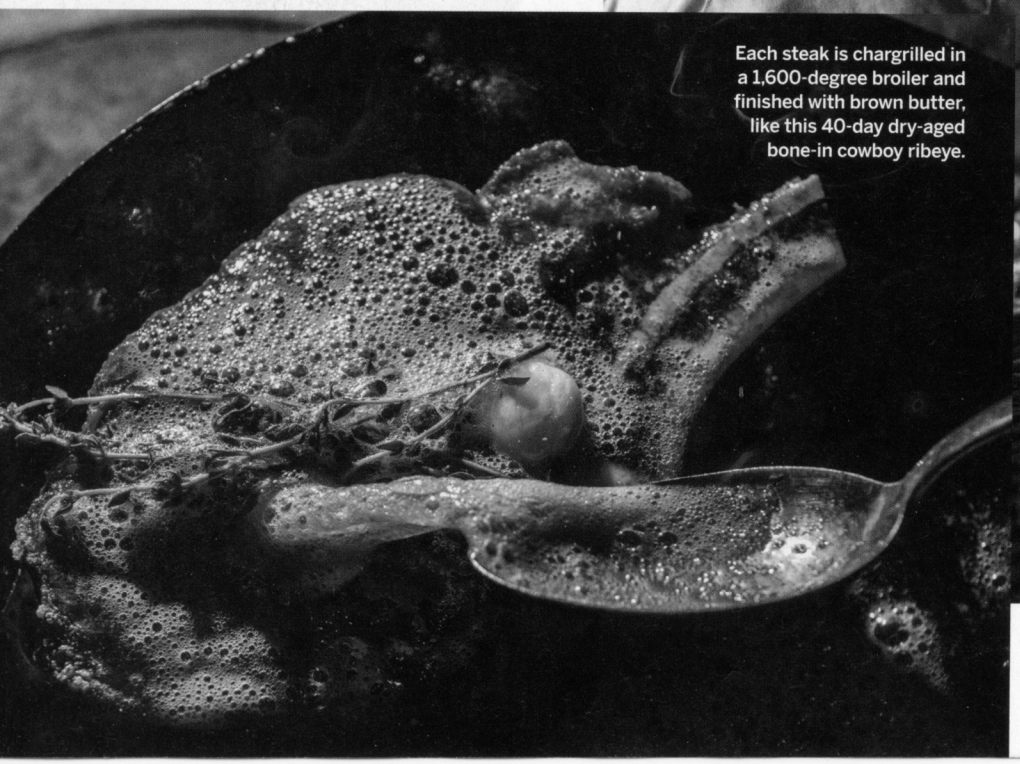
"It's not at all like it was in the '70s," says general manager JB Caillet. Having managed iconic New York restaurants, including a famous Wall Street watering hole called Harry's, Caillet knows a thing or two about the medium. "It was definitely a male-driven institution. All men sitting around drinking and eating. Those power lunches in the '70s." Rudy's, by contrast, is meant for *anyone* seeking an exquisite dinner and a refined dining experience.

Located on Main Street in downtown Clarkston, Rudy's doesn't have an air of exclusivity. Take the bar and lounge area, which exists on a first-come, first-served basis. That's how restaurant bars *should* be, by the way. It bothers this particular food critic when restaurants reserve their bar seating. The bar is holy ground, a special seat that should remain an option for people without a reservation. *Anybody* should be able to walk into a bar and, if a stool is open, snag a corner seat, stretch out, and enjoy the space from a bar fly's view. Rudy's bar is particularly stunning, with dim lighting, a quartz countertop, and a bar that gleams and shines with pristine cleanliness.

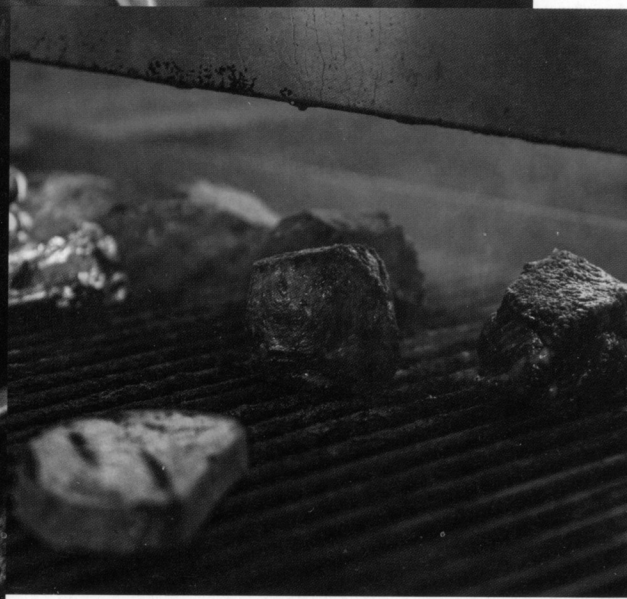
More often than not, the bar is filled with numerous Rudy's regulars, and I have found that this is a restaurant that specifically rewards loyalty. Want to know

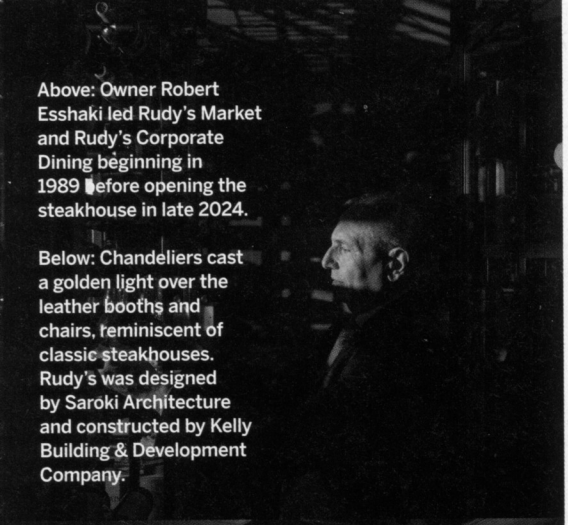


Executive chef Josh Stockton opened Detroit's Gold Cash Gold — plus several restaurants in Las Vegas — and did a stint at the Daxton Hotel before taking the helm at Rudy's.



Each steak is chargrilled in a 1,600-degree broiler and finished with brown butter, like this 40-day dry-aged bone-in cowboy ribeye.





Above: Owner Robert Esshaki led Rudy's Market and Rudy's Corporate Dining beginning in 1989 before opening the steakhouse in late 2024.



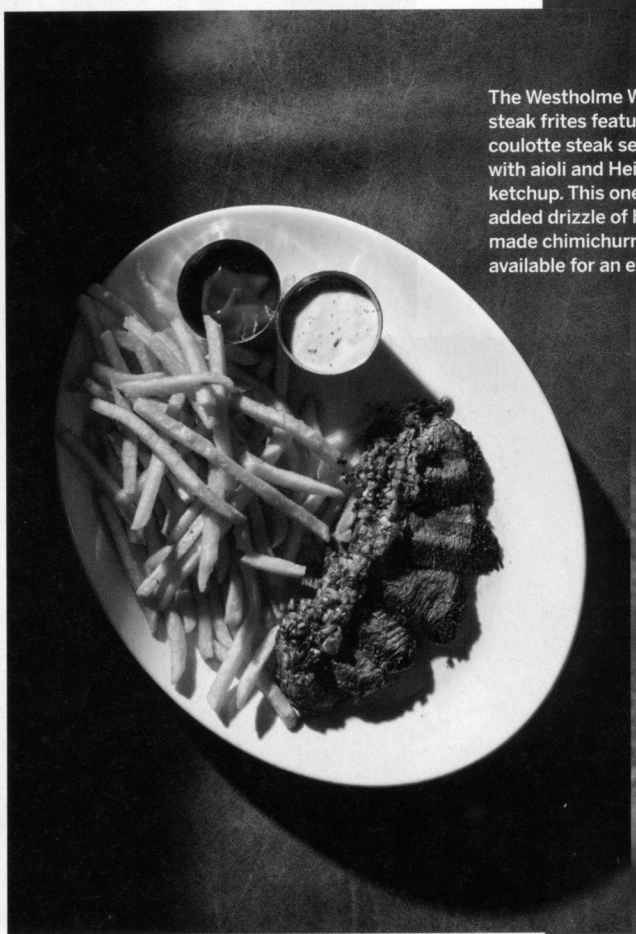
Below: Chandeliers cast a golden light over the leather booths and chairs, reminiscent of classic steakhouses. Rudy's was designed by Saroki Architecture and constructed by Kelly Building & Development Company.

about the upcoming wine dinner? Strike up a conversation with Caillet. Want to try an off-the-menu steak or an esoteric wine from Napa Valley? Be forthcoming and honest with the staff. Rudy's is a place where it behooves the guest to visit regularly to unearth all of its secrets and hidden gems.

CLASSICS WITH AN EDGE

Helming the kitchen is Josh Stockton, a dexterous and polished chef who produces cuisine worthy of devotion. He arrived at Rudy's with a resume including the Wynn in Las Vegas, where he worked at the Daniel Boulud Brasserie, as well as Gold Cash Gold in Detroit. Stockton works well within the confines of the small kitchen at Rudy's, adding flavor bombs and simple flourishes of technique to iconic steakhouse fare. The kitchen is small, yes, but very much Stockton's domain, and it houses a fastidious team that churns out resonant meals.

One of my favorite things about Rudy's is how classics are upgraded thoughtfully, like the iceberg wedge salad, a staple of steakhouses everywhere. Here, baby gem lettuce hearts are dressed with bacon lardons, blue cheese dressing, and what Stockton calls "overnight tomatoes." These are cherry tomatoes that have been cooking low and slow in extra-virgin olive oil for hours on end, resulting in a jammy, glossy tomato that augments this classic salad with its rich acidity. The tomatoes add another layer of



The Westholme Wagyu steak frites features a coulotte steak served with aioli and Heinz 57 ketchup. This one has an added drizzle of house-made chimichurri, available for an extra $3.





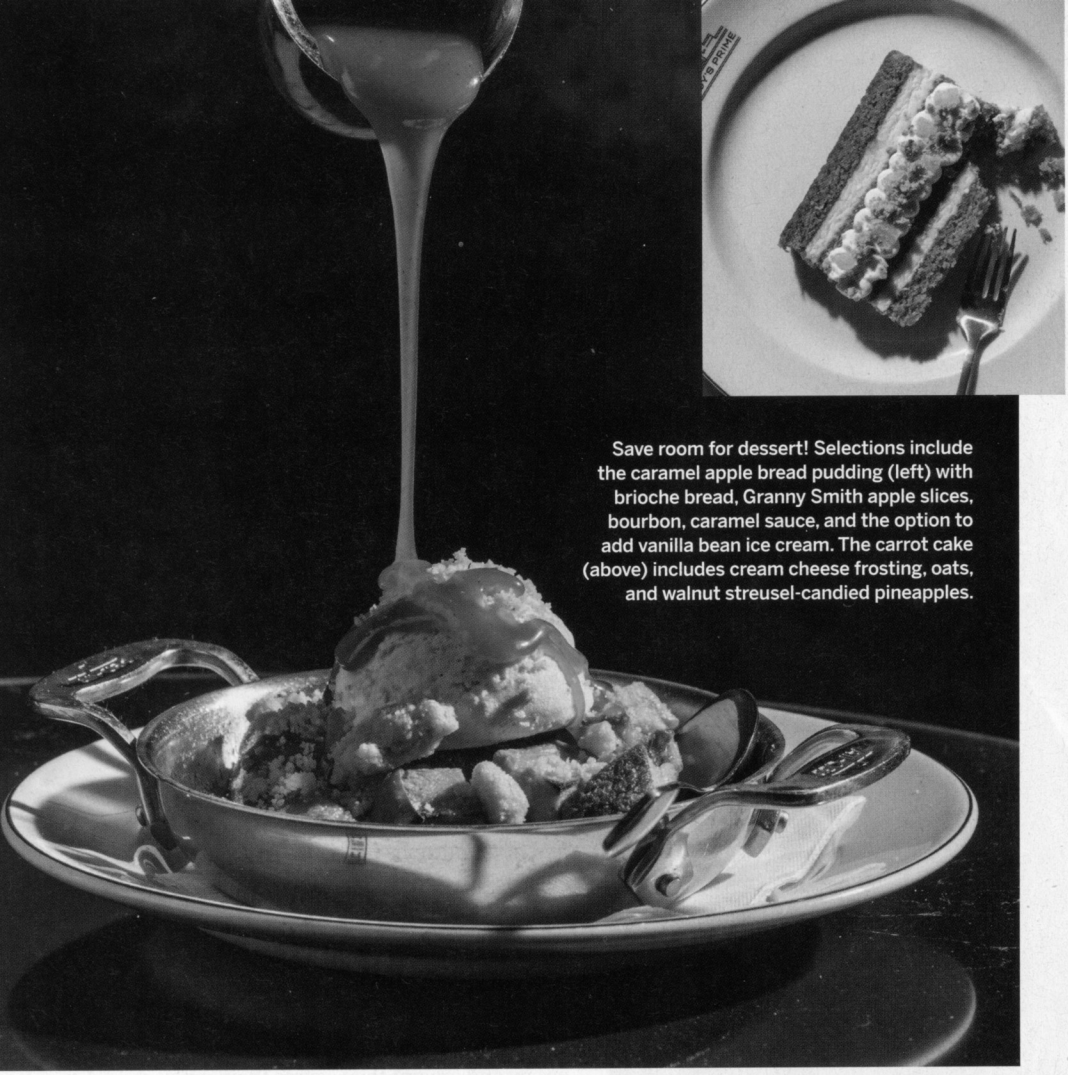
Above: Bar manager Ann Howard shakes a cocktail behind the bar.

Left: The Paper Plane cocktail that had our reviewer coming back for more.

flavor alongside the thick lardons and rich, funky cheese. It's one of Stockton's signatures, and he autographs the entire menu with tricks such as these.

Chef Stockton also produces some of the best fried chicken I've had in southeast Michigan, which is a nod to his time spent in Tennessee. He brines Bell & Evans chicken pieces in buttermilk, fries them until they're crispy and craggy, then serves them with a tangy pepper vinaigrette that stings the taste buds affectionately. I can't recall seeing a plate of fried chicken available at a steakhouse before, but it's exactly the kind of move that gives the menu at Rudy's so much personality. Stockton himself is drawn to butchery and country-style farmhouse cuisine, which is great news for a restaurant that so prominently features steaks.

All of the steaks at Rudy's are chargrilled in a 1,600-degree Montague broiler and finished with brown butter, which ensures incredible crust and maximum flavor. I'm particularly fond of the Westholme Wagyu steak frites, which utilizes the coulotte — a lesser-known, tender, flavorful cut of meat from the sirloin cap. To the side are straight fries (sliced thin, served golden) and sidecars of tangy aioli and Heinz 57 ketchup. The steak is lean but marbled and buttery; it dissolves in the mouth more than it feels like it's being chewed. It's an exemplary steak frites and a good entry point to what Rudy's does best: meat. I'm also fond of the 28-day dry-aged bone-in New York strip, grilled to medium-rare temperature. There are plenty of dry-aged steaks on the menu,



Save room for dessert! Selections include the caramel apple bread pudding (left) with brioche bread, Granny Smith apple slices, bourbon, caramel sauce, and the option to add vanilla bean ice cream. The carrot cake (above) includes cream cheese frosting, oats, and walnut streusel-candied pineapples.

which all pack a funkiness that drives up the umami past anything reasonable.

As I mentioned earlier, the best deal of all at Rudy's might just be the cheeseburger, which is a thick patty formed with Wagyu beef, melty cheddar cheese, caramelized onions, and B&B pickles. Pub burgers are making a comeback, and Rudy's leads the charge. This is one of the better burgers in the entire metro Detroit area. For only $18, I've seen worse, more expensive burgers in Los Angeles and New York City. The burger gets knocked down to $16 during happy hour, making Rudy's a wonderful pit stop after work. I also think that, given the state of the world today, it's important for fine-dining restaurants to offer a few affordable items on their menus. Rudy's makes a humble offering with its burger, and the gesture goes a long way.

I'm doing my best to hold back superlatives, as they're rote when talking about food these days. (What does the *best* mac and cheese really mean, anyway?) However, I will tell you that the most flavorful, luxurious, tasty mac and cheese I've had lives at Rudy's. Listen closely: Stockton's mac is made with mezze rigatoni, a ridged, tubular pasta that picks up the cheese sauce well. Clinging to each pasta is a salty, sultry mix of Gruyère and Parmesan, and the whole side gets topped with herbed breadcrumbs. There is a secret to this order, however: Request the aforementioned bacon jam to be added, and Stockon will happily oblige. Bacon lardons and sweet, caramelized onions add a meaty, candied layer to the mac and cheese that is nothing short of stupendous.

Steakhouse dishes are timeless, and Rudy's has them in spades: creamed spinach, potatoes served crunchy and creamed, famous salads, American sauces, and foamy desserts. Rudy's does all of the little things great at once, which in turn makes the restaurant great.

MASTER OF THE HOUSE

If Rudy's has a face, then it's Jean-Baptiste "JB" Caillet. Dapper, erudite, and friendly, he's always sporting a pair of designer glasses and a neatly kept beard. And in his years, he's traveled the globe several times over. Caillet was born in France, immigrated to America, lived in cities like Seattle, Houston, and New York City — where he managed iconic New York restaurants such as Aquavit and Balthazar — and even played professional polo in Argentina. If you can't strike up a good conversation with JB, well, perhaps you're not very interesting.

I posit that JB's worldliness is what makes him such a legendary hospitality figure. He represents a type of hospitality you don't see anymore. A steward, an old-school maître d', and a true master of the house. Caillet greets, warms, and problem-solves for guests, and he possesses a wealth of knowledge. Want to know which wine pairs best with your dry-aged New York strip? Which small boutique wine out of California is worth your fancy? Heck, did you leave your keys in your car and need a guy to unlock it? Ask JB. Caillet arrives at Rudy's every day with a worldly disposition, a benevolent mindset, and a passion for service, food, and drink, but *especially* the drink.

WINE WHISPERER

Caillet, who is also a certified sommelier, is responsible for curating the wine list at Rudy's, which is one of the more extensive in the area. The list, which has plenty of bottles from Napa Valley, Italy, and Spain, also carries a wonderful selection of French wines. After all, Caillet was born in France. When he worked at the famed Balthazar, a French brasserie in Manhattan, he was tasked

with sustaining a 100% French wine list. In the process, he developed a deep love of Old World wine.

"Old World wines come from a region in France where they've been making wine for 1,000 years or more," explains Caillet. "The local produce, the local game pairs well with the wine [in France]. That's what I love about it."

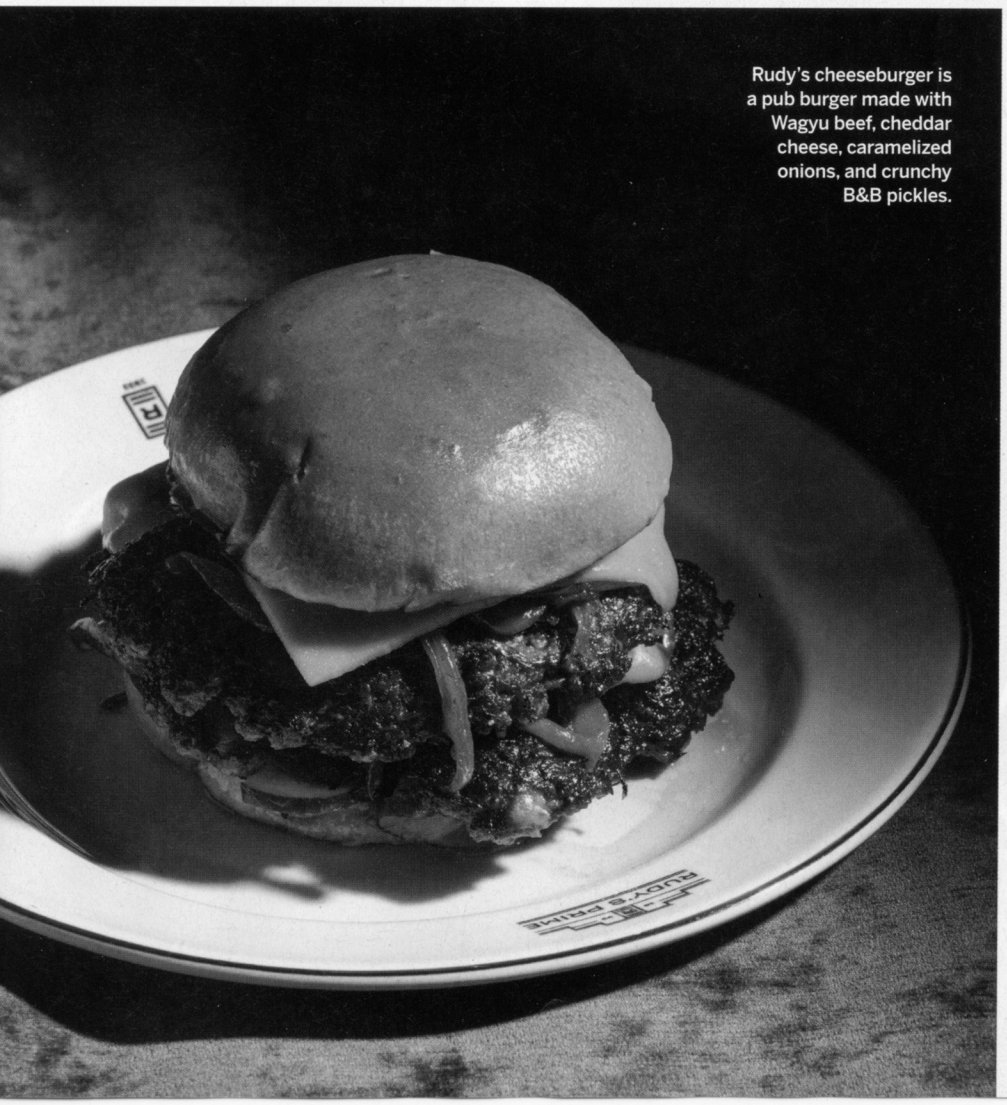
There's a symbiotic relationship between food and wine in France, where much of what's on the plate and in the glass comes from the same terroir. And that relationship is embraced tightly at Rudy's, creating an ideal sensory experience.

It's Caillet's conviction that Old World wines carry a more delicate body and flavor, which pairs well with the carousel of steakhouse grub at Rudy's. You'll find wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, and the Rhone Valley but also a focus on smaller vineyards that Caillet seeks out specifically, like La Pelle and Covert Estate. Of course, the wine Caillet *really* loves appears at the monthly wine dinner, an exclusive event where the winemaker is always present.

The wine list at Rudy's features plenty of crowd-pleasing Napa Valley classics — Silver Oak and Stag's Leap are iconic steakhouse wines. But if guests want to call over Caillet and chat about wines, he normally pushes them toward smaller, boutique wineries and Old World French classics. "People in the last year have really started to trust me," he says. "Tables come in and say, 'Please pick the wine.' I'm going to head them straight to Old World if they'll let me choose."

Caillet and I speak in early December, and he tells me that he's already thinking about the wine in April. His wine dinners are planned several months in advance. Seats are limited (usually about 12), and the waitlist is long, but it can't hurt to ask Caillet about it. Those who show a deep appreciation for wine are usually kept in the know. The idea for the dinner always starts with a specific winemaker or estate, and then Chef Stockton pairs food based on the wines that Caillet aims to serve. "It's a joy to work with Josh," says Caillet. "And also Ann Howard, the bar manager."

Speaking of Howard, she's done a beautiful job creating an elegantly detailed classic cocktail list. I believe an espresso martini to be a good judge of a bar program. I often find them to be too sweet, rich, or alcohol-forward. They can be slim and watery, rather than robust and steady. The balance is hard to get right, but I'm happy to report that Rudy's makes an *excellent* espresso martini — perfectly smooth, delicately sweet, with a punch of espresso that'll liven you up after a hard day. And the Paper Plane, which comes outfitted with a tiny, *literal* paper plane attached to the side of the glass, is chilly and citrusy, perfect for a harsh winter day or a balmy summer's eve. At Rudy's, old school is the best school, and it never goes out of style.



Rudy's cheeseburger is a pub burger made with Wagyu beef, cheddar cheese, caramelized onions, and crunchy B&B pickles.

CHASING THE BIG APPLE

This is a restaurant that has lofty expectations and big-city dreams. I had the chance to briefly chat with Robert Esshaki, the owner of Rudy's. I told him I had a trip to New York City coming up. With a playful yearning, he told me that he has always regretted not living in the city — at least for a year or two. I get the sense that Esshaki longs for New York, but with Rudy's, a steakhouse that buzzes and beams, he has also created something close to that big-city experience. He's helped build a steakhouse for the future, not something antiquated and stuffy. The refinement, the fine-dining execution, the privacy, the elegance, and the old-school commitment to hospitality — it's found a home in Clarkston. It's found a home at Rudy's Prime Steakhouse.