

YOUNG & HUNGRY

Sound Check, Please

Robert Wiedmaier is the latest restaurateur to take on live music with his new venue, Villain & Saint.

By Jessica Sidman

Restaurateur Robert Wiedmaier has abandoned his chef's whites from **Marcel's** by the time opening night of his new Bethesda music venue, **Villain & Saint**, comes to a close. He hops on stage in a tightish black tee and jeans and takes the lead singer's post with the full band behind him.

"Everybody! Oh my God! Was that not unbelievable?" Wiedmaier blurts into the microphone. "The **Lloyd Dobler Effect**, did they not kill it here tonight?"

While Wiedmaier is used to being center stage in the kitchen as the owner and chef behind **Marcel's**, **Brasserie Beck**, **Mussel Bar**, and other restaurants, this is a new, more literal kind of stage for him. Inspired by Haight-Ashbury, the San Francisco hippie haven where many rock 'n' roll greats like the **Grateful Dead** and **Janis Joplin** played in the 1960s, his music hall will focus on blues and jazz, indie rock, sixties classics, and heavy metal. Before the crowd goes home, "American Pie" plays as lights flicker between pinks, blues, greens, and yellows. The song, a favorite of Wiedmaier's mother, will close **Villain & Saint** every night.

People have been saying "food is the new rock 'n' roll" for years. But at a growing number of local establishments, they're not mutually exclusive. Most notably, there's the **Hamilton**, the state-of-the-art dining and music hall **Clyde's Restaurant Group** opened in 2011. More recently, **Neighborhood Restaurant Group's** catering company, **550 Events & Provisions**, partnered with **AMP by Strathmore** to provide food and drinks for the 2,800-square-foot performance and event space in North Bethesda. And while D.C. is certainly no Nashville, a number of restaurants have dedicated

space to nightly live music performances. **Republic** became the first live music venue in Takoma Park when it opened just over a year ago with open mic nights, blues nights, and jam sessions. **Sotto**—located in the former home of jazz club **HR-57** on 14th

space formerly occupied by **Markham's Bar and Grill** recently became available in Bethesda, not far from his Kensington home, he jumped on it. Wiedmaier is joined in the venture by his fellow partners in **RW Restaurant Group**: chef **Brian McBride**, COO **Frank Shull**, and CFO **Joe Lively**.

Wiedmaier has dabbled in playing drums and the harmonica. "But I wouldn't say I'm any good. My son thinks I suck." His 16-year-old, **Marcel** (the namesake of his Foggy Bottom restaurant), plays the bass in a jazz band, which performed at **Villain & Saint** during last Sunday's brunch. **Marcel Wiedmaier** will also be working at the venue doing sound and lighting checks for the bands that come in. He wants to go to the **Berklee School of Music** in Boston, according to his father.

Villain & Saint is about as different as can be from Wiedmaier's hushed fine dining temple, **Marcel's**. He's got the moxie to bring back lava lamps, whose green and pink orbs light up a wall near the entrance. Another wall pays tribute to deceased rock 'n' roll legends with portraits of musicians including **Jimi Hendrix** and **John Lennon**. Wiedmaier's even put some of his personal memorabilia on display, including a bass guitar signed by all the members of **Aerosmith** that he got years ago. "[My wife] **Polly** was pissed at me. She's like, 'How much did you get that guitar for?'" he recalls. It's attached high enough on the wall to prevent theft.

The food, too, is a far cry from the boudin blanc and caviar diners found at **Marcel's**. The Americana menu is split into meaty "villain" dishes (smoked pork ribs, a cheeseburger) and vegetarian "saint" dishes (grilled asparagus, zucchini pancakes). But it's not just that Wiedmaier is playing an-



Lloyd Dobler Effect plays opening night at Bethesda's Villain & Saint

Street NW—pays tribute to its predecessor with solo artists or small groups performing jazz, soul, blues, and go-go.

"I've always wanted to do a music venue," says Wiedmaier. "I love music." When he first opened **Mussel Bar** in Bethesda, he'd hoped to make that more music-centric, but the space was too small and it just didn't fit, the chef says. So when the

Photographs by Jessica Sidman



Villain & Saint chef Tom Meyer and restaurateur Robert Wiedmaier.

other tune with Villain & Saint. (Mussel Bar has more casual food, too.) Rather, Villain & Saint is a whole new genre for him.

After all, Wiedmaier is quick to point out that Villain & Saint is a music venue, not a restaurant. He doesn't consider it in the same category as Republic, which, he notes, doesn't have a stage like his place. "That's \$45,000 you're looking at right there—just in equipment," the chef says, pointing to the stage on the afternoon leading up to opening night. TVs that line the bar live stream whoever is playing. You can even watch the shows in real time from your phone or computer.

Villain & Saint has its own full set of instruments, including electric guitars and a drum set. Most bands bring their own equipment, but Wiedmaier wants to keep the stage set up at all times to emphasize that it's a music venue. Still, he is a chef at the end of the day, so the bar and kitchen play prominently. "Most music venues that you go to, it's hard to get a drink, the food's mediocre. And we didn't want to do that here."

Running a music venue that serves food and drinks presents some unique challenges that don't necessarily exist in typical bar and restaurant. Neighborhood Restaurant Group founder **Michael Babin** has found that the concert dictates the flow of food for 550 Events at AMP. Most of the orders come in during a narrow window of time, which is tough on the kitchen. As a result, 550 Events has tailored its menu, which includes dishes like mushroom risotto fritters and rockfish sliders, to be able to support that.

550 Events also plans to work with artists interested in customizing the menu offerings. Neighborhood Restaurant Group Bar & Spirits Director **Jeff Faile**, Beer Director **Greg Engert**, and Wine Director

Brent Kroll will also partner with artists on drinks. "We are excited to explore that more," Babin says.

Many restaurateurs feel there's already a special affinity between the restaurant and music worlds. "The restaurant business attracts a lot of creative people, and creative people often have strong feelings about or interest in music," Babin says.

Wiedmaier adds that being a chef can be kind of like being a rocker. Having cooked with fellow chefs at charity events, "we're kind of like a band. I'm doing first course. He's doing second course. You're doing third course. You're doing dessert."

That sometimes means encountering the same kind of frustrations as a band. "A lot of times you show up to these venues, and there's no one to help us," Wiedmaier says. "No one to help us carry our stuff in. There's no place to go get something to drink... I've found it's the same thing with bands. A lot of these bands don't get treated very well."

Wiedmaier hopes to change that at his own venue. Villain & Saint is a small place with a capacity for only 138 people indoors, but it does have a green room for artists downstairs that's outfitted with a refrigerator, TV, and couches. "They can go down there and chill out between sets instead of just standing here," he says.

After all, it's no longer just diners he has to worry about taking care of. "I want people to understand that this is about the musicians. This is all about the music," Wiedmaier says. "Yes, we have a great bar. Yes, we have great food. But it's about the music here." **CP**

Eatery tips? Food pursuits? Send suggestions to hungry@washingtoncitypaper.com.