

# A culinary oasis.

Christopher Rohe, C.E.C., makes an unexpected location work in his favor

by Abbie Jarman

Everyone says it, a good location is vital to running a prosperous restaurant. “If you build it, they will come,” usually doesn’t cut it in this industry. Christopher Rohe, C.E.C., has faced this challenge ten times over at his restaurant Prescott’s in Rochester, Minn., a mid-sized city with a large number of temporary residents from the Mayo Clinic, a lot of popular chains, and a highway ride away from the burgeoning restaurant mecca of Minneapolis. Despite a unique audience and an odd location—in a strip mall, next to a Laundromat—Rohe built it, and they’re coming.

## Breaking ground

Rohe, a Rochester native, has been working in restaurant kitchens since he was 13 years old. Most recently, he was food and beverage director at the Rochester Athletic Club, and prior to that, executive chef at Rochester’s renowned Broadstreet Cafe.

Rohe took the job at the Rochester Athletic Club after seven years at the Broadstreet Cafe to get one step closer to his long-term goal: opening Prescott’s. “When you’re in the kitchen at a small restaurant like the Broadstreet, you’re limited on your management because you have a small crew. I took the job [at Rochester Athletic Club] because I wanted to oversee a large-scale operation with different facets, and get more business management experience.”

Rohe began work on Prescott’s in June of 2005. The hardest part, he says, was finding the right location. Parking is difficult in downtown Rochester, where most people don’t want to park in ramps, and street parking is minimal. Unless you have a lot of money to build from the ground-up, good locations with ample parking are scarce. Rohe solved the problems of price and parking with a location in a strip mall with 1,200 parking spots on a heavily-traveled street.

Rohe says his location in an old bagel shop doesn’t faze him—or his diners. “We want to be metropolitan. We have a whole wall just of windows to see cars and people going by. I love to go to big cities and people-watch, I think that’s fun. So you see people going to the Laundromat—it’s just real life. It doesn’t bother me,” he says.



“It’s that mentality that if you’re a good restaurant, you have to have your own building somewhere. Someday, when we can afford it maybe that’s what we’ll do, but for now, this is where we’re starting.”

After Rohe himself gutted the building, an architect came in and sized the place, and construction was at full speed by November. Besides location, Rohe says the other difficulty came when the construction crew took over and he found himself at the mercy of someone else’s schedule. “I’m paying rent, losing money hand over fist,” he says. “I had all my equipment—tables, chairs, china, everything—sitting and waiting in a storage shed, waiting for them to get the building caught up to move everything in.” Within a week after construction wrapped up, just after the new year, Rohe was open and serving food.

Besides needing an extra-strength dose of patience, Rohe didn’t encounter many more struggles along the way. “When you’ve done this so many times for so long, it’s actually easy. People ask me all the time, what was surprising about it—I say I’m surprised I didn’t do this earlier.”

## Enter as strangers...

Rohe’s menu features classic cuisine with unique touches, such as crab-stuffed chicken, duck fettuccine in a garlic cream sauce, and walleye meunière. The bread selection alone is creating a following in town, as is the “30 at 30” wine list, which features 30 bottles at \$30 each. Every-

thing about Prescott’s—the food, décor, service and wine—creates a comfortable and inviting atmosphere, perfect for special occasions and yet more than a once-a-year destination.

“I think we’ve been well-received in the community,” Rohe says. “My wife and I have a hard time finding a place to eat. We’ll drive around for 45 minutes, saying ‘I don’t want to go here, I don’t want to go there.’ And when you’re in a small community like Rochester, you can drive to Minneapolis and there are a million places to go. We felt that other people have to feel the same way, so there has to be a niche for us.”

Rochester is unique in that, at about 90,000 people, it’s no New York—nor is it Nowhere, Minnesota. It’s home to one of the main headquarters for IBM, as well as the Mayo Clinic. “We’re not a vacation destination. Rochester is different because people *leave* here to go to their cabins in the summer and holiday weekends, so you have to rely on the transient patient population and the traveling business people.”

Rohe has lured people in by mailings, advertising and working with hotel concierges. Luckily, word-of-mouth and Rohe’s long-standing reputation in the community has also helped fill seats.

But most important to Prescott’s success seems to be remembering who—and where—they are: “My wife [and general manager] Jenna has a little sign that sits up front that says, ‘Enter as strangers, leave as friends.’ We’re still that small town, family restaurant—yet we’re

trying to be a big-city restaurant with the professionalism and quality of food.”

## Professional pride

There’s a whole other side to chef Rohe that has helped shape who he is as a chef and a member of the community. He is an active member of his chapter of the American Culinary Federation (ACF), currently serving as vice president. Last year, he received his Certified Executive Chef certification—the second highest ranking given by the ACE. A life-long goal, Rohe was motivated to earn the certification when he missed out on a job opportunity at a large company. Although he had years of experience at small independent restaurants, there was no proof of his skills and expertise.

“That pushed me—I wanted to prove to myself and everybody else that I know what I’m talking about, and that I can do what I say I can do. Now I have those initials behind my name and nobody can take them away,” he says.

Being active in the community is also important to Rohe and his chapter of the ACE. They participate in fund-raisers, children’s events, and family fun nights—where they give out toques for the kids to decorate.

“It’s those little things that you remember when you’re a kid, like when you get that red fire hat when you tour the fire station. We give out white chef hats—whether it sits around the house for a week or a year, that will plant a seed and maybe the child will become a chef in the future.”