

Dining Out

In the **Kitchen** with

Klime Kovaceski, chef and owner, Crystal Cafe

By Jacquelyn D. Powers

Three and a half years ago, Yugoslavian-born chef Klime Kovaceski started a quiet revolution in cooking from his 70-seat Crystal Cafe on Arthur Godfrey Road in Miami Beach. By whipping up classical dishes—bouillabaisse, Wiener schnitzel, beef stroganoff, chicken paprikash and osso buco—without heavy sauces or fattening ingredients, Klime proved that fancifully prepared fare does not have to be overindulgent. Bringing a European brand of flair to his food, Klime, who helmed the now defunct Jama Restaurant, doesn't believe in overcharging patrons for high-quality meals. A mom-and-pop establishment—Klime is chef/proprietor, while his wife, Huguettee, acts as manager—Crystal Cafe is a romantic eatery with low lighting and cozy booths. It's no wonder customers return week after week.

JACQUELYNN D. POWERS: You have described the cuisine at Crystal Cafe as "New Continental." What does that mean?

KLIME KOVACESKI: New Continental means that I take classical dishes and change them to better serve American tastes in the '90s. For example, on the menu I have chicken Kiev listed. Chicken Kiev is not popular in this country for a very simple reason: It's stuffed with seasoned butter. I wanted to create a chicken dish with a name, but without all of the butter. So I experi-

**"I want my food
to please customers—not
impress them."**

mented and came up with a goat-cheese filling. I believe this is a much more superior dish to the classic.

JDP: How do you prepare some of the richer entrees on the menu without cream or butter?

KK: This is where you separate heavy-handed chefs from good ones. Some of those chefs are in their 20s. I'm in my late 30s and it takes years of experimenting to achieve that perfect balance between lightness and flavor. I use a lot of fresh herbs, juices and purées.

JDP: How do you juggle the responsibilities of being both the owner and chef?

KK: It's a knife with two blades. It's better because when I choose my ingredients here, I don't have anyone telling me that the olive oil I use is too expensive. On the other hand, it's harder because I can't just be a chef—I have to be nice to the suppliers, the waiters and the staff.

JDP: How do you keep your prices so reasonable?

KK: Since I am the chef and my wife is the manager, we keep our overhead pretty low. Therefore, I don't have to pay a chef \$50,000 and a manager \$40,000, and I have that money to spend on the restaurant. I like to keep the menu at a nice price because I want first-time customers to give themselves up to Crystal Cafe—not to be one-night stands. I want to establish long-lasting love affairs. One of the ways to achieve that sincere, warm contact with your customers is to be honest with your prices.

JDP: What inspires you to create new specials?

KK: I listen to my customers. Recently, I have been getting requests for