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SARAH'S TAKE



BY JACLYN BOROWSKI

Levine taking catering skills to the restaurant business

Charles Levine might be one of Baltimore's top caterers, but for him, something has been missing.

A restaurant.

Levine, the owner of Charles Levine Caterers, broke ground on his first restaurant, Citron, on July 22. The restaurant at 2605 Quarry Lake Drive has been in the works for several years.

"We're going to have a door that somebody can walk in and now we can keep it going, and that's what's been missing for me," Levine said.

The 10,500-square-foot restaurant will have 250 seats throughout several spaces: a main dining room, bar and private event spaces. That doesn't include additional outdoor seating.

Citron has been in development since December 2013 when Levine began negotiations with Obrecht Properties, which owns the Shops at Quarry Lake. Baltimore County is underserved by quality independent restaurants, Levine said. At the same time as Levine was prowling for a location, Obrecht Properties was also looking for a restaurant tenant to take over an open plot at Quarry Lake.

"They were looking all these years

for the right fit, and I was looking for the right fit," Levine said.

Levine is privately funding the restaurant, but he declined to disclose its cost. He's aiming to have it open next summer – tentatively July 4.

When he opens Citron, the restaurant will carry every bit of the personal touch that goes into his catering business. It's a style of service Levine says comes naturally after spending three decades in the industry.

"As a caterer, because of the kinds of work we do, this is what we're doing anyway," Levine said. "Our approach to the restaurant has been the entire hospitality approach that we've had in our career, which I think is significantly different from a lot of our restaurants."

When guests enter Citron, Levine said the staff will first find out what kind of experience they're looking for – a pre-movie meal, a night of fine dining or maybe just a cocktail and small plates on the patio. As with his catering business, nothing about it will be regimented.

"How do you want us to serve you?" Levine said. "When you go to dinner normally, they hand you a menu and you're in their world.

And they will adapt in a restaurant to making sure that obviously there's nothing you're allergic that you're going to have and make substitutions. I don't think that that's enough. I think that the whole experience of going out needs to go further."

The menu at Citron, centered on seasonal American fare, will change daily. The bar will have a separate menu from the dining room with lighter fare such as oysters, artesian pizzas and salads. The dining room will serve more composed plates.

"We've always been a scratch operation. That is not changing, far from it," Levine said. "There aren't restaurants that really are 100 percent seasonal."

Levine doesn't know yet whether he'll pursue more restaurants. He sees a need for more in areas like Baltimore County, but for now he's focusing on Citron.

"I'm somebody who lives and not recklessly, but I also have to absorb a tremendous amount of responsibility every day and I'm entrusted with quite a bit. And there was just a calling for something more," he said. "I'm not done, far from not done, and this is missing."