

At Lisa Schroeder's bistro, any day can be Mother's Day

By ERIC BARTELS
The Tribune

There isn't much that would keep Lisa Schroeder from hearth and home on Mother's Day, but she's got a pretty good excuse this weekend.

Schroeder, who's been a force on the Portland restaurant scene since opening Mother's Bistro and Bar six years ago, will be preparing brunch for 74 at the James Beard House in New York.

"She was here in '04," says Mildred Amico, director of house programming for the James Beard Foundation. "She is a charming young woman with very, very good cooking skills."

The 48-year-old Schroeder's cooking skills have rarely been in question. She knew precisely what she would contribute to the food scene long before she left the corporate world at 35 to attend the Culinary Institute of America.

"I went there with the notion, 'I'm opening a restaurant called Mother's,'" says the fast-talking Philadelphia native. "I remember having that flash: 'The world needs mother food.'"

After graduating, Schroeder worked alongside chefs in fine establishments in New York and Europe. "Every single thing I did for the next eight years led me to opening up Mother's. It's not about a business, it's a mission. It's about perpetuating mother food for posterity."

Schroeder had reasons to honor her own Russian-Jewish mother, a one-time restaurateur who died when her daughter was 21.

"I didn't get to grow up in the restaurant, but I really believe it's in my blood," she says. "It's not like they had Chinese takeout in the Ukraine. There was a time when Jewish moms were great cooks."

Schroeder moved to Portland, the hometown of partner Rob Sample. At Mother's, she added artistry to homespun classics like chicken and dumplings, meatloaf and macaroni and cheese, creating an instant hit on a once-lonely corner of Southwest Second Avenue. Now the place feels like a Portland institution.

Her attempts to expand the

maternal embrace have yielded mixed results. Mama Mia Trattoria, on the same block as Mother's, opened to less than sparkling reviews in 2004, but carries on. Balaboosta, a small delicatessen and cafe Schroeder launched a year ago, closed after several months.

She seems philosophical about the setbacks. "We've gotten smarter and leaner," she says.

PERSON of the WEEK

She's also enthusiastic about the prospects for a new project, a late-night drinks and dessert place next to Mother's called the Velvet Lounge and Cafe.

Style question

Then, of course, there is the matter of Schroeder's alleged charm. There is no shortage of stories littering the landscape about her tendency to play hardball in business or handle her staff with something less delicate than kid gloves.

"Listen, I have a strong personality," she says, her Northeastern accent turning words like "long" into the two-syllable "loo-ong." "A lot of people don't get my emotionality. Some people, my tone, it rips them to shreds. I tell potential employees how tough I am. I try to convince people not to work here."

Around the restaurant business, people tend to see Schroeder's drive in context. "I think she has a very competitive spirit," says Ken Buck, a wine consultant with Young's-Columbia Wine Company. "It's a little East Coast. What we perceive as bravado, she perceives as day-to-day business. She's always been fair with me."

"It's definitely not an Oregon style," says Tim Cuscaden, co-owner of the restaurant Fratelli. "She forgets formalities sometimes. I think Lisa assumes you're on board for the whole project."

"I like Lisa. We're in a very, very difficult business; she's got two very successful businesses. She's very demanding, but she's accomplished a lot."



Left: Mother's owner-chef Lisa Schroeder shows off a photo with her daughter and grandchildren.

Below: Borscht, cabbage rolls and mashed potatoes are some of Mother's cozy-cooking choices.

TRIBUNE PHOTO: JIM CLARK

Next up: Grandmother's?

Schroeder doesn't believe good things come to those who sit waiting, but she isn't afraid to reveal a softer side either. A grandmother of two small children, she says she's worked on her shortcomings in therapy.

"I'm not perfect," she says. "I'm always working on myself. There's a soul here. This is not just a business. This is an expression of me."

Acting Portland Police Chief Rosie Sizer got a glimpse of Schroeder's maternal instinct when she and other officers were working a protest march on a nasty spring day.

"We had been running around downtown all afternoon and evening trying to deal with protesters," Sizer says, "and it was pouring down rain."

"We were taking a breather, kind of huddled under the awning, and then we see some staff from Mother's come running out and they've got trays with coffee cups. It was the absolute sweetest thing. We felt mothered that night."

Schroeder says: "I didn't do it for accolades. It's about being a place where people can feel warm and comfortable."

She says she was making her customary rounds at Mother's



one day when she stopped to chat with a family as they dined. They told her they had just lost a grandmother and could think of no better place to go for a quiet meal.

"This brings tears to my eyes," says Schroeder, and it does. "It's why I exist. I wish I had my mother beaming with pride at what I've done."

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