

## DINNER AND A MOVIE

It's the classic date-night activity --- a relaxing meal followed by the latest Hollywood flick. But who has the time? Theaters opening in Tucker and Brookhaven will offer Atlantans the chance to do it all under one roof.

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Forget popcorn and Raisinettes.

The latest trend in movie theaters has audiences sipping wine, nibbling on gourmet dishes and sinking into plush leather rocking chairs.

Two national chains specializing in the dine-while-you-watch concept are coming to the metro Atlanta area, the latest attempt by the theater industry to get people off their couches and into movie houses.

CineBistro, from Birmingham-based Cobb Theatres, will open next year in Brookhaven, targeting an upscale, adult-only crowd. The theater will offer reserved seating, a full bar and an eclectic menu featuring dishes such as duck quesadillas and braised oxtails, some with a recommended wine pairing.

A more casual, family-friendly approach is being offered by Texas-based Movie Tavern, which plans to open next month in a renovated movie theater across from Northlake Mall in Tucker. Customers order at the lobby counter from a menu that includes pizzas, wraps, burgers, desserts and kid-sized meals.

Both theaters will show mainstream Hollywood hits, though CineBistro plans to include some art-house and independent films.

Jeremy Welman, chief operating officer of Cobb Theatres, said the movie theater industry must innovate. People are incredibly busy and have numerous options for their entertainment dollars. And that's not to mention homes stocked with big-screen TVs and home theater systems.

"We're competing with a million things for people's time. That's what it comes down to," Welman said. "We have to give them an experience that's worth going out to."

The movie industry remains relatively healthy, fueled by big-budget blockbusters such as the Spider-Man and Pirates of the Caribbean franchises. Americans shelled out \$9.6 billion last year for tickets, up 5 percent from the year before.

But a close look at the numbers reveals cause for concern. Most of the revenue gains have come from a rise in ticket prices, which have reached \$10 in metro Atlanta. Attendance has remained flat for several years at about 1.4 billion tickets sold.

The theater industry has rolled out a number of bells and whistles in recent years in an attempt to build audiences, from stadium seating to digital projection and 3-D screenings.

Jeff Benson, co-founder and CEO of Movie Tavern, is betting big that the next trend is restaurant-quality food. Since the first Movie Tavern opened in 2001 in Fort Worth, Texas, the chain has grown to 11 locations, with plans to open 70 or 80 more over the next five years.

"People love dinner and a movie. That's truly what this is about," Benson said.

Going to separate places for each, though, can take four or even five hours, Benson said. Offering both under one roof can cut that in half, he said, keeping baby-sitting costs down and making date night a possibility again for time-pressed families.

"They want that dinner experience; they want to eat while they watch the show and save the time," said Benson. "We think the cinema eatery is the future of the movie business."

The dine-and-watch concept is not new in Atlanta, but the track record is mixed.

Longtime Atlantans may recall Cinema 'N' Drafthouse, which operated several theaters in the metro area in the 1980s before going out of business.

AMC's Buckhead Backlot Cinema & Cafe, in contrast, is still going strong after 15 years, serving a menu of appetizers, wraps, pizza and desserts. The six-screen theater, which offers wine and beer, closed this month for extensive renovations to freshen up the decor and expand the kitchen. It's expected to reopen this summer, AMC officials said.

The new competitors say they'll be offering a more refined concept.

"We think our food is way better," said Benson, who noted his company has hired food and beverage professionals from national chains such as Bennigan's and Dave & Buster's.

CineBistro is banking that glamour and convenience will set it apart. The theater will offer valet parking, cutting-edge cuisine and a lobby that could double as a stylish nightclub.

Viewing times will be spaced out every half-hour or so to allow cooks and waitstaff to devote their attention to one theater at a time. No one under 21 is allowed, and all service stops once the movie starts.

There's a cost for all this luxury. Tickets will be about \$17 to \$18, and that's just to get in the door. Most menu items will cost between \$13 and \$19.

Welman, COO of Cobb Theatres, said he's confident there's a market for the high-end concept, comparing CineBistro to a boutique hotel or luxury skybox.

"We figured if we're going to come to Atlanta, we better do it with a big splash and do it right," Welman said. Buckhead and Brookhaven offer "more affluent and more mature audiences looking for something a little different from what you find at the neighborhood multiplex."

Food, of course, has been a staple of the movies from the birth of the industry and a huge profit generator for theater owners.

Over the years, concession stands that once sold just popcorn, candy and soda expanded their offerings to include fast-food items such as burgers and pizza. And some theaters even stock beer and wine, such as Landmark's Midtown Art Cinema in Atlanta.

But won't a room full of people eating dinner be distracting and make it hard to follow the movie?

Benson, Movie Tavern's CEO, said customers get used to it.

"It's like watching a movie with subtitles," he said. "At first it's annoying, but 10 minutes in you don't realize you are reading the movie."

## CINEBISTRO

> The concept: Upscale all the way. The theater combines a cutting-edge restaurant and stylish lounge with a state-of-the-art digital viewing experience.

> The movies: Seven screens showing everything from the latest hits to art-house and independent films. Tickets will cost \$17 to \$18.

> The food: A menu will be crafted for the Atlanta market. The Miami CineBistro offers a Latin-themed menu featuring yellowtail snapper sauteed in tequila and Grand Marnier (\$19); grilled skirt steak with roasted tomato chimichurri sauce (\$15); and a duck and goat cheese quesadilla topped with chipotle aioli and guacamole (\$13).

> The location: TOWN/Brookhaven, a retail and residential complex from Sembler Co. under construction off Peachtree Road, not far from Oglethorpe University.

> Opening: 2009

> Headquarters: Birmingham

> CEO: Robert Cobb

> Employees: \*

> Revenue: \*

> Locations: The company operates 11 multiplex theaters in Florida and Alabama, with two more set to open this year in Savannah and Miami. The first CineBistro is expected to open next month in Miami.

> Future: More CineBistro locations are planned, including one in Tampa set to open this summer.

\* Declined to provide. Company is privately held.

## MOVIE TAVERN

> The concept: Food and fun on a budget. The theater marries a multiplex and a casual restaurant chain such as Applebee's or Chili's, with orders placed at the counter.

> The movies: Mainstream first-run Hollywood fare, but with budget prices. Tickets cost \$7 for adults and \$5 for children and seniors, and for matinees.

> The food: An assortment of burgers, hot dogs, pizzas, wraps and desserts, many with names tied to the movies. Highlights include: the Mini-Me burger, four-bite-sized cheeseburgers (\$8.95); the Italian Job sausage pizza (\$8.50); and the Three Amigos fiesta bowl with rice, lettuce, black beans and chicken strips (\$8).

> The location: The former AMC Northlake 8 in the Northlake Festival shopping center, across from Northlake Mall in Tucker. Movie Tavern is spending \$2 million to renovate the space.

> Opening: Mid-May

> Headquarters: Dallas

> CEO: Jeff Benson, a former accountant who started the company with his wife, Jamie, and friend Dennis Butler.

> Employees: 1,077

> Revenue: About \$50 million annually.

> Locations: There are 11 Movie Taverns, most in Texas, others in Colorado, Kentucky and Ohio. None in Georgia.

> Future: The company is planning an aggressive expansion over the next few years, fueled by an infusion of cash from Lee Roy Mitchell, executive chairman of Cinemark, a Plano, Texas-based cinema chain. At least two more metro Atlanta locations are in the works, likely in the northern suburbs, that may feature wait service and a more extensive menu.

Domestic box office (in billions)

2001: \$8.13

2002: \$9.27

2003: \$9.17

2004: \$9.22

2005: \$8.83

2006: \$9.14

2007: \$9.63

Domestic theater admissions (in billions)

2001: 1.44

2002: 1.60

2003: 1.52

2004: 1.48

2005: 1.38

2006: 1.40

2007: 1.40

Source: Motion Picture Association of America