

Akin Alafin, at his Prospect Avenue restaurant, Stonetown.



TRIUMPH

THE TASTE MAKER

More than just the son of a local culinary legend, visionary Akin Alafin's collection of popular dining spots prove he's got great taste, too.

What are the ingredients for success?

Apparently, they lie in a soft opening.

Businessman Akin Alafin can hardly remember the last time one of his restaurants had an official grand opening — when the eye-catching outdoor sign, carefully chosen furnishings and sleek website were perfectly placed and in working order by the time that eatery scheduled to open for customers.

“But I can't help it: I can't just wait for everything to fall in place,” says Alafin, 40, serious and thoughtful as he leans on a table at Stonetown, his new downtown Cleveland endeavor.

“It's like I have too much focus. Once I see an end goal, I don't let anything else get in the way.

“It's actually a problem.”

His faithful customers would beg to differ.

Angie's Soul Cafe, a mecca for Southern-style comfort food in downtown and the Lee-Harvard

area; Zanzibar, home to sophisticated soul fusion in Shaker Heights; Jezebel's Bayou, a New Orleans-themed spot steeped in Cajun and Creole cuisine in Larchmere — the popular restaurants that Alafin operates hardly suffer from a precisely choreographed introduction.

It certainly didn't bother the fortunate friends and loved ones who received a casual text from Alafin two months ago, inviting them to Prospect Avenue to sample the fare at Stonetown.

“I only texted 60 people -- but 160 showed up,” he remembers with a grin.

It wasn't as complete as it is now. Today, visitors walk into a spacious former coffee shop awash in earth tones and vintage touches, including two towering bookshelves accented with old wine crates (a stylish barrier that divides the bar from a back dining area), and chairs and tables constructed from a rich, dark wood that was reclaimed from an old building

in Pennsylvania.

“That's me: I've never been into that sleek and shiny, contemporary look,” says Alafin, dressed in head-to-toe black.

Rather, those first guests were met by Alafin in construction clothes (“I'm very hands-on with the interior,” he explains), and the sumptuous smells of what caused the guest list to swell in the first place: the food.

“We've definitely built a reputation for excellence,” he says. Alafin's 73-year-old mother is the namesake of Angie's Soul Cafe, where her hearty, South Carolina-infused cooking style has been a Cleveland staple for nearly 30 years.

“Visitors know they're going to have an authentic, homemade and creative experience with us.”

He didn't disappoint.

Red velvet waffles paired with thick, vanilla syrup. Juicy baked chicken bathed in whiskey-ginger barbeque sauce. Okra and fried green tomatoes served on a bed of

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Stonetown's menu is a blend of Southern-inspired cuisine and gourmet flair. Left to right: Drunken yardbird, with whiskey ginger BBQ sauce; stone rolls, a popular appetizer; lemonade and red Kool-Aid; the “Better Than Sex” dessert.



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Sizzling appetizers await servers pick up at Zanibar

mixed baby greens. The flavorful dishes that flowed from the kitchen, courtesy of executive chef Tony Fortner (also responsible for the menu at Zanibar), inspired greater word-of-mouth than any red-carpet rollout ever could.

Of course, the cool, welcoming vibe doesn't hurt, either.

"I try to set an atmosphere that represents our culture -- but without shoving it in people's faces," says Alafin.

As he speaks, explaining that Stonetown is named after a popular dining district off of the eastern coast of Africa, the sultry voice of blues singer Billie Holiday soars from the restaurant's hidden speakers. On one of the flat-screen televisions above the bar, Sidney Poitier and Bill

Cosby hatch a plot in the 1974 film, "Uptown Saturday Night."

"I want non-African Americans to feel like the setting is authentic and hip," says Alafin. "And I want African Americans to walk in and say, 'I don't know who runs this place, but they didn't forget about us when they put together the menu and the design.'"

He would never forget.

In fact, the ultra-focused visionary insists that, despite the hectic pace of operating a collection of high-profile locations, he's always eager to create another beloved gathering spot.

"I have a really high tolerance for stress -- so I would do this all of the time," he says, shaking his head. "But that would also have everyone on my team stressed out.

"That's something important I have to consider when I make decisions: the well-being of those people who work for me, the fact that they have families and lives.

"If this were just about me," he adds, "I would've opened ten more restaurants by now."

That's a problem diners in Cleveland would happily let him indulge.



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