

# good neighbors

a conversation at dinette

by **Christina French & Lauren Urbschat**  
photos by **Heather Mull**

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**MANY PEOPLE ASK US** “what is your favorite local restaurant” – a question that is literally impossible to answer. There are so many factors from type of cuisine, to service, to atmosphere and everything in between. But when it comes to choosing a favorite “neighborhood restaurant,” Dinette is a quick answer. Especially after we had a pizza the other night that had us talking for days: an unexpected and fresh combo of Brussels sprouts, portabella mushroom and toasted pine nuts. This type of creative twist, paired with a salad and glass of wine from their unique wine list makes any given Wednesday night something to look forward to. Only about two miles from our home in Highland Park, John and I end up at this cool hot spot in the Eastside Plaza development at least once a week.

So I grabbed Lauren Urbschat, sous chef at Dinette, to discuss what makes it such a great neighborhood haunt. There was much fun back and forth to define the unique magic. Here’s just a little of our friendly, neighborhood discussion:

### Location

**Lauren:** You may actually be surprised to find that your favorite neighborhood restaurant is right smack between Borders and T-Mobile in the new Eastside Plaza development.

**Christina:** It’s true. Dinette is not in some cozy old building nestled into residential streets the way that many envision a neighborhood favorite. The décor is quite minimalist. But the pizza oven, the wonderful staff and the regulars make this place so welcoming and warm.

**Lauren:** The warmth also comes from chef/owner, Sonja Finn, who is a welcoming and constant presence. Her simple elegant dishes, featuring local, seasonal and organic ingredients, garnered her national attention as a Rising Star Chef of the Year semi-finalist at the illustrious James Beard awards.



Thanks to Sonja, the food and the good company, this location attracts regulars, from Shadyside, Highland Park, Lawrenceville, Point Breeze, Regent Square, Oakmont and Mt. Lebanon.

**Family as regulars**

**Lauren:** Dinette is also a family restaurant. Sonja's parents, Olivera and Seth, are a regular presence in the restaurant. Olivera makes the baklava and Seth delivers herbs, tomatoes and arugula from his rooftop garden down the street. Olivera will hostess in a pinch, and Seth is often the on-call handyman.

**Christina:** And I see a lot of families out together at Dinette too. It surprised me that a place specializing in such unique and progressive flavors would attract parents and kids alike.

**Lauren:** Absolutely. From day one, families like Jack, Cynthia and Matty were regulars at the counter. Recent transplants from New York, they were thrilled to discover Dinette so close to their Squirrel Hill home. Jack and I share an affinity for IPAs, so every couple weeks he brings me a new beer to try. Cynthia swaps home-renovation stories with Sonja and loves the Fritto Misto and Anchovy Pizza. Matty, their precocious 7-year-old, is not satisfied unless the Beef Carpaccio is on the menu. This is a family that gets us!



**Building community**

**Christina:** You can feel a real, active dedication to community at Dinette. For being open for only just over a year, you guys have become a staple in the neighborhood and even an example to inspire other businesses around you in the East End.

**Lauren:** Sonja chose the Eastside Plaza for the location of Dinette to be a part of the exciting neighborhood revitalization occurring in East Liberty. She also employs many sustainable business practices such as refillable, house-filtered sparkling water, exclusive use of recyclable paper products, and local ingredient sourcing as a commitment to a greener community. Also, the open-kitchen format and small, full-time staff also help to build a sense of community by encouraging active conversation between front and back of the house.

**Service**

**Lauren:** The sense of community customers feel would not have developed without the obvious camaraderie of the staff. In an industry where high turnover is expected, Dinette is the exception to the

rule. If you've eaten at Dinette more than once, you quickly notice that we have a unique team. We're not just co-workers, we're close friends and we all agree that this is the best place any of us has ever worked.

**Christina:** Service is so important. You never remember a good meal if the service is bad. And furthermore, your staff takes the dining experience to the next level by being happy, knowledgeable and engaged. I notice you even do special things for regulars, which is such a treat!

**Lauren:** You're right. Especially when regulars bring new guests, introductions are always first and foremost. Regulars feel like they're part of something special and are proud to show it off!

To say thank you to our most loyal customers, Sonja celebrated Dinette's one-year anniversary by treating everyone to a private party complete with cake, champagne, dancing, and custom airbrushed t-shirts. Dinette is our place, but it's your place too.

**Christina:** I couldn't agree more! •

*Thank you to Lauren for helping to write this fun piece with me. Lauren has lived in Pittsburgh for over 10 years. She is a part-time writer, artist, and entrepreneur, and full-time sous chef at Dinette. This is her first real restaurant job and she loves every minute of it.*



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