



**mike gruss**

## CHESAPEAKE NEEDS MORE THAN A CHILI'S TO SPICE THINGS UP

**A**LL OF AMERICA, or at least all of America's appetite, can be found along the thoroughfares of Chesapeake. Its staples of suburban fare are Applebee's, Starbucks, Panera, Quiznos, Five Guys, Buffalo Wild Wings, Outback, Jason's Deli, Cracker Barrel, Little Caesars, Red Robin and Moe's.

Thursday, Chesapeake added one more deep-fried notch to its expanding waistline of restaurants: Chili's.

When I gulped down a Triple Dipper at the new location near City Hall last week, I was completely at ease with the high ceilings and wooden booths. It felt like I had swallowed this meal dozens of artery-hardening times. And with good reason. I had.

Maybe not at that particular Chili's or maybe not at that shopping center, but I had finished a comparable meal at someplace similar in Great Bridge or Greenbrier.

The new restaurant replaces an empty video store

But Chili's does nothing to help Chesapeake stray from its image as McYawnsville, just another stop in the same *suburban landscape* for the same Dilbertlike business travelers on the same boring business trips.

Wright said his department recognizes the portrayal and provides extra help for independent shops trying to navigate the process.

"We'd love to see more local restaurants," he said. "It adds to the flavor of our city."

If Chesapeake is to shed its image, it shouldn't be measured by how many sizzlin' fajitas and mushroom swiss burgers Chili's sells. A better indicator may come from another Chesapeake restaurant, Passion, which opened five miles away in a Greenbrier strip mall in May 2008.

Passion is owned by longtime Chesapeake resident Michael Gomori. When he conceived the business, he accounted for the high number of chain restaurants nearby. He'd heard the talk - Chesapeake has agrarian roots and simple tastes. But he took a gamble because he knew

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locals don't want to drive to Norfolk or Virginia Beach or Portsmouth for a fancy dinner. They don't always want a fried onion. They want something local, a place to call their own.

So Passion serves crab

to say it, but you're a number."

Chesapeake's city leaders point to Passion as one of the area's successes. But Gomori said the restaurant is still losing money. He considered closing Passion in the spring. But since May, business has picked up and now he's closer to breaking even.

If Passion succeeds, it shows Chesapeake and its customers are taking a small step toward a non-vanilla identity.

And if it fails, Chesapeake becomes a little more like everywhere else in Amer-