GRAPE PRIDE
Wine Country Ontario champions local wine purveyors

MICHELIN STAR
France’s renowned toque Alain Ducasse shares his secrets to success

WINTER WARMERS
Soups and sandwiches offer convenience, value and decadence

ANNUAL PINNACLE AWARDS ISSUE

TOP OF THE CLASS

TORONTO’S KING STREET FOOD COMPANY NABS COMPANY OF THE YEAR, EASTERN CANADA, HONOURS AT THE 26TH ANNUAL PINNACLE AWARDS

IN MEMORY OF MITCH KOSTUCH
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TIME TO SHINE

Who doesn’t like a winner? Whether talking about sports, business or entertainment, we’re magnetically drawn to successful individuals and companies. Understandably so. Everyone wants to be associated with them because perhaps, selfishly, on some level, we hope their success rubs off on us.

Ironically, when it came time to write this month’s editorial, I planned to focus on excellence, as I typically do every December in our Pinnacle Awards issue. But, before my deadline, circumstances beyond our control changed what I wanted to say, and why I wanted to say it. Sadly, on Oct. 23, Mitch Kostuch, our president, passed away suddenly, leaving a void in the lives of his personal family and his professional one, both here at Kostuch Media and at TrainCan, our sister company. On a larger scale, Mitch’s passing has impacted everyone he ever met, both professionally and personally, in Canada and throughout the world. The outpouring of affection moments after we announced his passing is testament to the immense respect and admiration Mitch commanded in the industry.

In many ways, it’s fitting that we feature a special tribute to him (see story on p. 4) in the context of this special Pinnacle Awards issue — the one that focuses on excellence. Mitch was truly a special man who cared so passionately about the foodservice and hospitality industries, and he was always inspired by the excellence he saw at every turn, from the operators to the chefs to the suppliers, to the students who will be tomorrow’s leaders. He recognized the importance of every individual. He was always excited and re-energized after attending events and conferences, because he always walked away from them with new respect for the industry and a ton of new ideas.

Of course, Mitch was very proud of what the teams at Kostuch and TrainCan have accomplished. He was particularly proud of what we have achieved in the past 26 years with the Pinnacle Awards program; after each annual edition, he would be the first to congratulate me and the KML team on yet another great event. As such, we dedicate this issue to Mitch and to everything he represented. As a company, we are sad to have lost his guiding spirit, his inspiring personality and his commitment to excellence. As individuals we mourn the passing of a “gentle man,” a humanitarian and a truly special individual. His legacy will live on.

Speaking of excellence, earlier this fall, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Alain Ducasse, chef/owner of 22 restaurants around the world (see story on p. 17). If anyone can talk about success he can. Ducasse’s stable of restaurants has garnered a total of 21 Michelin stars, with three earning three Michelin stars each — an incredible feat not replicated by any other chef. When asked what he attributes this achievement to, his answer speaks volumes: “You have to work harder, better and faster than anyone else.” Certainly, all of this year’s winners, and Mitch Kostuch, can attest to that sentiment.

As we close the chapter on yet another year, let’s pause to celebrate the stars that shine so brightly in this industry — including Mitch — and thank them for showing us the way. On behalf of the entire KML team, thank you for your continued support over the past year. We wish you a wonderful holiday season, and a happy new year, punctuated by good health, prosperity and always a touch of magic.

“ Time to shine

Rosanna Caira
Editor/Publisher
rcaira@kostuchmedia.com
WE HAVE BECOME THE MOST TALKED ABOUT FRANCHISE BRAND IN CANADA’S PREMIUM CASUAL DINING INDUSTRY.

WE’RE CONNECTING THE DOTS BETWEEN RESTAURANTEURS AND GUESTS ALL ACROSS CANADA.
Mitch was one of five children born to Antoni and Karolina Kostuch, Polish-born immigrants to Canada. Above, Mitch poses for his first communion picture.

Mitch attended The Ryerson Institute of Technology. He graduated from the Journalism program in 1953.

In 1972, Mitch graduated from York University’s MBA program, becoming the first mature student to graduate from a university program without an undergraduate degree.

Living the Legacy

With Mitch Kostuch’s passing, the foodservice and hospitality, and publishing industries lose one of their icons.

By Rosanna Caira
TO MANY in the hospitality and publishing industries, Mitch Kostuch was a man of many talents. He was an entrepreneur, a mentor, a visionary, an astute businessman, a champion of all things culinary. In his personal life, he was a dutiful son, a protective brother, a warm and caring uncle, a loving husband and father, a doting grandfather and a friend. Above and beyond everything else, he was a true “gentle man;” a warm soul who genuinely cared about people and who was infinitely passionate about the foodservice and hospitality industry.

His sudden passing this October leaves a huge void in the two industries he championed for almost 50 years. But, perhaps more importantly, he leaves a void in the lives of his son, Jim, and his daughter, Lynn, and those who worked with him at Kostuch Media Ltd. and TrainCan Inc.

It’s hard to believe I met Mitch 34 years ago, next February. There was no Hotelier back then, no digital magazines, no Internet, no social media. It was a much simpler time for both the publishing and the hospitality industries. As a neophyte journalist, I hungered to get into the publishing industry, but with little practical experience it was hard to gain a foothold. So I answered a newspaper ad for a receptionist at a publishing company, not realizing its magazine served the foodservice and hospitality industry. Despite my university degree, I gladly accepted a job as a receptionist, eager to learn everything I could about publishing.

Back then, the office was situated one floor below SB Capital, at 85 Bloor St. E., a company Mitch and his partner, George Felles, began in 1973. Once a week, Mitch would come down to meet with management and get a regular business update. I instantly recognized him from his picture in F&H magazine; he held out his arm to shake my hand, smiled that trademark smile and welcomed me to the company. I replied, “Thank you Mr. Kostuch,” and he quickly corrected me, “Call me Mitch.”

He never put on any airs. He was down to earth, accessible, genuine and generous. Every Christmas, in those early days, he and his wife, June — a wonderful and warm woman, who could make anyone feel at ease instantly — would open their beautiful home to the Kostuch team. We would have wonderful Christmas gatherings, with Champagne flowing alongside June’s homemade traditional Christmas dishes. Later, as the company grew, and with the passing of June in 2003, Mitch began to host those gatherings at the Donalda Club, one of the city’s most prestigious golf and country clubs, where he was a founding member.

Travel was one of Mitch’s greatest passions. There wasn’t a country Mitch hadn’t been to nor was there a culinary competition he hadn’t attended and supported: IKA HOGA, precursor to the Culinary Olympics; the Culinary Salons of the National Restaurant Association (NRA); the Bocuse d’Or in Lyon, France, or the various World Association of Cooks Societies competitions; and, of course, the countless competitions at home in the country he loved. He was a food aficionado. And nothing made him happier than combining both of these loves.

I remember travelling with him to Frankfurt for the 1988 Culinary Olympics. For seven days, we got up early and met for breakfast, before I reported on the event; then we ate our way through the daily competitions, and, come evening, we would dine at some of the city’s top restaurants. As anyone who has travelled with him knew, it was hard to keep up with him. I’ll never forget when, after a late dinner, he turned to me and said, “Let’s meet later tomorrow morning,” in his authoritarian voice. I was so relieved that I could finally sleep in later. Little did I realize late for him meant 8:15 a.m. instead of 8 a.m. It’s a story that, to this day, brings a smile to my face. It proved how tireless he was in his support of the industry, attending events, meeting with chefs, lending
his ear. He was so passionate about foodservice and hospitality, and he inculcated that love in the KML and TrainCan teams.

Of course, Mitch was also a brilliant journalist. He began his career at the Toronto Star where he was a cub reporter working the City beat. But his first real break came at Southam Business Press, where he spent 17 years working his way through various jobs, beginning in editorial with Heavy Construction News, then moving to sales where he eventually became a “space cadet” (as he always liked to remind us), then publisher, and eventually VP. In 1970, he threw it all away to return to school, where he became the first mature student to graduate from a Canadian university without an undergraduate degree.

Mitch was always charting new paths. After graduating from York University in 1972 with an MBA, he was hired as a consultant at the CRA, now Restaurants Canada. He became very familiar with the CRA magazine, the association’s mouthpiece, and to everyone’s surprise, he eventually purchased it, beginning a new chapter in his already illustrious career. He liked to tell the story that after he bought the magazine, Marketing magazine featured an article claiming he had bought the fourth-ranking magazine in a two-publication field. But he didn’t let that hold him back. In fact, in 1995, after a heated battle with Canadian Hotel & Restaurant — a Maclean-Hunter publication that existed for 75 years and was our top competitor in publishing — Mitch surprised us all and purchased the magazine, eventually folding it into F&H magazine. Along the way, he always quipped to his wife that she should consider herself lucky that he bought a food magazine and not a plumbing one.

As a true entrepreneur nothing made Mitch happier than launching new businesses and expanding our offerings. In 1989, Kostuch Publications was asked to bid on producing Ontario InnKeeper, a regional publication covering the Ontario hotel industry. We lost the bid but, under then publisher Lorol Cullen, we decided to start our own hotel industry magazine, and so Hotelier was born (this year it celebrates its 25th anniversary).

During those early days of his tenure as owner of the magazines, Mitch created many industry firsts: the “Hospitality 100” (precursor to today’s “Top 100 Report”); and “The Fact File,” a compendium of stats compiled in association with the University of Guelph and Prof. Michael Haywood (now a member of the Hotelier Advisory Board). Those were two of the projects I initially worked on in my early days. I recall driving with Mitch to the University of Guelph so he could familiarize me with the subject matter and introduce me to Haywood, the author.

Mitch was ahead of his time. Years before the fascination with cookbooks took hold, he published The Canadian Menu Manual, a book authored by chef John Schmied and some of the country’s leading chefs competing at the Culinary Olympics. It was one of my first editing projects as assistant editor.

From the beginning, Mitch realized the power of partnerships. He worked actively with the Canadian Foodservices Executives Association, precursor to today’s Canadian Association of Foodservice Professionals. Together they started the Top Management Night, an event that continues to this day, every February. He also published supplements on leading Canadian companies such as Canadian Pacific Hotels and Four Seasons Hotels. And, along the way, he became involved in Cuisine Canada, now Taste Canada. More recently, he was instrumental in partnering with Chicago-based Technomic and Lyon, France-based CHD Expert, understanding that together we are stronger.

He carried his love of news with him as we launched the “What’s On! Report” in 1998, precursor to today’s “Newsblast.” It became his baby, and he worked tirelessly to source industry news and write as many stories as possible.
And, when technology entered our lives in a big way with the advent of the Internet in 1995, Mitch was one of the first Canadian publishers to lead the way by creating foodserviceworld.com, nudging the rest of the team to jump on the bandwagon. Where others would pontificate and speculate about the lasting impact of new trends, Mitch would jump into the fray, not concerned about failure but rather excited about the new challenges and opportunities.

I recall travelling to the International Hotel & Motel Show in New York in 1996, where along with my team of editors, we reported live from the show floor on the new products introduced at the event. It was yet another industry first. Mitch recognized trends before many even realized they were trends. And even when we, as his team, would sometimes be reticent, he would be there to push us and nudge us into new areas, recognizing it would force us to stretch our muscles in new directions.

Mitch was a people person. When it came to employees, he let them learn through mistakes. He believed that the more you gave them to do, the faster they would learn to do it and the better they would be. He regularly popped in on employees to chat with them, to water their plants and to talk about the day’s headlines. He valued the young; he was always excited about having interns in the office — he liked their energy, their optimism and their potential. And, along the way, he was a mentor to many, including me.

From the early days, he saw something in me that he nurtured, and he gave me endless opportunities to grow. I remember at one of my first strategy meetings with the company, a few months after starting at F&H, how in awe of him I was, quickly realizing he was a brilliant man I could learn so much from. So I stuck around for a long time, because he gave me endless opportunities to grow and to evolve. He was my biggest supporter, allowing me to do whatever was important for the magazine and the industry. Whenever we attended events together, he would quip that I was his boss.

When I celebrated my 25th anniversary with the company, he gifted me with an incredible trip to Umberto Menghi’s cooking school in Tuscany, Italy, and he did it before an audience of 500 industry executives at the Pinnacle Awards. It remains one of the highlights of my career. Last year, he once again surprised me at the Pinnacle Awards by presenting me with a Lifetime Achievement Award, renaming the award in my honour (see this year’s Pinnacle Award Lifetime Achievement Award winner profile in Hotelier). He was always ready for a good celebration — whether it was employees’ birthdays, milestone achievements or commending the sales team as they hit or exceeded budget targets.

He was always at the centre of fun. For many years at Halloween, we hosted pumpkin-carving parties for staff, and not only would he buy the pumpkins but he would also judge the results and reward the best efforts. A few years ago, after hearing about a restaurant operator who had gifted her employees with money to dine at competing restaurants and then report back on their findings, he decided to do the same with our staff. It was a way to involve them and keep them interested. And one year, we even hosted a mock wedding for our then publisher Lorol Cullen, who had surprised us all by eloping. While most owners might have begrudged such frivolity, he welcomed it as a way to build team spirit.

Mitch was a true humanitarian. He was always giving of his time, ideas and money. One of the charities that was especially close to his heart was Friends of We Care. He was instrumental in its growth over the years, and he would educate people about its importance, always urging staff to visit the camps during “Camp Days” in the summer.

One of the things I will miss most about Mitch is the chats we had on an almost daily basis — bouncing ideas for new initiatives off of him or letting him know what I was planning for the days ahead. He was always
excited by those new ideas, so much that he could hardly contain his enthusiasm.

Nothing made him happier than new initiatives, because he was an ideas man. When we moved to our current address, at 23 Lesmill Rd., he built a test kitchen on our premises. It had always been one of his dreams, and he thought it would complement the magazine as it would allow us to test recipes for our monthly food column; he also realized that industry suppliers and chefs could use it, too.

In 1996, he saw the growing need for increased food-safety training and vigilance in the kitchen and signed a deal with the NRA to distribute materials from its ServSafe program in Canada. That fuelled the eventual founding and development of TrainCan Inc., in 2001, a food-safety training company he entrusted to his son, Jim. During the past 13 years, TrainCan has certified more than 160,000 foodservice employees.

Right to the end, he continued to do the things that brought him the most pleasure — attending industry events. During his last days, he attended the groundbreaking of Centennial College’s new culinary building with his son, Jim; he made a donation to Taste Canada; and he attended the opening of Little Fin with me (the latest restaurant in the Chase Hospitality Group, and this year’s Pinnacle Award winner in the Independent Restaurant of the Year category. See story on p. 38). Even though I knew he wasn’t feeling particularly well, it didn’t surprise me that Mitch showed up that afternoon. He always wanted to be in the know about the latest and greatest happenings, and he continued to ask probing questions right to the very end, sharing in great food and good conversation.

While he is no longer physically with us, he is woven into the fabric of our lives and the life of this industry. His memory, his legacy and his indelible spirit will guide us to the next chapter at this company. On behalf of the entire KML and TrainCan teams, and the industries he loved so dearly, thank you Mitch, for all you have done and all that you were. We are richer for having known you. We miss you profoundly, but your legacy continues. Rest in peace.
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FOODSERVICE AND HOSPITALITY DECEMBER 2014

PARTNERS IN PASTRY

Toronto’s George Brown College partners with Paris’ Alain Ducasse Education to cultivate budding pastry chefs

BY ROSANNA CAIRA

This past spring, Anne Sado, president of Toronto’s George Brown College (GBC), and Lorraine Trotter (pictured, centre), dean of the school’s Centre for Hospitality and Culinary Arts, travelled to France. On their agenda was a stop at France’s Ecole Nationale Superieure de Pâtisserie (ENSP), chef Alain Ducasse’s (pictured, centre, second from left) pastry school.

The educators were looking to broaden the two schools’ already existing relationship and work out the details of the recently announced post-graduate certificate in Advanced French Pâtisserie. “We have sent students on many study tours, and through that experience we came to respect what students could do there,” Trotter told F&H in mid-October as the school officially launched the new program.

The idea to expand GBC’s relationship with ENSP had been percolating. In fact, GBC had already created a two-week study tour with ENSP. So, during the spring trip, the two educators were invited to Paris to meet with Ducasse. “We issued the invitation to chef Ducasse to visit us in Toronto over coffee at Restaurant Le Maurice, and he was delighted to accept,” said Trotter. This past October, the chef and worldwide restaurateur, who has amassed 21 Michelin stars, made the trip to Toronto (see interview with Ducasse on p. 17) and formally announced the new partnership. “We have found an educational partner that shares our vision of top-quality learning and output and international training,” said Ducasse.

The new program will launch next spring. Twenty-four culinary students attending GBC will gain hands-on pastry training in France through the three-semester Advanced French Pâtisserie post-graduate program. Offered jointly with Alain Ducasse Education’s celebrated pastry and bakery school, ENSP, the program will cover topics such as chocolate confection, savoury baking, regional cheeses and artisanal breads.

It’s designed to prepare students for an increasingly global workplace by offering an international education and hands-on experience. “It’s a convergence of opportunities in the marketplace,” explained Trotter. “This is a win-win situation. ENSP will benefit from the opportunity to teach our highly motivated and skilled students. After their studies and placements in France, the students will return to George Brown with much stronger skills, a richer understanding of local and sustainable ways of working and the international experience much sought after by industry.”

CULINARY CASTLE

The Ecole Nationale Superieure de Pâtisserie in Yssingeaux, France, which is home to a special partnership with Toronto’s George Brown College, is an institution of international renown. School presidents Yves Thuriès and Alain Ducasse’s renovated culinary castle is the stomping ground for more than 1,550 students who use eight pastry labs and one amphitheatre where 10 permanent trainers and 100 professional speakers share their knowledge. “By focusing on innovation and modernity, our [teachers are] actively involved in the evolution of art,” reads the presidents’ letter.
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COMING EVENTS

JAN. 27-29: International Production & Processing Expo, Georgia World Congress Center, Atlanta. Tel: 678-514-1977; email: pstatmes@ippexpo.org; website: ippexpo.org

JAN. 29-FEB. 1: Guelph Organic Conference, Guelph University Centre, Guelph, Ont. Tel: 705-444-0923; email: organix@auracom.com; website: guelphorganicconf.ca

JAN. 30: Friends of We Care Calgary Bowling Challenge, Century Casino, 1010 42nd Street, Calgary. Email: sphpps@friendsofwecare.org; website: friendsofwecare.org

FEB. 12: CAFP Top Management Night Gala & Fundraiser, The International Centre, Mississauga, Ont. Tel: 416-422-3431; email: Toronto@cafp.com; website: cAFP.com/toronto

MARCH 1-3: Restaurants Canada Show, Direct Energy Centre, Toronto. Tel: 800-387-5649; email: event@restaurantscanada.org; website: restaurantshow.ca

FOR MORE EVENTS, VISIT

POURING IT ON THICK

Jeff Taylor (pictured), a bartender at Ottawa’s D’Arcy McGee’s, recently won a trip by performing an impressive rendition of traditional Irish hospitality during Prime Pubs’ annual Draught Master competition. Contestants gathered at Fionn MacCool’s in Brampton, Ont. to entertain the crowd by telling a traditional Irish tale, while pouring a pint of Guinness. “Bartending is a real art, and when it is done expertly the guest experience is truly memorable,” said Nathan Cameron, national beverage manager of the Vaughan, Ont.-based Cara Operations Ltd., parent company of Prime Pubs. “We host the annual Prime Pubs Draught Master competition to keep our bartenders at the top of their game. And with a four-day, educational trip to Ireland, including a day at St. James Gate Brewery and $2,000 in spending money as the prize, it is our way of rewarding our top bartender for his hard work and dedication.”

SCENE STEALERS

The Canadian restaurant community may not receive the accolades it deserves on an international level, but recent openings across the country have made an impression, as travel magazine EnRoute recently presented its annual list of Canada’s Best New Restaurants. The top 10 winners are Wolf in the Fog (Tofino, B.C.); Farmer’s Apprentice (Vancouver); Le Vin Papillon (Montreal); Rge Rd (Edmonton); Mallard Cottage (St. John’s, N.L.); Bar Buca (Toronto); The Chase (Toronto); Ayden Kitchen & Bar (Saskatoon); Légende (Quebec City); and Edna (Halifax). Ayden Kitchen & Bar, the new concept by Top Chef Canada winner Dale MacKay, also took home the 2014 People’s Choice Award.

CULINARY DISCOVERY

The founder of Zomato, an international restaurant-discovery app and website, has zeroed in on the Greater Toronto Area as his company’s first North American outpost. Zomato users can view menus, photos and choose local establishments based on their geo-coordinates. The app also offers a social network where users can write reviews and share recommendations. “We’re proud to include Toronto in our growing list of world-class cities. It boasts a vibrant restaurant industry, and Canada is a hugely promising market for us. We’ve earmarked US$10 million for our expansion in Canada and are committed to making Zomato the go-to restaurant discovery service in the country. Canada is truly a great starting point for us before we think of getting into the United States,” said Deepinder Goyal, founder and CEO of Zomato. The company plans to expand to Vancouver, Montreal, Ottawa and Calgary next.
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**A TASTE OF SUCCESS**

How the written word is received may be changing, but it was clear at the recent Taste Canada food writing awards, that books — such as the 58 submissions at this year’s event — continue to feed innovation.

The 17th annual awards united old friends and new colleagues at Toronto’s Arcadian Court for an evening hosted by celebrated TV personality Ricardo Larriviére (pictured, between Alison Fryer and Ted Reader), who extolled the virtues of cookbook authors and cooks. “We bring people together around the table,” said the chef. “Every recipe we create is forging this tradition.”

And, tradition continued as nine awards were presented. The winners were: The Stop, by Nick Saul and Andrea Curtis (Culinary Narrative – English); Les Saveurs Gastronomiques de la Bière, by David Lévesque Gendron and Martin Thibault (Culinary Narrative – French); The Flavour Principle, by Lucy Waverman and Beppi Crosariol (General Cookbooks – English); Dans la Cuisine de Danny St. Pierre, by Danny St. Pierre (General Cookbooks – French); Toronto Star Cookbook, by Jennifer Bain (Regional/Cultural Cookbooks); Gastro Grilling, by Ted Reader (Single-Subject Cookbooks – English); Les Règles d’or des Épices, by Philippe and Éthnée De Vienne (Single-Subject Cookbooks – French); Michel Lambert (Hall of Fame Award); and Mona Brun (Hall of Fame Posthumous Award).

As the awards’ presentation ended, attendees took a moment to honour The Cookbook Store. The Toronto gem, which closed recently, has been credited with elevating the quality of cookbooks since opening in 1983.

Next year the awards’ ceremony will have two new additions with a new Best Food Blog accolade and new Taste Canada national chair, Donna Dooher, chef, restaurateur and community activist. Submissions for the 2015 Taste Canada Awards open Jan. 1. — Brianne Binelli

**IN BRIEF**

Commercial foodservice sales are expected to reach $59.8 billion in 2015, according to Toronto-based Restaurants Canada’s annual Industry Forecast. Contract-caterers and Western Canadian markets are expected to lead the growth...Montreal-based MTY Food Group Inc. is expanding its roster of quick-service concepts by purchasing the assets of a group of companies — which owns Manchu Wok, Wasabi Grill & Noodle and SenseAsian — for $7.9 million. The deal will add 133 units to MTY’s stable...Following a mandate to serve beef raised without the use of hormones or steroids, and eggs from chickens fed only a vegetarian diet, Vancouver-based A&W Food Services of Canada Inc. now serves chicken raised without the use of antibiotics...

**PEOPLE**

Richard E. Allison is the new president of Domino’s Pizza’s International division. During the past three years, Allison has spearheaded the addition of nearly 1,800 international Domino’s locations in 10 new countries. He succeeds Michael T. Lawton, current CFO, who ran the division prior to Allison...Richard Linley has taken the helm as the president of the Vineland Station, Ont.-based Wine Council of Ontario, representing VQA wines from Ontario across the province. Linley previously served as senior director, Government Affairs, at Toronto’s Canadian Beverage Association.

**SUPPLYSIDE**

High Liner Foods Incorporated, based in Lunenburg, N.S., acquired the business of Atlantic Trading Company, LLC, a Miami-based importer of frozen Atlantic salmon...Kitchener, Ont.’s Dare Foods Limited now offers Simple Pleasures Digestive and Social Tea cookies in a new portion pack...Chris Butchko is now in charge of marketing at Louisville, Ky.-based Winston Industries. Butchko was previously eMarketing manager...Mississauga, Ont.’s Gay Lea Foods Co-operative Limited has inked a deal to acquire Hewitt’s Dairy, a Hagersville, Ont.-based family run processor.
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When you’re the chef/owner of 22 restaurants around the world that have garnered a total of 21 Michelin stars, it would be easy to believe the press and focus on the accolades. But talk to Alain Ducasse, and he’ll tell you chefs should not open restaurants to achieve Michelin stars, they should open them to please their customers.

“When a restaurant is full, you know you have a successful restaurant. If Michelin gives your restaurants stars, that’s wonderful, and if the media likes your restaurant, that’s great, but the initial goal of any restaurant is to please your customers.”

The highly acclaimed chef, reputed to be one of the world’s best toques, with his stable of restaurants, as well as inns and a collection of cookbooks, was in Toronto this fall to announce the launch of a new pastry exchange initiative with George Brown College (see story on p. 10).
For Ducasse, achieving the pinnacle of success has been a journey in balancing creativity with technical kitchen skills. Having worked under culinary greats such as Roger Vergé and Alain Chapel has given him more than encyclopedic knowledge, it’s taught him life skills. “I learned professionalism and leadership from Roger Vergé; with Alain Chapel (French master chef), I learned about precision and discipline as well as modern cuisine,” says the toque. These days, he’s transferring that knowledge to his global brigade of chefs. He travels to oversee his restaurants but is quick to admit the empire runs successfully because he has a good team.

But, at the root of his prosperity is a food philosophy, which focuses on “great ingredients, locally sourced and prepared based on the seasonality — products prepared with perfection,” he states emphatically, explaining “they need to work harmoniously, and you need to know which wines go with which dishes. At the end of the day,” he says, “there has to be a great deal of discipline, and you have to be demanding of yourself through the repetition of skills until you arrive at perfection. That’s my objective; that’s my vision. That’s what’s needed to access gastronomy. That’s what rules my philosophy.”

Ducasse believes focus is necessary for success at any level, whether it’s a bistro, a takeout eatery or a haute-cuisine restaurant — “the same preparation is necessary even if you’re serving a sandwich — what bread are you going to use, what are you going to put in the sandwich, which butter, which seasoning? It requires great attention,” he says.

Interestingly, as the world becomes smaller, the trends impacting North American cuisine aren’t vastly different from those of France. “We’re interested in consuming less meat protein and using more products from the sea,” says Ducasse, with “less fat, less salt and less sugar as well as more local products.” He’s even coined the word, “glocal” to describe his philosophy of having a global vision with a local focus.

Still, though trends aren’t that vastly different across the pond, Ducasse believes there are differences in how Europeans and North Americans approach food. “In Europe, we pay more attention to gastronomy. It’s part of our history. In Paris, for example, we have a number of fine-dining restaurants. That’s our specialty. When Americans come to Paris, they accept paying $300 to $400 per person for food and wines.”

Ducasse recently made global headlines by eliminating meat from the menu at his newest restaurant, La Plaza Athénée in Paris. “I’m a socially conscious chef, but I also wanted to demonstrate that haute cuisine can still be accomplished without meat. It’s a lot more work to create haute cuisine with limited products, but it can be done, and I dared to do it.”

Of course, these days North Americans don’t have to travel that far to delight in Ducasse’s cuisine. In addition to restaurants in France, Italy, the U.K., Japan, China, Russia and the Middle East, there are also outposts closer to home, in New York and Las Vegas. “It’s important to have a global vision,” says Ducasse, explaining that’s what fuelled his North American expansion. And, though some might question why a Parisian chef would venture to open a restaurant in Vegas, Ducasse is quick to answer. “I was the first European chef to open in Las Vegas.”

As for Canada, for the moment, Ducasse has no plans to open a location in Toronto, where he dined at some of the city’s best restaurants during his recent trip. “There’s too much competition here,” he quips. Plus, he says, he still has other locations to open first, including Beijing and Macau, China as well as another location in Paris.

In terms of what makes a Michelin-star chef, it’s simple, says Ducasse: “You have to work more, you have to work faster, and you have to work better. It’s about being determined and having a strong will and a strong vision with regard to your goals and the necessary values.”

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The casual-dining market in Canada is experiencing a transformation. Competition among the 21,359 casual-dining restaurants, which provide table service, wine lists and daily chef menu specials, is increasing.

In 2013, Canadians made more than 667-million visits to casual-dining restaurants, spending more than $11 billion, according to NPD’s latest CREST market insights. But this segment is experiencing challenges with customer traffic declining by an average of 1.0 per cent a year since 2008 and with 376 unit closures last year. Much of this is due to the emerging fast-casual segment and the influx of customers frequenting quick-service restaurants. As a result, casual-dining operators are reassessing their strategic positioning to attract customers in an increasingly competitive market.

THE NEW FACE OF CASUAL-DINING

Although the casual-dining segment has struggled in the past five years, the emerging premium-casual sub-segment has grown and is redefining casual-dining. In fact, findings from NPD’s recent report, “Full-Service Dining: What Customers Want,” show the premium-casual segment is the future of casual-dining in Canada.

Compared to regular casual-dining restaurants, premium-casual operators offer a higher overall dining experience with greater focus on customer service, an upscale atmosphere and quality food, which garners an average spend of $6.25 more per person. In 2013, Canadians spent more than $1.4 billion at premium-casual restaurants such as The Keg, Milestone’s, Moxie’s, Joey, Cactus Club Cafe and Earls. Meanwhile, smaller, regional premium-casual chains, including Browns Socialhouse and Turtle Jack’s, are experiencing aggressive expansion. Interestingly, many of the premium-casual chains are based in Western Canada and have had great success bringing their unique concepts across Canada.

PREMIUM-CASUAL LEARNINGS

So what makes a premium-casual restaurant successful? It’s the food. According to the aforementioned NPD full-service restaurant report, consumers overwhelmingly cite quality food as the number-1 motivation for choosing a premium-casual restaurant. It’s also the number-1 factor influencing diner satisfaction, which is critical as 73 per cent of customers will not return if they don’t have a good experience. Other positive associations with premium-casual restaurants include menu innovation, indulgent options, a variety of flavoured coffees and teas and knowledgeable, friendly staff who make recommendations.

THE FUTURE OF PREMIUM-CASUAL

According to NPD’s forecast report “2020 Vision,” the premium casual-dining segment in Canada is expected to grow customer traffic by 2.0 per cent leading to 2020, outpacing overall market performance, which is expected to grow by 1.0 per cent. Clearly diners are responding to this new sub-segment, and they expect more from traditional casual-dining.
Bites & Bowls

Canadians are warming up to soups and sandwiches, which offer convenience, quality ingredients and value

By Liz Campbell
The sandwich still meets that basic need for convenience, but consumers want more. "Customers want speed and [a good] price, but they also want taste, and they want to feel good about what they eat," says Brady Muller, chef/owner of Ciboulette in Halifax. "Many of our customers are regulars, so they don't want the same old, same old, every day."

Making the same old different is why the classic chicken club is the most popular sandwich at Ciboulette; there it comes panini-style with chicken, bacon, tomato, mozzarella, avocado and chipotle mayonnaise ($6.96). And ordinary grilled cheese becomes extraordinary with sun-dried tomatoes, basil and rosemary aioli ($6.96).

"It's not necessary to re-invent the wheel," asserts Anthony Rose, chef/owner of Rose & Sons in Toronto. "Good simple classics are the best." Nonetheless, his PLB Special Melt Breakfast sandwich — bacon, sausage, pickle, fried egg and fried onions topped with cherry jam on buttery caraway rye ($13) — is not your classic sandwich.

"It's not trendy to have a big menu, but I like the idea of options," says Matthew Schnarch, chef/owner of Café Pavé in Old Montreal, whose menu offers 22 sandwiches. "I cross-utilize many of the ingredients, so I can customize and create interesting combinations." Thus, a simple chicken sandwich can take on enormous flavour variations, from the Tokyo with English cucumber, tomato and kamikaze sauce (slightly spicy mayo with candied ginger) to the Tunis with sun-dried tomato, goat cheese, spinach with roasted garlic and creamy pesto ($10.99 each with soup/salad and beverage).

"These days it’s all about customization,"
The new Maximizer Mop’s built-in cleaning efficiency makes even the biggest jobs seem small.
affirms Emma Hyatt, Foodservice specialist at the NPD Group Inc. in Toronto. “Fast-casual is still an emerging segment, but its major source of growth is high quality, customizable, unique ingredients not normally found in fast food.”

Tim Hortons has taken its menu to the next level by introducing steak, an item not normally associated with QSR. “We have seen a trend to more higher-end ingredients and bolder flavours,” says Michelle Robichaud, manager, Public Relations at the Oakville, Ont.-based chain. “Our guests are really responding to our new Chipotle Steak and Cheese Panini, made with 100-per-cent Canadian beef ($5.29).”

NPD’s Hyatt calls it premiumization. “Fast-food restaurants are coming out with better quality, tastier, more inspiring ingredients,” she says. “Consumers are resisting spending at full-service but spending more in QSR for higher quality, higher-spec items. Some chains constantly launch limited-time offerings bringing in fun new, interesting lines, which may become permanent.”

Wendy’s has been creative with limited-time offerings such as its Pretzel Pub chicken

INGREDIENT OF THE MONTH: COCONUT MILK

Shunned by some for years because of its saturated fat, coconuts have become the darling of the foodie world, joining the ranks of superfoods. International launches of coconut water products have quintupled since 2008, according to international research firm Mintel, and along with the water, the rest of the coconut is enjoying new acceptance. In particular, coconut milk is proving to be a big plus on menus. While fresh coconut milk is difficult to source, it’s readily available in tins and can be reconstituted from desiccated coconut and hot water. Lactose-free, it’s a useful milk substitute in cream soups. Life’s Good Soups, a retailer at the Farmer’s Market in Halifax, uses coconut milk to add Thai flavour to gingersweet potato green bean soup. At Piping Kettle Soup Co., in London, Ont., a rich lentil soup gets an exotic twist from a dash of curry and coconut milk ($2.50 to $8.95). And, in Halifax, Ciboulette’s most popular soup, carrot ginger, becomes creamy smooth, and accessible to vegans with the addition of coconut milk ($6.40 with a biscuit).
sandwich ($6.19), or its pulled-pork and crunchy slaw in a toasted brioche with barbecue sauce ($4.99). Even McDonald’s is upscaling with the recent introduction of crispy shrimp wrapped with vegetables and zesty sweet chili sauce ($5.49).

While these premium ingredients inevitably come with a higher price point, there is a market for them. “Consumers are willing to pay for menu items that are made with quality ingredients, because they can see the value they are getting for their money,” says Robichaud.

Fresh ingredients are an important part of that value equation. “Our customers like the fact that our chicken is grilled to order,” says Erica Gale, director of Marketing at Richmond Hill, Ont.-based Extreme Pita. “They want to know their food is freshly prepared.” Grilled chicken with tomato, cucumber, mushroom, romaine lettuce, red onion, green pepper and tzatziki sauce ($7.29 to $7.99) is the top seller here, but customers can request customized premium add-ons such as artichokes and roasted peppers.

While wrapped sandwiches made inroads during the carb-conscious diet-craze days, according to the NPD’s Hyatt, wraps and...
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pitas are still driving sandwich growth. And Gale knows why wraps are a hit. “You taste the fillings rather than the bread,” she says. The owners of Ravi Soups, a Toronto chain opening its fourth location in seven years, can attest to this. The restaurant’s sandwiches come wrapped in a tortilla; the favourite is a meaty curried lamb with mango, pineapple, edamame, spinach and cilantro ($9.99).

Sandwiches are often very meat-centric, so it can be a tough category for vegetarians. Most restaurants offer at least one option, usually substituting cheese or eggs to provide protein. For example, Tim Hortons offers a grilled-cheese panini ($4.20) and egg salad ($3.45). Even The Meatery, a Vancouver restaurant advertising “butcher-to-bun” fare, offers a concession to vegetarians — brie, pear and brown-butter sage sauce ($10).

Meat consumption is down, but, according to the NPD Group, CREST, during the year-ending May 2014, more than 81 per cent of sandwiches contained meat. “People are moving back to higher quality protein but eating less,” says Bett Porta, owner of The Meatery, where the free-range meats are local. The restaurant’s top-selling sandwiches are hoisin-braised beef short rib with pickled cabbage and guacamole; or pulled pork with chipotle slaw ($10 each).

But, while sandwich sales have increased two per cent, according to the NPD Group, CREST, soup has seen a decline of three per cent annually for the last five years. In the past year, soup was only ordered at about four per cent of foodservice visits. “While some operators have had great success with interesting new flavours, it has not been enough to drive overall growth,” says Hyatt.

Nonetheless, soup-centred concepts, such as Ravi Soups, are thriving with game-changing flavours such as curried apricot and red lentil with cilantro, lime crème fraîche and crispy shallots; or corn chowder with blue crab, Thai basil and crispy shallots (both $8.99). “Our regulars come back because the food is healthy. Everything is made from scratch with fresh vegetables and less oil,” says Kamal Kandhasamy, executive chef. “And our food tastes really good, with strong flavours.”

Unique, bolder flavours are popular, and Ciboulette’s Muller isn’t afraid to experiment. “We’ve even tried kimchi soup,” she says. Nonetheless, her consistent top seller...
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Foodservice

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is Intense Carrot and Ginger ($6.40 with a biscuit), a soup she describes as “zesty but approachable.”

Jim Phillips, owner of Piping Kettle Soup Co., with two locations in London, Ont., hates to admit his top seller is broccoli and cheddar. “I resisted it for a long time; it’s so boring,” he laments. “But our customers see Piping Kettle as their company; of the more than 100 soups we’ve offered, most were suggested by them. I finally gave in on broccoli cheddar; now it’s always one of the 10 daily soups.”

But regular soups at Piping Kettle also include Indian spiced channa masala soup, coconut lentil (a jalapeño-laced vegan offering) and turkey chili ($2.50 to $6). Although the Piping Kettle offers sandwiches, including the ubiquitous pulled pork, soup comprises 80 per cent of sales. Phillips explains: “People who eat soup, love soup. They’re getting everything in a bowl without a lot of bread; it isn’t as heavy as a sub.”

Soup has also proven to be a valuable upsell in full-service restaurants where it’s included in nine per cent of visits, according to the NPD Group, CREST. But QSR and fast-casual operators are also benefiting from pairing soup with sandwiches. Piping Kettle offers a small soup and small sandwich for $5. At Montreal’s Café Pavé, where the sandwich comes with soup, salad or chips, 50 per cent of guests choose soup; in winter, three-quarters choose hearty soups such as vegetable barley.

Two flavours remain popular among Canadians: tomato and chicken noodle. Tim Hortons’ top seller is premium chicken noodle soup made with white chicken meat ($3.30). Rose & Sons’ Rose serves his chicken soup with a matzo ball ($9), and, he laughs, “I try to make my tomato soup as close to Campbell’s as possible.” Extreme Pita serves Campbell’s soups, but, says Gale, the chain is looking at a new soup strategy for 2015.

In the never-ending struggle to attract customers, originality is key. Take the EXP Restaurant + Bar in Vancouver as an example. The video game-themed restaurant offers zesty sandwiches such as the Epic Shrimp and Crab Sandwich, described as “crispy prawns, crab mix, tempura green onion, avocado, shredded lettuce and wasabi mayo locked in an eternal struggle for superiority!” ($13). It’s a new approach to the epic struggle for the appetites of Canadians who are searching for convenience, unique ingredients and great value.

FOOD FILE

Tim Hortons’ Chicken Noodle Soup

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It’s that wonderful time of year: carols are playing in the malls, the snow is falling in the streets and neighbourhoods are filled with the twinkling lights of the season. And, with that comes the Pinnacle Awards. This year marks the 26th anniversary of Kostuch Media’s celebration of excellence in foodservice and hospitality. It’s time to take pause and recognize the companies that have gone above and beyond, inspiring growth and innovation, while serving their communities. The pages that follow feature profiles of this year’s five winners. Take a look, be inspired and revel in the success of a thriving industry.

— Brianne Binelli
COMPANY OF THE YEAR – EASTERN CANADA

WE THREE KINGS
Rob Gentile is beaming. Standing in the centre of Buca Yorkville in Toronto’s new Four Seasons Residences complex, he breaks for our interview on the first day of what he terms “orientation” for new staff. It’s autumn, a time for new beginnings, and his energy is contagious, as is his enthusiasm for slow-cooked, artfully created, authentic Italian dishes, which have made him the go-to Italian-Canadian chef. “As a kid, I preferred to watch cooking shows rather than cartoons,” laughs Gentile. “But, of course, being the youngest, I was also hanging out [at] my grandparents’ [house] eating food they grew in their backyard.”

Food is clearly a passion at King Street Food Company, which has had a banner year. Peter Tsebelis, managing director, and
Gus Giazitzidis, managing partner, first met at Myth, a Mediterranean-themed restaurant in Toronto that Tsebelis opened while pursuing an economics degree at the University of Toronto. Eventually the entrepreneurs became business partners and founded King Street Food Company in 2006.

In 2008, Tsebelis and Giazitzidis met Gentile through mutual friends; he was the perfect person to bring Buca to life. “We met a few chefs and restaurateurs,” says Tsebelis. “But no one really impressed us with their philosophy of food until we met Rob.”

Formerly of Mark McEwan’s One and North 44 restaurants, Gentile was ready to lead the culinary vision at Buca with gourmet, rustic Italian comfort food. He became executive chef and managing partner in 2009. “Rob understood the importance of the traceability of ingredients,” explains Tsebelis. “The ingredients need to be traced back to their sources — the farmers and fishermen who supply them. The ingredient is paramount.”

King Street Food Company grew to include Jacobs and Co. Steakhouse (in 2011) and The Saint Tavern (in 2012). “The company didn’t really represent a ‘type’ of food or even a restaurant look but a philosophy towards hospitality,” explains Tsebelis. “Our approach has always been a guest-first approach. That translates into an overall feeling of comfort in the food, the service and the environment.”

The Buca brand did so well that more locations followed. Earlier this year, the 38-seat Bar Buca trattoria was born, serving espresso and pastries as early as 7 a.m. and Italian bar food until 1 a.m. Brunch draws lineups on weekends with dishes such as Gentile’s version of eggs — the Uova Strapazzate, which features farm eggs, burrata cheese and truffle ($14).

“Every neighbourhood in Italy has [its] little restaurant on the corner where they go for their morning coffee and pastry, their lunch or dinner and then a glass of wine and a snack to eat at night,” Gentile says of the inspiration behind Bar Buca. “We discovered Toronto had nothing like it. Restaurants were focused on the café concept or the bar/restaurant concept, not the entire day’s menu options.” And, the new concept is already well regarded (like its sister restaurant) with noted Toronto food critic Joanne Kates — Buca is number 1 and Bar Buca is number 10 on the writer’s annual list of the best 100 restaurants in Toronto.

But, it doesn’t end there, as Buca Yorkville just opened this past fall. The menu focuses on sustainably sourced seafood and homemade seafood salumi (ever tried salmon mortadella?). It seats approximately 70 and includes a large patio.

And, the team recently inked a multi-restaurant deal with celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, who hand-picked King Street Food Company to debut his rustic Italian restaurant concept — which has 35 outlets in the U.K., Australia, Ireland, Hong Kong and Singapore — in the North American market. The 200-seat, 8,000-sq.-ft. Jamie’s Italian restaurant is set to open inside Toronto’s Yorkdale Shopping Centre this spring, bringing pizza and pasta made on site daily to a fast-casual setting. Details are still being worked out, but every unit will vary slightly, blending culinary ideas from Oliver and Gentile.

The celebrity indie chef fell in love with Gentile’s cuisine on a chance dinner at Buca in the fall of 2011. Gentile was in the kitchen that night and smiles as he remembers the special service. “The first thing we did was a salumi spread on a long board,” he says. “We had over 20 types of meat from every animal you could imagine: wild boar, goose, goat, venison, moose, lamb, horse, bison.” Many of the salumi were hand-made, hand-cured by Gentile who took several educational training tours through Italy.

Of course, the dinner didn’t stop there. The menu also included orecchiette with basil-fed snails and an entrée of lamb’s neck — which has 35 outlets in the U.K., Australia, Ireland, Hong Kong and Singapore — in the North American market. The 200-seat, 8,000-sq.-ft. Jamie’s Italian restaurant is set to open inside Toronto’s Yorkdale Shopping Centre this spring, bringing pizza and pasta made on site daily to a fast-casual setting. Details are still being worked out, but every unit will vary slightly, blending culinary ideas from Oliver and Gentile.

The company partners are committed. “Like most people, we ended up in the service industry by accident where it started as a part-time job,” says Tsebelis. “We grew to love it and stayed in this field because of the creativity it offers. It’s addictive to create new concepts.”

But, it’s about more than spreadsheets and new ideas, and the King Street partners don’t forget to give back to the community that nurtured their success. They actively participate in at least two charity events per month in Toronto, including Bloor Street Entertains, which benefits the city’s CANFAR (Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research) and The Evergreen Urban Rodeo and Barbecue, which supports green and healthy cities. It also partners with organizations such as Second Harvest, Community Food Centres Canada and The Stop, which all provide food to Toronto’s less privileged.

“Ensuring consistent service is the core that requires the most time, training and practise.” It’s about getting everything right from the kitchen prep lists to the steps of good service, notes the toque who has six years of experience coaching staff. Every step of the food process is honoured, from nurturing relationships with farmers and fish suppliers to employee training. No element is overlooked.

“We provide extensive training seminars specific to each venue, [its] concept and offering,” says Tsebelis. “Our people are our most valuable asset, so training is ongoing.” The partners also subsidize educational programs. In the past staff attended a symposium on Slow Fish (part of the Slow Food movement), for example. An educated staff communicates better with the customer and can deliver knowledge in a more convincing and personal way, Gentile notes.

It’s clear the company partners are committed. “Like most people, we ended up in the service industry by accident where it started as a part-time job,” says Tsebelis. “We grew to love it and stayed in this field because of the creativity it offers. It’s addictive to create new concepts.”

The deal with Oliver, new restaurant openings and a surge in traffic due to positive buzz has spurred a spike in business, with sales rising by 75 per cent between 2013 and 2014. “We don’t give out exact sales numbers, but years of a strong work ethos and genuine love for good food have truly paid off,” explains Tsebelis.

A good work ethic is taught from the onset by Gentile. The executive chef and managing partner is a perfectionist when it comes to schooling his staff. “Employee training is the most important part of our business,” he says. “It’s about getting everything right from the kitchen prep lists to the steps of good service, notes the toque who has six years of experiences coaching staff. Every step of the food process is honoured, from nurturing relationships with farmers and fish suppliers to employee training. No element is overlooked.”

“We provide extensive training seminars specific to each venue, [its] concept and offering,” says Tsebelis. “Our people are our most valuable asset, so training is ongoing.” The partners also subsidize educational programs. In the past staff attended a symposium on Slow Fish (part of the Slow Food movement), for example. An educated staff communicates better with the customer and can deliver knowledge in a more convincing and personal way, Gentile notes.

“The first thing we did was a salumi spread on a long board,” he says. “We had over 20 types of meat from every animal you could imagine: wild boar, goose, goat, venison, moose, lamb, horse, bison.” Many of the salumi were hand-made, hand-cured by Gentile who took several educational training tours through Italy.

Of course, the dinner didn’t stop there. The menu also included orecchiette with basil-fed snails and an entrée of lamb’s neck — which has 35 outlets in the U.K., Australia, Ireland, Hong Kong and Singapore — in the North American market. The 200-seat, 8,000-sq.-ft. Jamie’s Italian restaurant is set to open inside Toronto’s Yorkdale Shopping Centre this spring, bringing pizza and pasta made on site daily to a fast-casual setting. Details are still being worked out, but every unit will vary slightly, blending culinary ideas from Oliver and Gentile.

The company partners are committed. “Like most people, we ended up in the service industry by accident where it started as a part-time job,” says Tsebelis. “We grew to love it and stayed in this field because of the creativity it offers. It’s addictive to create new concepts.”

But, it’s about more than spreadsheets and new ideas, and the King Street partners don’t forget to give back to the community that nurtured their success. They actively participate in at least two charity events per month in Toronto, including Bloor Street Entertains, which benefits the city’s CANFAR (Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research) and The Evergreen Urban Rodeo and Barbecue, which supports green and healthy cities. It also partners with organizations such as Second Harvest, Community Food Centres Canada and The Stop, which all provide food to Toronto’s less privileged.

“It’s just as important to give back as it is to succeed in business,” says Giazitzidis. But perhaps the biggest success of all is that the entrepreneurs behind the growing empire are living out their childhood dreams. “I was raised by a single mother, and she always told me, ‘Whatever you do for a living, make sure you enjoy it, because you’ll be doing it for a long time,’” Gentile recalls. “That led me to cuisine, and I haven’t looked back since.”
Pinnacle winners
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Congratulations and thank you for partnering with Ecolab

Company of the Year Western Canada: CACTUS CLUB CAFE, VANCOUVER
Independent Restaurant Group: THE CHASE HOSPITALITY GROUP, TORONTO
Congratulations to: ALL OTHER AWARD RECIPIENTS

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Who knew a surfing vacation could eventually lead to the birth of a brand, but that was the case for the Vancouver-based Cactus Club Cafe. “I’d never been to Hawaii before, so I fell in love with it and fell in love with surfing there; it’s been a life-long passion of mine ever since,” says Richard Jaffray, Cactus Restaurants Ltd., president and founder.

The 26-year-old company was born just a few years after the trip, and after Jaffray loaded up his ‘74 Dodge Dart and left Calgary to make a new life in Vancouver. Just in his late teens, the budding engineer and part-time waiter quit school and headed to Canada’s West Coast to pursue business in 1984, eventually opening Café Cucamonga in 1986, with co-founder Scott
Morison. “It was a little 900-sq.-ft. café that was pretty crazy — it was open quite late at night, serving ice cream, sandwiches and salads.” And, it kept Jaffray near the water to feed his love for surfing.

But, the entrepreneur and his partner wanted more. They sold Café Cucamonga for an undisclosed amount in 1988 and started a new venture (Morison left the company in 2004). “The idea of doing Cactus Club was about doing something on a bigger scale where it had more growth opportunity,” explains Jaffray. “My first restaurant ... did great, but if I left the building it was going to be hard to build another one.”

It was time for kaizen. The Japanese business term — which translates to “continuous improvement,” is a philosophy followed at Cactus Restaurants Ltd. “Cactus Club has evolved, and it’s not something that’s
[just] happened — we didn’t just decide one year to completely revolutionize the business,” explains the president. “It’s something we’ve been doing ever since [we opened]. And, that original restaurant in North Vancouver that’s now over 26 years in business is having its best year, so we’re proud we’ve been able to continually improve.”

Today, the 26-unit “casual, fine-dining” chain offers house-made globally inspired dishes served in a “relaxed, unpretentious” atmosphere. All corporately owned (aside from some joint-venture units with senior management), each location offers approximately 200 interior seats and up to 100 patio seats in a 6,500-sq.-ft. footprint created using an in-house design team and external architects.

Grassroots ideas are part of the chain’s DNA, so it makes sense that it was a founding member of the Vancouver Aquarium’s Ocean Wise conservation program in 2005; it was also involved in the city’s Green Table Network, which acknowledges foodservice operators who improve their environmental performance while serving quality food.

The private company does not release sales numbers, but 2014 follows a year of great growth. “We came off some pretty big openings in the marketplace in the last 12 months,” says Jaffray, during a morning call from Vancouver in September. “We opened the Coal Harbour location downtown on the waterfront at Jack Poole Plaza [in Vancouver]. [And] we opened a flagship suburban location in Langley, [B.C.] and in Edmonton.”

This fall, the company opened its first Saskatchewan unit in downtown Saskatoon. And, next year, the concept debuts in Ontario with a two-level unit with a rooftop patio slated to open in Toronto’s First Canadian Place.

The move east into Ontario and Saskatchewan is slow and deliberate. “We made a conscious decision that we wanted to bring Cactus Club to the Toronto market and to expand further in the Prairies and Saskatchewan,” says Jaffray. “[For us] 2014 was not only [about] getting ourselves positioned for this big expansion coming up in two new provinces but also making sure we maintained the level of success at these new locations we just opened.”

That success was affirmed this year at Vancouver magazine’s Annual Restaurant Awards. Rob Feenie, executive chef, remembers it well. “Cactus was recognized for the seventh year in a row for Best Casual Chain; trust me it’s not an easy thing to win. But, the one we were really proud of was we beat David Hawksworth for Best Downtown restaurant for Coal Harbour.” He adds: “It is one of the most beautiful restaurants. It’s unbelievable. And, we as a team, worked really hard.”

The brand’s team comprises approximately 3,000 employees, including service director Sebastien Le Goff, 500 chefs and 50 Red Seal chefs. The culinary crew is led by Feenie, who joined the chain in 2008 and continues to introduce new techniques and recipes to raise expectations. This year, menu innovations included the Tuna Sushi Cone with spicy Ocean Wise albacore, hand-rolled with avocado, cucumber, pickled ginger, tempura, micro cilantro, green onion and a soy paper wrapper ($5); Ceviche with Lois Lake steelhead, sustainably harvested prawns, red onions, Thai basil, mint, cilantro and nuoc cham ($14.50); as well as Bengal Chicken Curry with garam masala, tomatoes, cream, cauliflower, almond coconut basmati rice and naan ($17.75). The Indian dish was a departure from Feenie’s French, Italian and Japanese specialties, and it gave...
In the Cactus Club kitchens, training and development are ongoing, and Feenie brings the culinary brigade together to cook outside their regular environment, too. "I don’t get to be in all the stores at the same time, so to be in an environment where I have all the chefs in the same room; it’s something we get to do [for them], and it’s a lot of fun," says the toque who takes his chefs and sous chefs to a local school to practise. But, the chefs’ commitment runs deeper. "What I love is, on their own social time, they’re cooking for each other. It’s fantastic," says Feenie.

Quality food is integral to the company fabric, having been home to a large contingent of Red Seal chefs before Feenie came aboard. "We were investing in our kitchen partners’ education and our sous chefs’ education, and that’s something that’s been a part of our culture all along," says Jaffray, who goes on to talk about Cactus University where management also has a chance to learn, studying various business topics taught by external instructors, while working towards a "degree." Meanwhile, a mentorship program allows young managers to connect with senior management and executives for approximately three to six months.

Perhaps it’s that dedication to employee growth that led to the brand being named a platinum club member of Canada’s Best Managed Companies in 2014, following seven consecutive years on the iconic list that recognizes companies with revenues of more than $10 million, which demonstrate business performance and sustained growth. “This recognition is a reflection of our team’s ongoing commitment to the growth of our business, the development of our people and the involvement in our community,” says Jaffray who works with staff to create annual business plans.

Indeed, giving back to the community has been a part of the chain’s mandate for years, having supported organizations such as the Sarah McLachlan School of Music in Vancouver, the Culinary Arts Program at Vancouver’s Templeton Secondary School and Make-A-Wish B.C. & Yukon.

Feenie got involved with Make-A-Wish 14 years ago after an employee shared her passion for the organization. This year, during the chain’s annual Sweet Dreams Dessert Month in April, when $1 from every dessert sale was donated to the cause locally, Cactus aimed to raise $7,500. And, this year it spent approximately $4,000 in gift cards to host Bon Voyage dinners (or lunches) for families before they took a Wish trip. "It’s funny, we can send a family to Paris to go up The Eiffel Tower, and when we get the thank-you photos and the thank-you letters, they always include how special they were treated at Cactus Club," says Ross Hetherington, CEO, Make-A-Wish B.C. & Yukon, explaining how the kids are greeted by name, given high fives, kitchen tours and more.

With all that he’s accomplished, it’s little surprise the Cactus Club’s 50-year-old leader was bestowed with the Lifetime Achievement Award at Vancouver magazine’s 25th Annual Restaurant Awards this past spring. “It was a tremendous honour, and I was very elated," Feenie recalls with a laugh. He adds: “[But] I’m not done yet." And, as the company continues its expansion in Toronto, Calgary and Kelowna, it’s clear the detail-oriented thinker is waiting to lead the company through the next big wave, paddling toward it slowly, while adjusting to the water’s kaizen.

FOODSERVICEANDHOSPITALITY.COM
CREATING AN EXPERIENCE
Toronto's Chase Hospitality Group is led by Steven Salm (left), president; Michael Steh, executive chef; and Michael Kimel, director of New Business Development (not pictured).
BUILDING AN EMPIRE
TORONTO’S CHASE HOSPITALITY GROUP IS REDEFINING HOSPITALITY, CREATING A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE WITH TOP-NOTCH FOOD AND SERVICE
BY LAURA PRATT | PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET MULLIGAN
New restaurants often open with an obvious focus on food, but, for the Chase Hospitality Group, success means focusing on more than that; it means honing in on how a customer feels.

With that in mind, before the Toronto opening of The Chase in August 2013, the leadership team gathered around a white board to identify how to “redefine hospitality in North America.” Steven Salm, company president, acknowledges this ambition was “bold,” and wasn’t likely achievable in a year, or even five. But he was keen to set a goal that over-delivered on the fundamental emotions a guest expects from a restaurant experience.

Salm, a born-and-bred New Yorker, was managing the Manhattan operations of BLT Restaurants when Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment tapped him to come to Toronto to become a senior F&B executive. He arrived in spring 2010 but left the company two years later to take advantage of the “unbelievable expansion” his adopted city was enjoying. In December 2012, Salm, in conjunction with Michael Kimel, fellow founding partner and director of New Business Development, launched the Chase Hospitality Group and signed a lease for what would become a double-barreled operation. The focus would be on fresh fish, an acknowledgment of the healthier lifestyle it promotes and an answer to the absence of quality seafood options in Toronto restaurants. Wherever possible, the fish would be sustainable.

Chase Hospitality’s initial setting, which houses the 132-seat Chase and 83-seat Chase Fish & Oyster on Temperance Street in Toronto, is a fully restored downtown heritage building. It’s a financial district beauty transformed by Gianpiero Pugliese, principal of Audax Architecture in Toronto. It took five months to build The Chase and its main-floor fellow tenant, The Chase Fish & Oyster, a five-storey elevator ride below. The latter celebrates fresh, seasonal seafood offered in creatively presented hot and cold dishes. A lobster hot pot features scallops, clams and mussels ($38); a crab-and-avocado roll is served with sweet corn and braised leeks ($23). And, as for the featured player, the restaurant serves 40,000 oysters per month. “We wanted to completely redefine oyster bars in the city,” says executive chef Michael Steh. Meanwhile, The Chase is an upscale resto with rooftop patio known for its flavour-filled small plates (snow crab, $27), adventurous entrées (big eye tuna, $42) and the spirited interaction in which staffers engage patrons. The results have attracted the likes of Jake Gyllenhaal and Isabella Rossellini.

But it’s the “extremely loyal” regulars who give the restaurant its success, says Steh. “I’m not talking about 10 couples who come in every week; I’m talking about hundreds upon hundreds who [eat at] our restaurants for lunch and dinner. It’s a lifestyle for them.” It’s in great part thanks to this allegiance that The Chase’s sales have increased five per cent since opening (exact sales figures were undisclosed).

The partners hope this tradition continues at the company’s new 4,500-sq.-ft., 119-seat Colette Grand Café, which opened at Toronto’s Thompson Hotel in July. The design, which was also overseen by Audax Architecture, features barrel-vaulted ceilings, hand-painted tiles and the traditional Parisian colours of blue, yellow and white. The palatial newcomer offers breakfast, brunch, lunch and dinner with a focus on French seaside cuisine, alongside a quick-service dine-in bakery and a...
It’s been a busy year for the Chase Hospitality team, who recently opened the much-anticipated Little Fin. This quick-service seafood diner, a neighbour to The Chase and The Chase Fish & Oyster on Temperance Street in Toronto, was created to focus on quality fresh seafood, available to eat on premise or take away. Its signature dish comprises cooked-to-order fish rolls prepared on sesame buns stained black with bamboo charcoal.

It’s that idea of simple food made and sourced well that leads the company’s food philosophy. “We’re not trying to overcomplicate things,” says Steh. “People want food that makes them feel good. They don’t want to be overwhelmed.” As such, the two Chase restaurant menus feature simple, vibrant ingredients that are responsibly sourced and presented in unexpected ways. To wit, an appetizer simply labelled Avocado at The Chase is served in paper-thin slices that have been placed in a vacuum sealer then rolled with a mixture of crab, smoked onion and smoked coconut ($23).

At Colette, food prep is a bit more challenging due to the precision required in French cuisine. “There are so many variables that need to go into a recipe for goat cheese soufflé that you have to follow the same [method] every time,” says Steh. “It’s that attention to detail that’s so challenging but [also] so rewarding.” Soufflé au Chèvre ($16), Entrecôte and Frites ($38) and Trio de Foie Gras ($34) are Colette’s most popular dishes.

Up next in Chase Hospitality’s pursuit of redefined hospitality comes personal service, which embraces the singled-out corporate value to “care for our ladies and gentlemen with empathy and sincerity,” says Salm. For example, Chase restaurant servers can name all of a dish’s ingredients, identify who took the photos on the wall, provide a history of a spirit in a cocktail and name the flowers arranged in the centrepiece. Also, off-menu dishes are specially prepared, and returning guests will find their favourite drink at the table when they arrive. “When these people come in, it’s smiles, hugs and handshakes. It’s welcoming people into your home rather than greeting someone coming into a restaurant,” notes Steh.

This type of service leadership is nurtured at the company. “Finding people to lead, work and inspire is difficult in this city,” says Salm. “So we’re creating our own farm team.” That’s facilitated through the Chase Elite Program, which plucks “high potentials and promotables” from the part-time level and ushers them through a 16-week leadership-development program. Of the 92 employees who applied to be part of Chase Elite this year, an interview process identified 16 to join. At the program’s conclusion, 12 were promoted. “The same way you would raise a family is how we raise our staff,” says Salm.

Salm considers the question of hospitality’s next incarnation as fascinating as it is unknown. “We’re plotting our direction as we go,” he says. And, along the way, they’re not forgetting to give back, supporting Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto’s Mount Sinai Hospital and Toronto’s Baycrest Hospital Foundation. Chase Hospitality gifts each beneficiary between $1,000 and $5,000 a year.

From food to hospitality and community outreach, the Chase Hospitality empire never slows. The Chase restaurant alone feeds a legion of hungry devotees inside a bustling 6,000-sq.-ft. restaurant that includes an 800-sq.-ft. kitchen overseen by three chefs and sous chefs and 15 line cooks per service. “Some people will call us crazy,” says Steh of the flurry. “But this is how you reset the bar of Toronto’s hospitality scene.”
CHEF OF THE YEAR

RIDING THE WAVE Ned Bell, executive chef of the Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver
In his collection of essays, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell wrote of a rare personality type. “These people on whom we rely more heavily than we realize are Connectors, people with a very special gift of bringing people together,” he wrote. Social advancements depend on these influencers, who are curious, self-confident, sociable and energetic, he adds.

Ned Bell is one such Connector who has had a profound impact on how chefs and Canadian consumers perceive seafood. Through advocacy against overfishing, and tireless promotion of identifying and sourcing sustainable seafood, the West Coast toque is part of a growing generation of chefs who consider the environmental impact of each dish.

The Okanagan, B.C.-native has enjoyed time
in the kitchen since the age of 11, when he'd whip up kid-friendly lasagna and stir-fry meals for his younger siblings. As a teen, he took on dishwashing jobs and catered his parents' parties. At first blush, it wasn't the food that drew Bell toward a culinary career but socializing with his guests and getting feedback on the dishes he was serving. "I'm a pretty gregarious person, so I really enjoyed that interaction. It wasn't until right after I graduated [high school] that I realized I wanted to go to culinary school," he explains.

As a student at Dubrulle Culinary School in Vancouver, Bell studied all facets of culinary arts, from savoury to sweet. He was the only student chosen out of his class to become a kitchen apprentice for instructors such as celebrated chef Rob Feenie. After graduation in 1993, Bell followed his mentor to the upscale French restaurant Le Crocodile in Vancouver.

While the chef was advancing his career, he became inspired by the work his peers were doing to advocate for sustainable seafood. "I stand on the shoulders of great Vancouver chef Rob Clark and guys who were co-founders of the Ocean Wise program. I was just along for support and became really intrigued and started to educate myself about what sustainable seafood was and how I could effect change," Bell explains, speaking of The Vancouver Aquarium's program designed to educate the public on seafood species that are caught (or farmed) to ensure long-term health of the ecosystem. Chefs follow its guidelines to identify which seafood species are sustainably caught and good to highlight on the menu (such as handline-caught Pacific halibut) or over-fished species to nix from the menu (such as black tiger prawns).

Fast forward to 2011. After Bell had helmed the kitchens of award-winning restaurants across the country, such as Accolade in Toronto, Murrieta's Bar & Grill in Calgary and the Rosewood Hotel Georgia in Vancouver, he landed at the Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver. His ideas about implementing a sustainably sourced menu came to fruition at the helm of the hotel's 120-seat Yew Seafood + Bar. "I first met Ned in the summer of 2011 when the hotel was searching for a new executive chef with the passion, personality and purpose that the position demands," Robert Cima, GM of Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver and regional VP of the Toronto-based Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, recalls. "Yew had just made a concept shift to seafood and finding the right person for the role was pivotal. My first impression of Ned was ... energy. Ned's got a lot of it — a lot of ideas, creativity, enthusiasm — and it's infectious, which speaks to his leadership qualities."

Bell's new seafood-focused menu had no place for Atlantic salmon or Chilean sea bass. "We took things off the menu that weren't designated-Ocean Wise or weren't from wild, well-managed fisheries or closed containment aquaculture, which is basically like fish farming or fish farming done on land," he explains. Instead, raw dishes took the spotlight such as halibut topped with avocado and corn ($19) and mains such as sablefish paired with celery and baby kale ($35). It was all part of his philosophy of creating globally inspired but locally created food, featuring nutrient-dense, plant-based cooking.

"As our menus became more progressive, we started to take more risks and put on more interesting ingredients (its hearty Yew chowder, for example, combines smoked black cod with Okanagan apples and vanilla..."
CONGRATULATIONS CHEF NED BELL
2014 PINNACLE AWARDS CHEF OF THE YEAR

From playing chef to becoming a well-respected one, you’ve come a long way, Chef Bell. We’re incredibly proud of your inspiring dedication and commitment to sustainability on land and sea. Congratulations on receiving the 2014 Pinnacle Award for Chef of the Year!

FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT

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bean honey, $12), and as customers started to get really excited about those ingredients, we continued to push and grow,” he adds. That excitement fuelled a business boom. “We took the restaurant from $6.5 million annually to $8.5 million in our first year, which was pretty extraordinary. Clearly by giving ourselves a really focused identity — not only were we a seafood restaurant but a sustainable seafood restaurant — customers connected with that and supported it by coming back and loving what we were doing,” he raves. The Four Seasons in Vancouver became Canada’s first 100-per-cent Ocean Wise-certified luxury hotel, and the award-winning restaurant is on track to reach $9 million in annual sales by the end of 2014, from $8.5 million in 2013. Today, it’s averaging 250 covers for lunch and 300 for dinner.

With growing support from his community, Bell’s activism has blossomed. In 2013, the chef spent four days cycling nearly 900 kilometres across Vancouver island to raise funds. This year he founded Chefs for Oceans, a grassroots campaign that was dreamed up during the Halifax Canadian Chefs’ Congress two years ago to raise money and awareness for Ocean Wise and the like-minded Sea Choice program. This past summer, he took his biking challenge up a notch, cycling from St. John’s, N.L. and hitting every province west to Vancouver.

“I wanted to do something outside of the box from a culinary point of view,” Bell explains. “So, I thought maybe there would be some shock value to that, and maybe people would pay attention to the message more.” Over the course of 10 weeks, Bell cycled 150 to 200 kilometres per day and made two-dozen appearances at restaurants along the way, hosting brunches, receptions and even dock ‘n’ dines to share his story and spread the message about sustainable seafood, raising more than $24,000. He also returned from his travels teeming with new menu ideas for Yew, including a Shore Lunch inspired by Manitoba and Western Ontario. It features shallow-fried walleye with baked beans, wild rice, bread and butter.

The emotionally and physically taxing feat is just one way chefs across Canada are stepping outside the kitchen and advocating for the environment. “Chef Ned Bell is an ardent supporter and defender of our oceans, and his cross-country bike trek across Canada this summer exemplifies that perfectly,” says Ann-Marie Copping, manager of Ocean Wise. “The Ocean Wise team is so grateful for his work to raise awareness of the issues facing our quickly depleting oceans, and it’s through influencers such as Ned and a national network of sustainably minded chefs, suppliers, producers and partners, that we hope to turn the tide of overfishing.”

Bell has two “big hairy audacious goals” for the future, “B-hags, for short,” quips the chef. He wants to introduce a national sustainable seafood day in Canada on March 18 (a day celebrated in Australia); and, over the next decade, he’d like sustainable seafood to be accessible to every Canadian, a feat he says can be accomplished by zeroing in on the retail markets first to revolutionize the supply chain. In the meantime, the father-of-two is looking forward to growing his network of chefs and influencing the future generation of toques, one by one. “Sustainable seafood is [at the centre of] a conversation people are having, but they still need so much more information. Chefs for Oceans’ work is just beginning.”
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The landlocked Canadian operation headquarters of High Liner Foods in Concord, Ont. don’t conjure up images of cresting waves, surging gales or groundswells. But, upon closer inspection, the porthole-inspired boardroom signs, brass accents, leather seating and rich wood tones fittingly pay homage to a seafaring life.

The Lunenburg, N.S.-based company (with U.S. headquarters in Danvers, Mass.) was founded in 1899 as W.C. Smith & Company, a salt-fish operation in Lunenburg, N.S. And, for nearly a century, its crew boasted big quotas and big boats, selling everything that was caught. But, after a government-imposed moratorium shut down the cod fishery in July 1992, the company’s leaders had to rethink their *modus operandi*. “We went through a period where we [had] our back against the wall,” says Mario Marino, president and COO, Canadian Operations, who started with the company as a sales rep nearly 34 years ago. “We had close to 50 vessels and no fish to catch. So, as an organization, we had to [entirely change]
STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR
our model and source fish around the world. Procurement was not even a word in our vocabulary."

The cod fishery supported coastal communities for hundreds of years, but, when stocks dwindled to near extinction, it cast a beacon on the exploitation of ocean life and the need to safeguard natural resources. "The learning there was sustainable fisheries are so important," Marino adds. "We had to [make] sure we were sustainable and the industry was sustainable around seafood, because if we don’t have sustainable fisheries we’re not going to have fish to catch, fish to process and fish to sell."

So, in 2010, the company defined a goal to source all its seafood from certified sustainable or responsible fisheries by the end of 2013. This includes purchasing from suppliers who catch or farm seafood responsibly, protecting against over-fishing and limiting the impact of fishing and aquaculture — the cultivation of seafood in controlled saltwater or freshwater conditions — on the environment. In February, the company reported reaching 99 per cent of its sustainability goal. This achievement required collaboration from every aspect of the business, including procurement, sales, marketing and information systems. It also came at a time of rapid business growth — 2007 annual sales were US$275.3 million; today sales exceed US$1 billion — including three acquisitions that required large-scale integration with seamless customer service.

This past February, High Liner Foods was recognized for its achievements in sustainability when it was honoured with the McDonald’s Canada 2014 Sustainability Award at the restaurant company’s Supplier Summit in Toronto. “High Liner helped McDonald’s Canada navigate sustainable sourcing practices for fish and seafood as we completed MSC’s (Marine Stewardship Council) third-party chain-of-custody certification,” says Amy Hwang, manager, Supply Chain Management for McDonald’s Canada in Toronto. “Through our partnership, we’ve been able to leverage their expertise to achieve the certification milestone and take a further step forward in our sustainability journey.”

High Liner Foods’ sustainability efforts also include reducing the company’s overall carbon footprint. At some plants, used cooking oil is generating electricity; at manufacturing locations, all paper, plastic, metals and food waste is recycled; and retrofitted lights at the Lunenburg processing facility have reduced energy consumption by 200,000 kWh annually. The company is also working with Sedex (the Supplier Ethical Data Exchange), a London, U.K.-based not-for-profit membership organization, which helps drive improvements in ethical and responsible practices throughout the supply chain.

On the heels of its award from McDonald’s, High Liner Foods was named SeaShare’s 2014 National Fisheries Institute’s Donor of the Year — among other 2014 accolades — for its contributions of seafood, processing and funds. The Bainbridge Island, Wash.-based non-profit has provided more than 180-million seafood meals throughout the American food-bank network. Meanwhile, High Liner Foods’ Canadian operations supported various charitable groups this year, including United Way, Habitat for Humanity, World Wildlife Fund Canada and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, among others. “It’s sharing back what we have been so lucky to have as
a company — to continue to grow even in tough times,” says Jerome Amlinger, VP, Sales and Marketing, Foodservice Division, who works out of the Concord office.

And, there could be more to share since this year’s second-quarter operating results show sales increased in the first half of 2014 by US$58.1 million, or 12.1 per cent, to US$538.2 million, compared to US$480.1 million during the same period last year. The increase is attributed partly to improved profitability in Canada and the U.S. but mainly to the acquisition of New Bedford, Mass.-based American Pride Seafoods in October 2013, which added US$73.5 million in sales in the first half of 2014. This is one in a string of acquisitions, which saw High Liner Foods gobble up Miami-based Atlantic Trading Company, LLC in October of this year; Newport News, Va.-based Icelandic U.S.A. in 2011; the American assets of Malden, Mass.-based Viking Seafoods in 2010; and St. John’s, N.L.-based FPI (Fishery Products International) in 2007, among others.

Consolidating the fragmented North American seafood industry is key to reaching the company’s Adjusted EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization) target of US$150 million by 2016. “We are aggressively pursuing acquisitions,” Marino says. “You get cost effectiveness in buying raw materials, packaging and processing, so you can get your costs down just by scale. That helps us continue to be profitable, and it helps us continue to innovate and support the category in retail and foodservice.”

High Liner Foods’ product line now comprises 30 species and more than 400 SKUs in foodservice and has grown beyond fish sticks to include premium species such as squid, lobster, crab and mussels. In October, four new species of wild-caught fish were added to the Foodservice Signature product line, including Alaska sockeye salmon, Alaska halibut, Alaska black cod and Pacific cod. And, this past summer the company introduced a gluten-free line, which includes two items under the Sea Cuisine label: Wild Pacific Salmon Fillets in Creamy Dill Sauce and Mediterranean-Glazed Haddock Portions. The new offerings meet customer demands for gluten-free products and come certified with the Mississauga, Ont.-based Canadian Celiac Association’s stamp of approval. “People are looking for gluten-free options on menus,” Amlinger explains. “And they still want indulgence; they still want to try a battered or baked fish product with a crispy coating on it, not just a plain piece of fish.”

Making it easy for foodservice operators to increase seafood consumption at their establishments drives the top brass at High Liner Foods. They ensure product offerings provide customers with consistency in quality and consistency in supply chain, ensure products can be presented in multiple ways without a lot of specialized equipment or highly skilled labour and provide four regional distribution centres for foodservice in Canada, allowing deliveries within 24 hours from coast to coast.

As one of the largest purchasers of fish in the Canadian foodservice industry, the buyers at McDonald’s Canada have built a long-standing, collaborative relationship with High Liner Foods. “Their level of expertise of the seafood industry, coupled with their leadership and commitment to sustainable sourcing, makes them a trusted partner,” says Hwang. “Their values are aligned with ours and, as such, we’re very proud to work with them.”

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BY HELEN CATELLIER

Ontario wines were not taken seriously for years, but icewine helped change that in 1991, when Inniskillin’s 1989 Vidal Icewine won the Grand Prix d’Honneur at Vinexpo in Bordeaux, France.

Today, Ontario is one of the world’s leading producers of icewine, with approximately 60 wineries bottling nearly 900,000 litres of the golden elixir annually, according to Vineland, Ont.-based Wine Country Ontario, which promotes the province’s wine-growing regions. Ontario’s hot summers and cold and sharp winters ensure an icewine harvest most years, since grapes must be handpicked in the middle of the night when they are frozen solid and temperatures are -8°C.
This year, Canada won its first International Trophy at the 2014 Decanter World Wine Awards. Inniskillin’s 2012 Vidal Icewine took top prize in its category, but many Ontario wines were honoured with the prestigious award. “People still have this vision in their minds that in Ontario we only produce icewine,” says James Treadwell, sommelier and owner at Treadwell Farm-to-Table Cuisine in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. “It’s very exciting what’s happening now in terms of Chardonnay. There are exceptionally fine Chardonnays being produced at different price points.” Indeed, Flat Rock Cellars’ 2012 Rusty Shed Chardonnay was honoured with a gold award by Decanter magazine. When it comes to red, Hidden Bench’s 2011 Locust Lane Pinot Noir was among the Canadian silver winners.

Despite its 200-year history, Ontario is a relative newcomer to the world of winemaking. Ontario’s first winery, Vin Villa Winery, was established in 1866 on Pelee Island on Lake Erie. And, Inniskillin was granted the first winery licence since 1916 in 1974, when the modern era of winemaking in Ontario
began. In 1988, Ontario wine producers created the Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) to identify geographic appellations and introduce standards for production, including a guarantee that VQA wines are made from 100-per-cent Ontario-grown grapes.

In 2004, the VQA Award of Excellence was created by Wine Country Ontario to recognize licensees who embrace Ontario VQA wines and have high professional standards in wine service. “It’s about our industry recognizing excellence and bringing attention to those businesses that help us share our local story and have confidence in how great Ontario VQA wines are,” says Magdalena Kaiser, director of Public Relations, Marketing and Tourism for Wine Country Ontario.

This year the initiative was relaunched as the We Love Wine Country Ontario restaurant recognition program. The goal is to promote VQA wines and to help customers find their favourite VQA wines outside of wine country. To qualify, restaurants must offer Ontario VQA wine by the glass and have a wine list comprising 25 per cent or 25 varieties of Ontario VQA wines. Treadwell is a staunch supporter of the program. “Everybody wins. It’s about building an industry that’s been around for a [few] years, but we’ve only scratched the surface in terms of its potential. We’re proud to work with wineries in terms of building their brand but also building ours, too.”

Treadwell’s wine list comprises up to 80 per cent local selections and complements the restaurant’s food philosophy, which emphasizes the best artisan producers from Niagara and surrounding regions. “There are

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Old Winery Restaurant
Restaurant Oban Inn
Riverbend Inn & Vineyard
Shaw Café & Wine Bar
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Treadwell Farm-to-Table Cuisine
Treadwell Wine Bar
Trius Winery Restaurant
Zeas Grill

Oakville
Paradiso Restaurant

Orangeville
Babbo at Hockley Valley Resort
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Ottawa
Beckta
Le Café at National Arts Centre
Canvas Resto Bar Etc.
East Indis Company
Empire Grill
Perspectives Restaurant at Brookstreet Hotel
Petit Bill’s Bistro
Santé Restaurant & Art Gallery
Taylor’s Genuine Food & Wine Bar
Vineyards Wine Bar Bistro

Perth
The Masonry Restaurant & Market

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Riverside Grill at Holiday Inn
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Pickering
Port Restaurant

Picton
Amelia’s Garden at The Waring House
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Port Severn
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Queenston
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Richmond Hill
Fraticelli’s Italian Grill & Bar

Sarnia
Bridges Restaurant at Holiday Inn Creations Fine Dining at Lambton College

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Simcoe
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St. Catharines
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Thornbury
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The Chefs’ House at George Brown College
Crush Wine Bar + Kitchen
Epic at The Fairmont Royal York
Farmhouse Tavern
Frank at the Art Gallery of Ontario
Globe Bistro
Granite Club
Harbour Sixty Steakhouse
Hard Rock Cafe
Hawthorne Food & Drink
Joy Bistro
The Lakeview Restaurant
Luma Restaurant
Mars Collaboration Centre
Matisse Restaurant & Bar
Metro Toronto Convention Centre
Miller Tavern Downtown
Miller Tavern North York
Momiji Japanese Grill
The Old Mill
Pangaea Restaurant
Platinum Club at The Air Canada Centre
Real Sports Bar & Grill
Reds Wine Tavern
Ruby Watchco
Sassafras
Sightlines Market Buffet at the Rogers Centre
Splendido
St. George’s Golf & Country Club
Turf Lounge
Wildfire Steakhouse & Wine Bar

Vineland
Vineland Estates Winery Restaurant

Waterloo
The Bauer Kitchen
Bloom at Conestoga College
Rushes Restaurant at the Waterloo Inn Conference Hotel

Wellington
Drake Devonshire

Whitney
The Bear Trail Dining Room at Couples Resort

Windsor
Rino’s Kitchen & Ale House
some amazing wineries, which 90 per cent of the public don’t even know about,” he notes, pointing to small-scale producers who may only bottle 150 cases of wine and can’t get into retail. “That’s the most exciting thing, because not only are you giving [customers] the opportunity to try something different, but you’re also supporting very small producers who are passionate and who are doing it just for the love of making wine.”

Kaiser says Ontario now boasts approximately 150 VQA wineries. The cool climate creates grapes that are aromatic and higher in acidity, which complement food. “You look at acidity like a wedge of lemon or salt; it brings out the flavours of a dish really well,” Farm-to-Table’s Treadwell explains.

Moore agrees, adding that the relatively lower alcohol content of Ontario wine allows the food to shine, making the whole dining experience more pleasurable. “If you have a higher alcohol wine, it feels very weighty and heavy on the palate,” she says. “It masks the food.”

But, in addition to the natural acidity that makes Ontario wine a great accompaniment to food, it’s also versatile, aromatic and ages well. “Some of the wines are too young to be drunk when released; they need a few years to come together,” advises Moore. “I’m still serving 2002 Peninsula Ridge Cabernet [Sauvignon] and Merlot Reserve, and they’re beautiful now. They’re drinking very well.”

Though Langdon Hall offers more than 1,000 international wines, the resort attracts visitors who want to see what’s being made in its backyard. So Moore showcases more than 250 Ontario wines. “Restaurants should really get involved with this whole local movement,” Moore says. “It’s great for marketing; it’s great for the environment. We should showcase what great products are coming out of our province and help support our industry.”

SHARE THE LOVE
The We Love Wine Country Ontario recognition program includes more than 150 recognized establishments. To qualify, restaurants must offer Ontario VQA wines by the glass and have a wine list comprising 25 per cent or 25 varieties of Ontario VQA wines. In return, operators receive a communications starter kit, window clings, a winecountryontario.ca listing and mapping tool, use of the program logo for their menu and website, a framed certificate of recognition, an opportunity to leverage Wine Country Ontario-driven social-media efforts and inclusion in consumer outreach initiatives such as the Wine Country Ontario monthly newsletter. To nominate an establishment, visit winecountryontario.ca and click on Trade Resources.

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HITTING THE MARK

Classic brews and savoury nuances get star billing at cocktail bars this season

BY HELEN CATELLIER

Looks like the days of tall, fizzy and fruity concoctions are behind us, at least temporarily.

As the forecast changes from warm to cool, so does our palate for cocktails. “In the summertime, [customers] drink something ... more effervescent and citrus-forward, and maybe go to something ... a little bit heavier, a little bit oakier, more alcohol-forward in the wintertime,” says Franz Swinton, bar manager at Añejo restaurant in Calgary. The Old Fashioned ($15) is one of Añejo’s most popular cocktails, particularly during the winter. This, along with other vintage drinks, such as the Manhattan and Sazerac, don’t always appear on cocktail menus anymore, but they have stood the test of time. “They are classic because they work and they are delicious,” says Oliver Stern, managing partner at Toronto Temperance Society, a members-only bar.

Another concoction that’s well-suited for sipping in the winter is the Vancouver Cocktail (pictured, left), which debuted last month at L’Abattoir restaurant in Vancouver. Inspired by a drink originally served at the historic Sylvia hotel in the city’s west end, the three-ounce beverage is a blend of gin, vermouth and Bénédictine. Bar manager, Shaun Layton, acquired unopened antique spirits from the 1960s and is pouring the Vancouver Cocktail while quantities last. He’s confident customers will pay a whopping $60 for the nostalgia and exclusivity it offers.

Whether marked by changing palates or the changing seasons, savoury cocktails have also started replacing the über-sweet, sugary ones. Swinton sources alternative, organic sweeteners, which aren’t as cloying and don’t coat the palate. Golden agave nectar, derived from the same plant species as tequila, is a favourite, because it complements his tequila- and mescal-based cocktails well. The bestselling cocktail at L’Abattoir, the Avocado Gimlet, combines a quarter of a fresh avocado with sugar, rosemary-and-olive-infused gin, lime juice and apple schnapps ($13). “People say it reminds them of a smoothie, so it’s got a really thick beautiful creamy texture to it, and then you get the savoury notes from the olive, rosemary and the gin,” Layton explains, adding that he sells between 15 and 25 glasses of the green brew per night.

The two most popular menu cocktails at Toronto Temperance Society also have savoury notes. La Hoja combines cucumber, basil, lime, tequila, green Chartreuse, agave and salt ($14) and the Petey’s Muddle features jalapeño, cilantro, lime, mescal and a Laphroaig smoky Scotch wash ($14). Oliver notes that bartenders are working closer with chefs these days, making more attempts to pair food with drink; it’s a win-win for today’s foodie-obsessed culture.

POURING FOR PROFITS

Kitschy Polynesian-inspired flaming torches, palm trees, masks, totems and servers donning quintessential floral shirts is one way to warm up the bar scene on a chilly evening. “In every city I go, I feel like there’s a tiki bar,” says Oliver Stern, managing partner at Toronto Temperance Society, which often hosts tiki nights during winter. “Even though it’s winter outside, you’re drinking tiki drinks and listening to tiki music; [it] can feel like it’s warm and summery.” Evoking memories of tropical getaways, tiki bevvies are characteristically rum-based and often feature tropical syrups, coconut water, fruit juices or grenadine served over crushed ice. “We light things on fire and put in obnoxious garnishes such as umbrellas, plastic palm trees and big, neon bendy straws,” laughs Stern, “everything that’s different from the way our bar would normally be. It’s all about having fun.”
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Restaurant buffets are taking on a fresh new look. Today’s foodservice operators are moving away from tried-and-true steam tables and chafing dishes of the past, to create sleeker, modular, multi-functional displays, which keep food fresh and visually appealing.

Conserving space without sacrificing functionality is also important, says Paul McCluskey, principal with Design.net in Acton, Ont. and a noted specialist in kitchen and bar specification and design. “The main trend is having more fire power in less space.”

As a result, induction burners are winning attention within the buffet segment, too. “The quality is there for induction [use] to become widespread,” says McCluskey. “The only issue is induction requires contact with metal [for] heat transfer; so the [drop-in] pan must be the right depth.”

Induction warmers under stone are becoming especially popular, since they can be used with attractive chafing dishes, serving pans or designer crockery for a more attractive presentation. “The induction energy goes through the stone. When it’s turned off, you remove the chafing dish, and all you have is a stone surface. It’s a very attractive way to get away from the typical cafeteria or clinical arrangement; and chefs love the flexibility,” McCluskey says.

The same concept applies to cold surfaces where a metal plate can be placed under a frost stone to maintain the temperature required. Rotisol, from Inglewood, Calif., has cold drop-in displays with a built-in granite slab. Randell, from Conyers, Ga.-based Unified Brands, also has a cold-mount underside with a reservoir for collecting and draining moisture, McCluskey says. And, the more attractive the equipment, the more attention needs to be paid to the serving dishes, he adds. “It’s no good putting in a nice system if you have old pans.”

Robert Bartley, executive chef for Canucks Sports & Entertainment in Vancouver, has cho-
Anyone visiting the La Piazza restaurant at the Sheraton Laval Hotel in Quebec will be treated to a visual feast, thanks to new customized cold and hot buffet equipment. It was important to beef up the customer experience and outfit the restaurant with updated and precise equipment. And, it helps that the refresh gave staff safe and user-friendly tools with which to work, notes Eric Robidoux, executive chef. The new equipment includes more than a half-dozen multi-well units from Sheboygan, Wis.-based Vollrath’s Fabricator line, which features a hand-milled, stainless-steel exterior. The Miramar line’s decorative pans with display cookware are designed to offer elegant food presentation. The buffet also includes two drop-in induction units as well as a contour carving station (also from Vollrath), complete with a sneeze guard, lamps and a specially designed cutting board. When determining what equipment would be the best fit, Robidoux invested in quality, durable pieces that are visually appealing. “The heavy gauge ensures years of use, and drop-in wells are easy to clean and maintain,” he says, adding that the change has paid off. “[Customers] like the avant-garde presentation; some think we changed the entire menu.”

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which make it easy to restock porcelain dishes and cold-surface equipment for ice-bar or seafood presentations. “We’ve also purchased an induction unit with a stone top from CookTek as well as Eurodib (from Boucherville, Que.) induction single-burner cooktops for chef stations.” “So many places are pushing the envelope. One induction-buffet station I saw in India had a cover that converted it to a 20-foot table. It was an incredible use of space,” recalls John Higgins, director of George Brown College’s Chef School in Toronto. Back at home, he likes the adaptability of the customized refrigerated offerings from O’Fallon, Mo.-based True and Mississauga, Ont.-based Garland. Induction is also a draw for Higgins. “It’s so much safer than using methyl hydrates [as fuel]. We’re also trying to get away from steam tables, which only stay good for about 15 minutes.” Versatile food-holding equipment is especially important at the Smokehouse Café in Yellowknife. Its catering service offers local fish and game for various events, which are sometimes held outside in -30°C weather on the middle of a frozen lake. That’s why Roger DeLeeuw, the chef manager, uses two HotCube units from Mentor, Ohio-based Cres Cor. The portable systems have a solar panel for the electrical control and a propane tank for heating. “They can be plugged into the vane when we’re transporting them,” DeLeeuw explains. The units cost $1,200 each, plus an extra $300 for the solar panel, and they hold 12 full pans each. “They’re a lot more durable and can handle a lot of movement. We used to carry Cambro food boxes (from Huntington Beach, Calif.), which was a lot of extra work,” says the Yellowknife chef. Lisa Aronson, executive chef at The Algonquin Resort in St. Andrews, N.B., doesn’t transport food over ice surfaces, so she relies on seven new Energy Star-rated holding systems from Menomonee Falls, Wis.-based Alto-Shaam to keep food warm at banquets. “At any given time we can be serving multiple groups of 200 to 300 people. Some of the units are kept in a separate holding kitchen across the street. But it’s a great system for retherming plates, because they can take roll-in racks straight from the ovens.” The chef can place 78 plates on the rack. “They’re a staple for our operation,” she says. “Now that they’re more electronic, you can get much more precise temperature settings. Back in the day, the heat used to come from a bottom element; now it’s more even, and the bottom doesn’t get screaming hot to the point where you can burn yourself.” Ultimately, many issues factor into buffet and holding equipment purchasing decisions, but must revolve around budgets and flexibility, “otherwise you’ve wasted a lot of money,” notes George Brown’s Higgins.
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ew foodies associate the term “culinary community” with the city of Winnipeg, but that’s changing, thanks to food enthusiasts such as Mandel Hitzer. The chef and owner of the city’s Deer + Almond has already attracted toques such as Vancouver’s Vikram Vij (Vij’s) and Calgary’s Jason Barton-Browne (Teatro) to the prairie province to cook at the annual Raw:Almond pop-up that he co-founded with Joe Kalturnyk in 2013.

So, it’s no surprise that it was a community of friends and family that awakened the chef’s passion for food, a passion rooted in a European heritage that exposed him to quality, homemade nosh. “I started cooking for my siblings on Saturdays, and I got so much joy out of it,” he recalls. Before he was 20, his career path was set. “I realized this is what I want to do: I want to follow my heart and my tummy, be a chef and own my own restaurant.”

Foregoing culinary school, the eager Hitzer worked his way up from dishwasher to sous chef to head chef. Following Winnipeg gigs at Gluttons Bistro and Fresh Café as well as at Calgary’s River Café, he moved to Mexico to open a restaurant. But, unable to adapt, he returned home with a new outlook. “Working fine-dining and running a restaurant, I burned out. The industry scared me,” he confesses. “I didn’t understand how to find a balance.”

He took a break but eventually realized how much he loved food. So, in 2010, together with his artist friend Cyrus Smith, he hosted secret dinners in art spaces, warehouses and restaurants. “We figured out a way to create a buzz and start building a name for ourselves in the city,” he says. He thought: “One day we’re going to find an investor, an opportunity, by doing this. And it worked.”

The end result is the 68-seat Deer + Almond. Named for the animal that is close to Hitzer’s heart and Mandel, which means “almond” in German, the restaurant was number 18 on Vacay.ca’s 2014 list of Top 50 Restaurants in Canada. The menu changes every three months and features globally inspired tapas dishes such as sweet potato galette ($12), rabbit and herb gnocchi ($20) as well as sage and cranberry chicken sausage ($14).

“I’m pretty lucky. I have this incredible staff. The restaurant is this energy; it’s like we’re all believing in this lightbulb, and the lightbulb keeps shining brighter,” says the 32-year-old. “With the right crew, it allows [me] to take on more than I ever have before.” That’s how Raw:Almond fits into the picture. The three-week pop-up is hosted by Hitzer who invites chefs, such as Vij and Barton-Browne, to prepare food for 120 guests on Winnipeg’s frozen Assiniboine and Red rivers. It returns for its third year Jan. 26, uniting foodies and chefs to celebrate food, drink and friendship, accomplishing a goal its co-founder set when he launched Deer + Almond in 2012. It wasn’t about being the best, Hitzer notes. “First and foremost [it was about building] our community.”

**CHEF’S CORNER**

**BRAVING THE ELEMENTS**

The Deer + Almond’s Mandel Hitzer is building a unique food hub in Winnipeg

BY BRIANNE BINELLI

**BITS & BITES**

**What do you cook at home?**

“I love eggs and broth. I’m simple. Roast chicken”

**What’s your favourite ingredient?**

“Everything to do with the onion family and garlic”

**What’s your favourite food memory?**

“My Oma making me crêpes”

**What’s your favourite food memory?**

“My Oma making me crêpes”

**If you weren’t a chef, what would you be?**

“Maybe an artist. That’s why I’m so drawn to this profession”
“...because every meal deserves great bread.”

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