

Don Mills eatery no average Joey

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ADRIEN VECZAN FOR THE TORONTO STAR

You enter Joey Don Mills Grill and Lounge through revolving doors off a suburban shopping mall parking lot and are immediately transported into a glamorous world of fine dining and haute couture excellence.

In Joey's world, the fashionable young staff is runway-worthy and decked out in sleek Armani-style outfits. The elegant glass and steel decor is more Notting Hill than Don Mills. The menu is a Michelin-star contender and artistic impression gets top marks. The atmosphere is west coast trendy – lots of chatter and laughs. The sleek bar area is abuzz with young executives comparing the size of their portfolios.

It's hard not to like Joey's world.

And judging by the long lineup at the door, most people do.

"Can I offer you a glass of wine while you wait?" a server asks a startled guest waiting to be seated.

Yes, Joey even makes waiting an enjoyable experience.

And that's because Jeff Fuller, Joey's president and CEO, wouldn't have it any other way. Fuller imagined and created a place he says, "I myself would love to be wine and dine in."

While chic and stylish, Joey is neither intimidating nor pretentious.

"The stores all have some unique features but also some common threads," says Fuller, who heads up a 19-location restaurant empire that stretches from Vancouver (head office) to Toronto with stops in Washington state, Manitoba and Alberta along the way.

Fuller says Joey has had Toronto in its sights for a long time but the timing for the company's move east had to be right.

So he picked a recession to enter the most competitive restaurant market north of New York.

Obviously, Fuller knew what he was doing because since opening on Sept. 18, Joey Don Mills quickly topped all the company's other locations in sales.

Maybe that's why Fuller is so quick to open another Toronto location – the next one will be housed in the Eaton Centre and is scheduled to open sometime in 2010.

"We're really committed to Ontario as an area of expansion for future sites," says Fuller.

While elegant and chic today, Joey's beginnings were far more humble. The chain started out as funky Joey Tomato's in 1992 with, as the name suggests, a strict Italian concept. Over time, the concept and menu evolved – the Joey name remains constant everywhere but the Toronto location is known as Joey Don Mills, while in Seattle it's Joey Lake Union; Calgary is known as Joey Eue Claire; and so on. The menu is far now more global in scope.

To make sure the Joey franchise was an instant success, Fuller teamed up with Canadian celebrity Chef Chris Mills – he placed fifth among 21 competitors in the widely respected French culinary competition known as Bocuse d'Or and appears on the Japanese version of the popular Food Network show *Iron Chef* – who proceeded to create a menu that wouldn't look out of place in New York, Paris or Tokyo.

Mills, a frequent traveller, dazzles Joey's guests with bold flavours and recipes from places like Italy, Japan and Mexico.

That means patrons are treated to such delicacies as seafood Sicilian pesto linguine, California crab tacos, Bombay buttered chicken, Panang prawn curry bowl and a down-east favourite, a lobster grilled cheese sandwich.

Fuller left nothing to chance when he opened the Don Mills restaurant. He airlifted veteran servers and managers from other Joey restaurants so patrons could see instantly the high standards the chain demands of staff. The Joey veterans were also used to train local recruits.

The move worked brilliantly and it's hard to convince most patrons that the restaurant is a newbie.

"It (to move) was expensive but fantastic," says Fuller.

The Joey staff is passionate and knowledgeable and a fun atmosphere prevails.

"There wasn't a lot of heavy training, you just show up and have some fun. It's contagious," says regional manager Tyson Rideout, who along with regional chef Rupert Martin, were relocated from Calgary to oversee the Don Mills operation.

"I'm a believer that you don't have to motivate people. I believe in hiring motivated people and that you make sure to keep them that way," says Fuller.

Chef Martin rules the bustling, open-concept kitchen with an iron spatula and exceptionally presented dishes flow all day long – the restaurant is open for lunch and dinner and reservations are always recommended.

Not to be outdone, sommelier Geoff Boyd has crafted an imaginative roster of signature drinks such as the citrus slush-infused Super Sonic Gin and Tonic, the Super Nova Vodka Soda and the Pomegranate Mojito.

Maybe Boyd is the reason why this restaurant is so intoxicating.

The restaurant also offers a selection of 60 international wines by the bottle and two dozen wines by the glass that are dispensed using the innovative Enomatic wine serving system.

The thing that makes Joey stand out from Toronto's other chic, hot new restaurants, is the price list for both food and drink.

Most entrees start well south of \$20 and bottles of wine are priced reasonably.

Which just goes to prove this restaurant is no ordinary Joey.

Joey Don Mills is located in the Shops at Don Mills, 1090 Don Mills Road (off Lawrence Ave. East). Phone: 416-445-6391; joeyrestaurants.com