

Mother's Day

Serve up haute cuisine for mom

NANCY HOSKIN
Correspondent

Many have heard about Fenton's in Toronto, but few can afford making the trip, except on those special occasions.

Markham now boasts the next best thing—a chef from Fenton's mans the kitchen at Checkerberries and prepares excellent food without the fancy prices.

Only 25 years old, Florentino De Aguiar climbed his way up the ranks at the well-known Toronto restaurant, working from dishwasher to main chef in the downstairs kitchen over a seven-year period.

Checkerberries opened in May,

1986 and is owned by partners Patti Hickl-Szabo and Colin Skinner. Hickl-Szabo gained her experience in the restaurant field as a waitress working in the kitchen at Fenton's though she's a graphic artist by trade.

With Skinner's background in advertising and marketing, the two made a unique duo. Hickl-Szabo's husband, Andy, acts as a consultant on the restaurant's wine list, researching and developing their vast selection.

He and Skinner had previously tried their hand in a fast food restaurant, before becoming General Manager of The Old Firehall in downtown Toronto.

The trio realized that the partnership between Hickl-Szabo and Skinner was ideal, each educated in a different area of managing a restaurant.

"We make a good team," Hickl-Szabo said. "One or the other of us is in the restaurant at all times. We're the extra set of eyes or extra pair of hands to help out and are there to greet our guests, which adds a personal touch. On average we each work 70 hours per week."

The two partners located in Thornhill because of the growth potential in the area. Located on John St. just west of Woodbine Ave., Hickl-Szabo said that the area offered a nice mix of residential and industrial areas, which covers the luncheon and dinner trade nicely.

Checkerberries' comfortable atmosphere allows its clientele to dress up or down. Much of the business during the day is from local businessmen, while couples and families enjoy the restaurant

in the evening.

Hickl-Szabo describes the menu at Checkerberries as "contemporary Canadian cuisine," with everything made on the premises by Florentino.

The menu changes seasonally, with the restaurant offering daily specials depending upon what is available and in season.

"Some of our more popular dishes include our daily pasta, daily stir fry, our home-made soups and the warm salads. Heavenly Pie (an upside down lemon meringue pie with whipped cream) is a favorite dessert. Customers often have to phone and reserve a piece because it disappears quickly," Hickl-Szabo said.

Checkerberries wine list, handled by Andy, is unique. It includes five selections from Vintages, a rare wine store downtown, along with its regular fare.

"We want to encourage people to try new wines that might complement their meal," Hickl-Szabo said.



Maureen Dahl above, and her husband Jim are new owners of the Duchess of Markham on Main St. Fare is back to heartier foods and the atmosphere is decidedly Brit.

Photo: BILL LANNING

Only in Markham? Pity.....

By NANCY HOSKIN

The atmosphere is cosy and inviting and the closest you'll ever come to being in a traditional English pub and dining room in Markham, unless, of course, you visit England.

Maureen and Jim Dahl are the proud new owners of the Duchess of Markham, located on Main Street. The couple had always wanted a business of their own, and while their backgrounds are much different from seasoned restaurateurs, they are turning a love of adventure into a prosperous dining and drinking establishment.

The Dahls bought the replica of the old English pub last November and at the same time decided to move their family to Markham.

The last few months have been devoted to cleaning, decorating, changing menus and forming an advertising campaign to bring customers into the dining room. With Maureen's background in advertising and hospitality she looks upon her new responsibilities as a way to use her creative talents.

"We've been busy with a lot of behind the scenes work like new equipment, plumbing, lighting

and signs. We just added to what was already here," Maureen explained.

"We love to entertain and are used to having parties all the time. It was a natural to own a restaurant. We can now entertain our own friends, as well as our clientele."

With Jim acting as International Program Director of Save the Children Canada, Maureen runs their new enterprise daily. The two team up in the evenings and on weekends.

Before the ink was even dry on the contract, the Dahls were in England buying assorted paraphernalia for their restaurant.

"We went to thousands of pubs throughout the English countryside. We took photos, bought antiques, from tapestry to hunting horns, and collected recipes and menus from our favorite pubs and dining rooms," Maureen explained.

The same staff remains at the Duchess, including Richard, Graham and Jim, the popular bartenders downstairs in the pub.

"The pub has always been popular," Maureen said. "We certainly didn't want to walk in and change the things that were going well. We have many regulars who are dedicated to the pub."

The biggest asset of The Duchess, according to Maureen, is its unique atmosphere.

"There are a lot of Brits around Markham. They enjoy The Duchess because it makes them feel like they're at home."

Following the traditions set in Jolly Old England, Duchess regulars play darts weekly and join in area meets. The Dahls sponsor the Markham Rugby Club, and even have a team of golfers called the Duchess Duffers who play together each week during the season.

The weekly entertainment lineup in the pub also follows traditional English happenings. For example, one can sing along with local favorite Syd Simpkins each Wednesday evening when the Dahl's host Pub Night, downstairs.

The look in the upstairs dining room has altogether been changed as has The Duchess' menu.

The Dahls have changed the cuisine back to a heartier fare, and are actively interviewing major executive chefs for their revamped kitchen.

"We want to be considered a fine dining room," Maureen explained. "Consistency is boring to a chef, but not to a client. It's important that each dish is presented the exact same way when someone comes in. This will keep them coming back."

When the Dahls took over The Duchess, they put together a catalog listing all the items on their lunch and dinner menus, their contents and their method of production.

In February the Dahls introduced a brunch menu for Sunday, where customers are served from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m. with table service.



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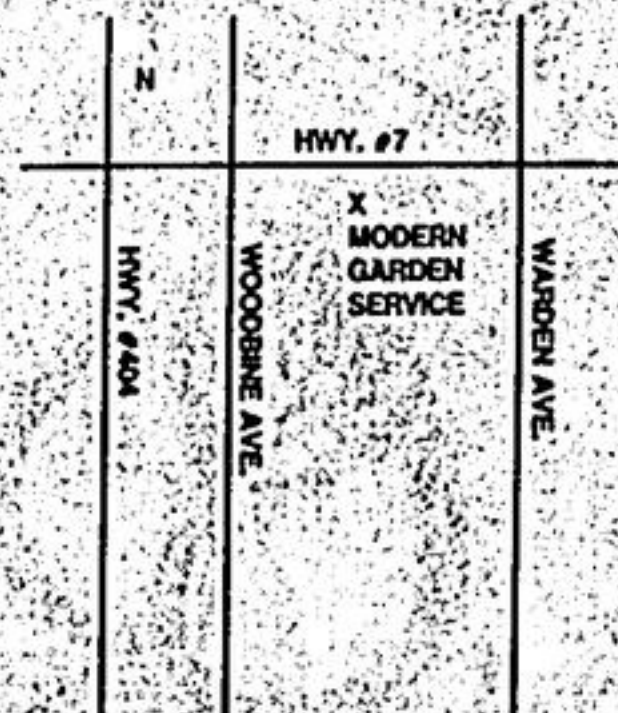
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