

The pitfalls, and beauty, of opening your own restaurant

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Michael Noble (left) and Chef de Cuisine Justin Labossiere in Noble's new restaurant — Notable in Calgary on August 4, 2010.

Photograph by: Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

It is two hours to lunch service at Notable and the kitchen ventilation system keeps shutting off, sending smoke from the fire-burning rotisserie swirling into the air, where it spreads across the ceiling.

"Flip the breaker," Michael Noble calmly tells his chef de cuisine, Justin Labossiere.

There is relief when the fan kicks in, but it's only momentary. The silence when it shuts itself off again is almost imperceptible, except to Noble, who can do little more than laugh at the comedic timing.

After all, he's talking about the tribulations and triumphs of opening a new restaurant.

The temperamental ventilation system is just one of myriad woes he's had to deal with leading up to the grand opening of Notable on Sept. 15 -- and since then as well.

The air conditioner stopped working at the official opening; the cold water faucet has occasionally spewed hot water -- bad news for washing salad ingredients; and there have been long days, lots of physical labour and sleepless nights.

"You want to lose 15 pounds? Open a restaurant," he says with a wry laugh.

But the freedom that has come from owning a restaurant and the joy of watching it fill with eager diners looking to sample the lamb burger with patty, sauce, bun and fries, all made in-house, or the rotisserie chicken with a chili-garlic butter outweighs all of the trials.

"You have to push the fear of risk aside and just do it," Noble says.

"God knows there are easier things to take up as a vocation, but this fills my cup. I have a gift and a passion for this."

Noble is no stranger to opening restaurants.

Before moving to Calgary to open Catch, he was the chef behind Diva at the Met in Vancouver. As a consultant, he has helped open Flatiron and Kayne's, as well as Farm.

The difference this time is the additional layer of responsibilities: financing, shareholders, landlords and leases.

Every restaurant he's built, he says, has had plumbing or electrical issues. There are always glitches.

It appears to be a universal truth.

On a show now airing on Food Network Canada, David Adjei travels across North America helping would-be restaurateurs get their dreams up and running.

The chef had already starred in seven seasons of Restaurant Makeover, taking on establishments going off the rails and helping them get back on track, and has a restaurant consulting business that takes his "30 years of mistakes" to help others.

"I lived through those mistakes. They cost me a marriage, houses," he says. "It almost killed me."

He now translates a lot of what he learned from opening his own restaurant, Nectar, for those he works with on The Opener, which has been picked up for a second season.

Every time, he sees something that makes him shake his head: the meat restaurant that hired a hardcore vegan as the head chef and the establishment that was busy applying a Venetian plaster treatment to the walls and ordering Austrian glass decorations but had no kitchen just two weeks before opening.

Then there was the pair of fraternity brothers opening what they envisioned as a "Rastafarian Taqueria" in New Orleans, but finding themselves with malfunctioning kitchen equipment and an air conditioner that broke down as temperatures climbed.

Sometimes the blinders come on when people are trying to realize their dream of opening a restaurant, Adjey says.

There are two reasons why restaurants fail, he explains.

First is underfunding.

New restaurants should have enough money in the bank to cover two to three months of costs for rent, staff, food and alcohol.

(The fraternity brothers were out of cash by the time they opened, which prevented them from being able to replace the air conditioner for several months.)

At the time Adjey opened Nectar, he had but one bottle of wine on the shelf. When a customer bought it, a busboy had to sneak out to the nearby liquor store to purchase another.

The second reason is having no clear concept, developing what Adjey calls a "bagels and ice cream menu," which has no apparent rhyme or reason.

"When you read a great menu, it's a natural story," he says.

Noble had his concept down pat by the time he opened the doors, starting with the notes he made after leaving his position as the director of culinary and product development for Earls Restaurants.

Gourmet yet casual food. Warm and comforting. A place to which people want to come spontaneously and not feel they need to plan in advance.

To that end, Noble refuses to book the entire restaurant by reservation, instead hoping people will just walk in fresh from a stroll along the river or after a day of skiing.

He could have done it a dozen years ago or more, he says, but Noble has always preached learning everything before taking that next step.

"This is the culmination of almost 30 years in the business," he says.

And yet that experience could not free him from the inevitable pitfalls.

Setting the ventilation units onto winter settings -- to match the unseasonably frigid temperatures outside -- solves the problem and the fans finally start up and stay on, letting Labossiere get the rotisserie fire blazing.

There were other moments along the way when Noble has wondered what he's doing; there were nights when if he stirred from sleep he would be up for the rest of the night.

There are still six-day workweeks and days when everything aches as he rolls out of bed.

But with ownership comes freedom.

And that tastes good.

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