

## Terroir Diary – March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009

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By **Malcolm Jolley**



J. Charles Grieco, Donald Ziraldo and Paul Grieco. Photo: Jo Dickins .

### Tuesday, March 3, 2009 - 7:50 AM

Maybe it's the lack of snow or the brilliant sunshine, but I am surprised at how many chefs, restaurateurs, hospitality workers and food writers are at Hart House at The University of Toronto before 8 AM for the third annual Terroir Hospitality Industry Symposium. This is not a crowd that likes to get up early. I am on the Steering Committee of Terroir and Gremolata is conference sponsor. But this year my duties on the day of the symposium are light enough that I can attend most of the activities and take notes. Here is a summary of what happened.

#### 9:15 AM

Symposium Chair, Donna Doohar (Mildred's Temple Kitchen) kicks off the conference with a meditation on service, which she defines as "a state of mind". Donna makes the point that hospitality is one of the largest employment sectors in Canada employing about 400,000 people, especially for young people and is often someone's entry level job. She notes that although what happens in the front of the house is often the most important aspect of a dining experience, service innovation is largely ignored by trend-watchers and forecasters. Ultimately, Donna notes, when *civilians* fantasize about opening a restaurant or getting into the business, it's because they are attracted to an industry that "makes people happy". Donna ends her opening with a video clip of Grover The Waiter.

#### 9:30 AM

J. Charles Grieco addresses the Great Hall. Charles commands the respect of the room as a legendary Toronto restaurateur (La Scala) and Chair and President of The Ontario Hospitality Institute. Charles was a founder of the OHI, which came about as immigration from Europe, the traditional source of restaurant workers, began to slow in the 1970s. The OHI's mandate was to develop and home grow excellence in the hospitality industry. It's probably best known for its annual gala Gold Awards Dinner, which is the 'Oscars' of Ontario's restaurant and hotel community and raises money for student scholarships. (I am a Fellow of the OHI.)

For all of Charles' history in the business, his address is only forward looking. Taking the broad theme of 'recognition', he asks if ratings matter. Citing a number of recent studies, both close to home and across North America, he surprises the crowd by noting that there has never been a proven link between ratings and business performance. But, he insists, they still matter: "We know anecdotally that winning or losing an award will affect business." Charles concludes that ratings will become even more important as blogs, social networks and the internet continue to apply scrutiny to the industry - fairly or not. *Zagat*, by example of an older peer-to-peer rating system, may or not be open to manipulation but it's "democratic" and so very hard to argue with. The Solution? First, remember that "we are in the business of *hospitality*." Second, develop quality standards and implement them. "There are none now, let's not kid ourselves," Charles challenges the crowd, adding that we need "a service workforce", properly trained. Finally, he advises us that we need not be scared of reviews or ratings, since they actually develop interest in food culture and that's ultimately good for business.

#### **10:00 AM**

Max Valiquette is the President of Youthography and an expert on youth culture and marketing. He's here since most hospitality workers are well under 30, and he proceeds to scare the pants of the owner operators and managers in the room with a detailed (and spirited) survey of youth culture, which he characterises comprising a "prolonged pre-adult lifestage". The "MyFace Generation" is more likely to live at home in their mid-20s and spend money on recreation than pay rent, and are increasingly tweeting their way through life depending on a "single delivery system for all culture and communication" on their handhelds. Max is eloquent and thorough, making the case that there is not much distinction between private and public for the MyFace Generation and that extends to a breakdown between workplace and home. He also notes that a majority of under 25s did not plan to stay at their current jobs for three years or more. Understanding this generation gap, could be the key to successfully managing the service workforce.

#### **11:00 AM**

Paul Grieco is Charles' son and grew up at the family's restaurant, "polishing glassware". When he decided to stay in the business, he left Toronto (where he thought his last name might get in the way) and headed to New York where he is a successful restaurateur, co-owning and managing *Hearth*, *Insieme* and *Terroir*, his wine bar just voted the city's best by *New York* magazine. All three are commercial and critical successes. Paul is bursting with energy and eschews the podium to walk the floor. His take on service in this new technology, blogosphere, Food Network culture? While the food served might change, when it comes to service: "Not one thing as changed one iota." The fundamentals remain, he explains and restaurateurs better keep polishing their glassware. Grieco describes his experiences as a young waiter in New York city. He was driven "like an animal" by managers at some of the city's top spots until he found employment with the hospitality legend Danny Meyer, at the Gramercy Tavern. Meyer's famous quote is that service is a monologue, but hospitality is a dialogue. Working for Meyer shaped his subsequent success in two fundamental ways: 1) Meyer ensured his staff was well treated and empowered, so they were able to deliver the highest standard of hospitality and 2) Meyer's restaurant concepts were and are successful because they are rooted in a core idea, to which everyone can be true. Grieco used the example of his restaurants offering health insurance as an example of Grieco's interpretation of Meyer's dictum that "the most important person is not the guest, it's [his] staff". When they show up for work, Grieco wants them to be able to concentrate on their job, rather than be wracked with worry. Makes sense. On the second point, Grieco became truly animated: "I am tired of chasing down customers!" Grieco's theory, so far successful is that is a restaurant has to have a unifying theory or "core idea" that everyone understands and can execute: at *Hearth*, it's a welcoming hospitality, and *Insieme* it's a union of modern and traditional Italian and at *Terroir* it's Lower East Side punk/rock'n'roll attitude. Grieco is famous for this Summer of Riesling promotion this past year where all 50 wines poured at *Terroir* were Riesling. If someone wanted a glass of something else? Tough: "Terroir is my sandbox, and if you like it you can stay and play. If you don't like it, find another sandbox." Finally, Grieco ended on a more sobering note: the hospitality industry is suffering greatly in New York. Grieco worries

that panic may spread and restaurants will continue to slash prices when suppliers are not. The result will inevitably be a diminution of standards.

#### **11:20 AM**

The symposium sponsors are given a chance to address the crowd. Franco Naccarato from Savour Ontario Dining explains how his program at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs helps restaurants use locally grown and produced ingredients. Lisa MacNeil from Gordon Food Service, talked about how her large scale employer is committing itself to sustainable and environmentally responsible practices. And Wendy Chorapade from the Wine Council of Ontario spoke about the economic stimulus provided by purchasing a bottle of domestically produced wine.

#### **11:40 AM**

The symposium breaks up into three smaller sessions. Chef Owen Steinberg does a live demonstration on Sensory Composition and Balance and in another room, a blind taste comparison of Ontario and Burgundy Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is led by top wine writer David Lawrason. As I couldn't attend either, I must rely on reports that both were successful and delicious. Jamie Drummond, from Jamie Kennedy's restaurants, informed me that he and his fellow panellists did well enough tasting blind. As well they should have, he was joined by Paul Grieco, Thomas Balchelder from Clos Jordanne, Norm Hardie, Paul de Campo from Henry of Pelham and Jean-Pierre Colas from Pensinsula Ridge. Apparently the Ontarios showed very well against the Burgundy's, often at a significantly lower price point.

I was busy introducing, and then attending a session on 'Creative Marketing in the New Economy' moderated by my colleague at Gremolata, James Geneau. On the panel were Karin Desveaux-Potters from Pinch Gourmet and Harvest restaurant in Prince Edward County, Rebecca LeHeup-Bucknell from the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance and Michelle Kalman, VP Creative Marketing at St. Joseph Media, who famously publish *Toronto Life*. Much advice was offered on how to handle everything from nasty blog posts (ignore or offer a customer an online satisfaction survey, just don't argue) to enticing journalists to write about you. Needless to say, I found the last topic interesting and was tempted to suggest sending them cases of Champagne.

#### **12:45 PM**

Lunch! Terroir's buffet-style lunch is worth the price of admission alone. When top chefs cook for top chefs, they don't fool around. I was particularly taken by a Lake Erie perch fish taco from Anthony Rose's team from Toronto's Drake Hotel, and Langdon Hall's table, featuring Chef Jonathan Gushue and assisted by The Cheese Boutique's Afrim Pristine, was an almost obscene orgy of meat and cheese. Over 10 restaurants participated in all, matched by over a dozen Ontario wineries. No wonder there was lingering.

#### **2:00 PM**

Lunch is over and we breakup again into smaller sessions. Those whose taste buds have are still up for stimulation head up to see Kathleen Mackintosh from The Ontario Cheese Society, and proprietor of the all local shop Culinarium in Toronto and Mirella Amato, a craft beer expert and publisher of beerology.ca pair beers and cheese. The rest of us head upstairs for a session called 'Up Your... Service' moderated by Kato Wake, hospitality veteran and fellow Terroir Steering Committee member. Kato has assembled a panel of experts including James Niehuis President of the catering powerhouse The Butler Did It, Jerrett Young the Manager of Operations for Oliver Bonacini, Rory Gallagher the Manager at Mildred's Temple Kitchen and the British Restaurant Associations 'Young Waiter of The Year' for 2006 and Jill McAbe, a founder of the legendary restaurant JOV Bistro. Despite the diversity of experience there emerged a rough consensus on how to motivate a restaurant's wait staff. A balance of "cop and coach", preferably much more of the latter. The trick was hiring the right people in the first place. McAbe explained how she would make sure she had detailed job description which she would present as a contract. All panellists agreed it was important to be clear about hospitality expectations and to keep communications open and clear with their hospitality team.

#### **3:00 PM**

Back to the Great Hall, where educator and author Bonnie Stern is moderating a panel

convened to discuss 'Creating A Culinary Destination'. On the panel: Rosanna Caira the Editor of *Foodservice and Hospitality Magazine*, Chef Tawfik Shehata from Vertical, Chef Jonathan Gushue from Langdon Hall, Eugene Zakreski the Executive Director of The Stratford [Ontario] Tourism Alliance and Mitchell Davis, Vice President of The James Beard Foundation. Bonnie leads the panel in a series of Q & A's: What's their favourite food city? Does a city need more than restaurants to be a food destination? Is Vancouver's approach of having at least four restaurant awards the way to go? Should Toronto do a better job of leveraging its diversity? The answers were diverse, but a consensus emerged over Mitchell Davis' assertion that a culinary destination depends mostly on its native food scene. If we continue to be into our food, then the will come, which makes sense. Vancouver, it was broadly noted, supports its chef and restaurant community with vigilance, no wonder the world is beginning to take notice.

#### **4:00 PM**

*Globe and Mail* columnist Sasha Chapman takes the floor with a quick presentation on 'Toronto's Good Food Revolution'. She demonstrates how far we've come in the last forty years, noting that there were 6,500 applicants to just 1,500 spots at George Brown's culinary program. She tipped her hat to long standing restaurants like Scaramouche and Grano, who've survived for decades by exemplifying a core idea, echoing Paul Grieco's talk from the morning. She stressed that Toronto's Good Food Revolution was not just about "dropping \$400 on a tasting menu", but really about "eating well everyday." She also championed the concept of 'open innovation', explaining that the culinary community had "more to gain than lose when peers collaborate". Crosstown Kitchens, the collective of young chefs who work in each other's restaurants to raise money for charity she cited as a prime example. As Toronto's culinary identity moves forward, she suggested, it will be by echoing the four operating principles of the Crosstown team: 1) collaboration and cross-pollination, 2) the gelling of a regional identity, 3) forming a distinctive cuisine and 4) a commitment to social responsibility. Finally, she put an equal emphasis and responsibility on the community she and I represent: the diners. Diners must continue to be educated, through media, as they need to "know what they want." Indeed.

#### **4:30 PM**

James Beard Foundation VP and noted food writer Mitchell Davis closed the symposium with his thoughts on 'Excellence in Hospitality'. This was well time as Mitchell was about to defend his PhD thesis on the same topic, especially in light of blogs and new media like Yelp and how they affect how people think about restaurants. Mitchell synthesized many of the concepts around the day's discussions. He offered breakdown definition of hospitality:

- Hospitality is not service, although service is an important part of hospitality;
- Hospitality is an attitude, not a list of rules;
- Hospitality is generosity;
- Hospitality is awareness; and
- Hospitality is authority.

On that last point Mitchell stressed that wait staff must be empowered to serve their guests. Further, as an attempt to define the concept, he turned to James Beard himself, who famously said: "My favourite Restaurant is the one where they know me." Mitchell suggested great hospitality is about anticipating the needs of the guest, as though one really did know them. Finally he suggested that we are in an age of post-modern service. That the old models of rigid waiting have been surpassed by a more casual and interactive one.

#### **5:30 PM**

Party! After Donna closed the symposium proper, being thanked herself and thanking lead organiser Arlene Stein, we head to common room to drink more Ontario wine, and beer and cheese and goodies from Ottawa region, put together by that city's Culinary Tourism Initiative. Everyone is excited and pumped from the day. I speak to organic grower David Colmeyer from Cookstown Greens about supplying Barrack Obama's recent lunch with the Prime Minister. And I mingled and sipped and tasted for more than hour before it was time to go home. And starting thinking about next year.

