
BACK OF THE HOUSE

TREADWELL'S TERROIR

BY MARY LUZ MEJIA

Stephen Treadwell is a man who understands the importance of relationships. The relationships he has built – and continues to forge – with his customers, staff, suppliers, and the land and water surrounding Treadwell Farm to Table Cuisine are what define who he is and what he does. Treadwell upholds a basic credo at his award-winning waterfront restaurant in Port Dalhousie: keep it simple, remain consistent and respect the raw ingredients.

Treadwell's menus read like culinary tourism guides: Descriptions of starters, mains, sides and desserts include the local artisan producers, cheese makers, farms and vineyards from which many of the ingredients hail. The back of the menu lists the names and locations of suppliers – just so you know the provenance of that succulent piece of fish and who made that perfect goat cheese. When you read that a flavourful appetizer consists of house-made bison sausage with quince





Chef Stephen Treadwell

purée, Colby's wild honeycomb and Hidden Bench verjus, you might be interested to know that the wild honeycomb is sourced from his son's retired Grade 12 teacher. "It's all about who you know," asserts Treadwell with his signature smile.

He didn't know a soul in Toronto when he and his wife Sue decided it was time to leave the U.K. Treadwell studied cooking in Harlow, England, and had worked in London, Switzerland and Sweden, but decided in 1982 that he wanted to continue growing as a chef and started to cast his eyes abroad. He and his wife had their sights set on Australia until they stepped into Canada House in London and saw an imposing image of the CN Tower. Ready for an adventure, the couple decided that Canada looked like a good place to resettle and, given its relative proximity to England, the decision made sense.

"Back then, we didn't know anybody. We were both pounding the pavement. We had no jobs, just two suitcases. I was walking up Yonge St. putting resumés in everywhere," says Treadwell in an accent not far removed from an episode of Coronation Street. His mannerisms and forthright attitude give the immediate impression of someone who is not going to dance delicately around any subject matter – be it his restaurant, his food, his staff or the industry in general. It is this honesty and directness that helped him to form the relationships, two in particular, that were seminal to his career in Canada.

The first came in Treadwell's association with Peter Oliver, a former banker who at one time owned Oliver's Old Fashioned Bakery, located a few blocks from where Treadwell landed his first job. When Oliver decided to open Auberge du Pommier, which is referred to today as the "original jewel in the Oliver Bonacini crown" ("Bonacini" is Oliver's long-time partner, Michael Bonacini), Treadwell signed on



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as sous chef. It was 1988, and Treadwell worked at a steady pace for five years, working his way up to chef de cuisine and picking up on Oliver's attention to detail with regard to meticulous customer service, impeccable food and the bottom line.

Along the way, Treadwell noticed that the local food scene was operating in a way that many restaurants still choose to follow today. "When I got here, you picked up the phone and ordered your produce. Lettuce usually came from California," he says, and "there was no definition of what Canadian cuisine was because it was very European with lots of sauces and demi-glace."

Seeing a gap in the market, Oliver opened Canoe, perched atop the Toronto Dominion Bank Tower in Toronto's financial district, where Canadian regional cuisine is the restaurant's trademark. Although he was offered a job at Canoe, Treadwell decided it was time to leave Toronto.

He landed a lucrative opportunity in Vancouver but got cold feet at the last minute. "By then, my son James was ten years old, I didn't want to work in Toronto anymore, and I backed out of Vancouver. My wife wanted to kill me, but I had just met hotelier Si Wai Lai while helping out a friend of mine, Dario Tomaselli at Oro Restaurant. She [Si Wai Lai] had a vision of what Niagara-on-the-Lake could be. She wanted to up the culinary ante here and so I went to work for her at the Queen's Landing," says Treadwell.

By 1995, he had become the inn and conference centre's executive chef, establishing Tiara Restaurant and assuming responsibility for the culinary operations at the Prince of Wales Hotel, as well. He stayed on for eleven years, overseeing the two properties in the picturesque, vineyard-surrounded town. This is where Treadwell helped to pioneer Niagara cuisine, and he established lasting friendships and bonds with local farmers and with producers of food made using artisanal methods. By putting the emphasis on the best products the area had to offer, Treadwell offered guests in Niagara-on-the-Lake an experience that shone a spotlight on exceptional seasonal Niagara fare.

Treadwell decided in 2006 that he was ready to take his Niagara cuisine concept, along with his well-seasoned local relationships, and open Treadwell Farm to Table Cuisine with his son James, who is the restaurant's sommelier. Asked why so few in the Niagara region had chosen to go this route sooner, Treadwell responds emphatically that "no one had the balls or the vision. I'd come in in the morning and call up one farmer and say, 'What have you got today?' He'd drop off the beets or greens at the end of my driveway and I'd bring them into the restaurant. Sometimes that means having to change the dishes [on our menu] during busy times because something is out of season or just isn't available," he trails off, leaving it unsaid that many chefs would struggle to adapt so quickly.

Treadwell explains that this concept isn't new. In Europe it's almost always been the preferred method of cooking and it certainly isn't unusual. What is unusual, he says, "is the extent to which I'm doing this," especially in the Niagara region where some talk the talk but few in Treadwell's estimation walk it. "Other people write on the menu that they're doing local seasonal food – and believe me, they're not. I know the suppliers that we use and they tell me, 'That's funny because I don't even deliver there!' A few places like the Stone Road Grille do it right," says Treadwell.

Doing it right means keeping a hawk-eyed vigilance on the little details, no matter how seemingly unimportant, including the use of locally grown and pressed oils and locally produced wine vinegars. The ma-





jority of the offerings on the wine list are Ontario VQA wines, sourced by James Treadwell and selected to heighten the dining experience.

During my visit with the Treadwells, I had the pleasure of experiencing one particularly memorable wine, a late harvest Vidal from Daniel Lenko Estate Winery in Beamsville, Ontario, served alongside a most delectable walnut-and-bourbon butter tart with – get this – parsnip ice cream! I know...I said “Parsnip?” too, and then put my faith in Treadwell because nothing I ate that day had been short of exceptional. I was not disappointed. He smiled and said, “People don’t realize how sweet parsnips are.” Sweetness I understood, through roasting and caramelization, but I would have never guessed an ice cream this good could be coaxed from a simple root vegetable.

“To me, it’s all about flavouring. I keep hearing ‘It’s the flavour, the flavour, the flavour’ from customers because that’s what it’s all about. It’s putting [out] that quality product with the right flavour combination, and not overdoing it,” asserts the chef. It’s when cooks mix too many flavours that fight each other on the plate that things go awry; it’s what Treadwell dismissively calls *confusion cuisine*. In his estimation, simplicity is the key to some of the best cooking possible. “Why would I go and source out the best and throw all of these flavours in it. Why would I want to cover it all up?” he asks, almost incredulously.

Treadwell is imparting his messages of simplicity and consistency, a strong work ethic and valuable life skills to his young kitchen brigade. He knows the young cooks of today are the next generation of chefs and he wants them to be prepared.

These promising apprentices are fortunate to be learning from one of the best in the business and are eager to tap into the invaluable skills Treadwell gleaned from former mentors Peter Oliver and Si Wai Lai. “These two people are passionate about what they do and [are] demons when it comes to business. Let’s forget about cooking for a minute. Working for Si Wai and Peter, you learn about life, paying the bills, organizing your business, staffing and keeping them motivated. They understand, just as I do, that if you’re not making money at the end of the day, forget about it because then you don’t have a business,” says Treadwell.

Luckily for us, Treadwell Farm to Table Cuisine has stayed in business, although many locals doubted it would last more than a year. Diners from near and far have embraced Treadwell’s vision and celebrate his commitment to Niagara cuisine. Some food writers have even begun calling the area “Napa North.” When asked how he feels about this, Treadwell replies, “I think we’re getting there. I’ve seen lots of changes and I’ve been down here for thirteen years. Have I helped that cause? Hopefully I have.” If his long list of loyal customers, suppliers, farmers and awards are any indication, I’d say the cause has most certainly been given a friendly Treadwell hand. □

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