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Want. Crave. Learn. Grow

Of Expectations and Opinions, a chat with @MLSEchef



Sometimes we form opinions and have expectations of places even before we visit them in person. I feel that a lot of us actually do this quite often. Usually, there is really no rhyme or reason, but nonetheless it does happen. This is neither good nor bad, assuming that we keep open minds and give establishments the opportunity to impress us when we chose to show up and give them a try. I am trying to practice what I preach here, and was recently posed with a question that brought this, and the motivations as to why I sometimes am apprehensive to spend my money at certain restaurants, to the foreground of my mind when choosing a place to eat.

I sat down with the Director of Culinary, and Executive Chef at Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, Robert Bartley at e11ven Restaurant to have a chat. We spoke about my recent experience at the restaurant, about why he became a chef and his early memories of how they relate to food, the importance of recognizing what guests want, the local food movement, quality of ingredients, and many topics in between.



I love that I am given the opportunity to meet some of the great chefs that we are lucky to have cooking here in Toronto, and I always learn a lot when they take time out of their very busy schedules to have a chat.



Prior to my invitation from the folks at e11ven to spend an evening with some other food bloggers trying their food, playing with their iPad wine list, and sampling some of the great wines on said list, I had already formed an opinion of the restaurant. Not sure where it came from, but I did not have high expectations. Chef Bartley asked me what I thought of my experience, and we chatted about it in detail. My immediate answer to him was "Let's just say that I was delightfully surprised from start to finish". This is what motivated me to mention in my post that sometimes we form ideas before eating somewhere, because I'm not really sure why I felt the way I did. Maybe someone said something to me when they first opened? Maybe I had a negative idea regarding the concept? Who knows, but I am glad I gave them the opportunity. Robert felt that e11ven got up to speed quicker than they expected, but did admit that there may have been some small speed bumps at the beginning. We talked about the media, and how they are quick to jump all over a new establishment before they have had a chance to be open for even a few weeks, and how they seem to like to attack, as opposed to focusing on the good.



At e11ven they have their wine and cocktail list on an iPad

Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment is a huge, as well as multi-faceted, organization that focuses organizationally on teams, facilities, and content. The latest focus for this powerhouse is Food and Beverage, where they are considered across North America to be cutting-edge in the industry, and a model for other like-minded organizations. MLSE has been heavily investing in F&B with major expansion plans, and going forward with this as being a 4th pillar of focus for the organization. Hiring Robert was a key part of this plan, and he is committed to the organizational vision of "real food" with great ingredients and a focus on execution and consistency to provide their fans (whom they call the guests) with the best possible experience.



The bread reminded me of the pan bread at Jack Astors.



A classic spinach dip.



Under the lettuce is one of the best crab cakes you will ever have, period.



This was lovely, a very light whipped ricotta spread.

I was really impressed with the things Robert had to say about how they run F&B within the organisation. It is really a grass roots but modern approach. "Testing is the key to consistency, and we use the "best practices" that we have learned from the data we have collected", Robert explained. They look to their fans to dictate how the restaurant should be run, from the style of restaurant to the food, service, everything. They understand what is wanted, and are 100% dedicated to executing the vision of what a restaurant like e11ven should be, including using the very best ingredients, sourced locally wherever possible. They want to do simple dishes well, and impress with great value.



The bacon appetiser. Yes, bacon.



A massive kobe beef meatball.

Toronto is a food powerhouse with a highly educated public, and restaurants should use all of the tools at their disposal to get guests into their restaurants, and to keep in touch with what is going on in the food community. MLSE is a great example of a company who executes the use of social media very well, and encourages people in their organization to do the same. Robert likes technologies like Twitter to keep up to date with the scene in Toronto to see what other young chefs are up to.



Tuna tartare and avocado.



House smoked salmon. Very tender and moist.

It always impresses me why people decide to become chefs. It is hard, thankless, and takes a real toll on you and your life. Those who do it generally love it, and it gets under their skin. The good ones, anyway. Robert was the youngest of 7 kids with a modest upbringing in Woodstock, Ontario, where his family owned an ice cream shop. In the Bartley household, the matriarch was way ahead of her time, and was composting and recycling in the 70's, as well as cooking everything with soul and from scratch. No Kraft Dinner, or Highliner fish sticks in this house. Mom wouldn't have her kids eating any of that, even when Robert and the others begged. Can you see why he became a chef, with such a great mom?





When in university, Robert figured out that school wasn't for him and when he saw an ad for the Stratford Cooking school he decided to apply. Not having any kitchen experience, he was sent out in the world to gain some before being accepted in the program. He got a job cooking in London at a small bistro called Café Brugge, and a year later was back in Stratford. The rest, as they say, is history. Stints at Avalon with Chris Macdonald, almost 3 years with Susur Lee at Lotus, working under Chef Lynn Crawford at the Four Seasons, along with some time spent in an organization learning the business side of restaurants really prepared him for his current role with MLSE.



I will be visiting e11ven Restaurant again soon, and hear their patio should be ready to go any day. Who is going to join me?

Comments

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patio! crab cakes! wine list! can't wait to learn about this new place...

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