

The Elm Tree Restaurant: A Family Affair



Brother-run restaurant a hit
in the downtown core

By Heather Hudson

Like most people following in their family's footsteps, brothers Jonathan and Ben Mishaev wanted to chart their own path in the restaurant industry. But the lessons they learned in the kitchens of their father's and uncle's restaurants were hard-wired – and helped them create a restaurant as familiar to their roots as it is fresh and modern.



"WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON HAVING A COMFORTABLE AND RELAXED AMBIANCE WHILE SERVING GREAT COMFORTING FOOD. WE WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THAT WE'RE A FAMILY-RUN RESTAURANT WHERE YOU CAN RELAX. THE SERVICE IS CASUAL AND FRIENDLY, NOT ROBOTIC OR PRETENTIOUS."

– JONATHAN MISHAEV, GENERAL MANAGER, THE ELM TREE

In just over three years, the successful The Elm Tree restaurant (43 Elm St.) has become an homage to their Mediterranean roots and the longstanding tradition of hospitality, but with a metropolitan take on food and service.

"Having grown up in a family where food was a centralized affair, my passion was present from very early on. Food was all around me, all the time;

from the intoxicating aromas of my grandmother's home-baked breads to the infatuating smells of my father's weekly barbecues. It was fundamental," said Ben.

Although Ben is passionate about food, it was younger brother Jonathan who first conceived of a restaurant with a different flair than the ones he grew up working in.

"My brother and I had dreams of operating a full service dining establishment. I'm interested in beverage programs. [At Elm Tree], we have a fully stocked bar, eight craft beers, unique wineries on our list and great, creative cocktails," said Jonathan.

Though the brothers are partners today – Jonathan is general manager, Ben is the chef – it was Jonathan

CHEF BEN MISHAEV SHARES THE INSPIRATION FOR HIS COOKING:

"One food that gives me a nostalgic sensation... is my mother's braised stew. This is not one's conventional idea of stew; it is a combination of stuffed baby eggplants, tomatoes and sweet peppers. The stuffing is a mixture ground beef, onions, and garlic that has been sautéed slowly with various spices. Then this oversized pot is finally put in the oven to finish braising for at least two hours.

This dish reminds me of home. Whenever I have a dish with similar textures, flavours or aromas, it brings me back to this memory. Certain flavours and aromas can take one back in time for just a moment to remember and cherish the flavours he or she loves.

My inspiration boils down to creating food that represents my background in a way that can be enjoyed by everyone. I build menus that take into consideration various preferences, likes and dislikes while staying true to what I enjoy eating and what portrays who I am as a young cook."





who initially opened Elm Tree in 2014 when he was only 21.

“I didn’t have any managing experience. The first year I learned from the people I worked with,” he said. “I had a really good staff working with me when we opened. They helped me understand what Toronto is all about – what the food culture is like.”

Working seven days a week, he absorbed as much as he could from his experienced employees while finding time to research wine and beer to offer interesting selections that complemented the food and vibe he was cultivating. Three months after opening, Ben headed off to study at The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in New York City.

Meanwhile, Jonathan found the perfect location and got started without him.

“I was alone for the first two years, with my uncle and father’s help. [During that time,] I tried to figure out who we are and what we wanted to do with the restaurant.”

Since its inception, the menu has undergone an evolution of its own. Their

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first chef was Greek and brought with him a Mediterranean flavour. A French chef followed, who put his own twist on the menu. A third chef was Spanish and ushered in a different palate.

“When my brother got back from New York, we looked at the menu and saw what was working and what wasn’t. Today, we identify as a Mediterranean kitchen. The Greek, French and Spanish chefs each brought something to this journey. My brother is trained in classic French, but growing up in the restaurant industry with Middle Eastern roots, we’ve decided to reproduce that flavour,” said Jonathan.

Some of their signature dishes include the Cornish hen that is brined and pan roasted and served with sautéed Brussels sprouts, crispy shitake, pancetta and celeriac puree. The lamb shank is braised in a rich aromatic jus made from an array of spices and seasonings indigenous to the Middle East and served with a classic pomme

puree, crispy quinoa and pine nuts. Among the other top sellers are scallops, herb crusted rack of lamb and wild mushroom risotto.

“We like to change our menu seasonally, at least four times a year. We keep the same idea with the lamb shank, Cornish hen and salmon dishes, but we change up the sides seasonally using local vegetables,” said Jonathan.

With 18 people on staff and a prime location for locals and tourists alike, The Elm Tree has developed a reputation for high-quality food and exceptional customer service. It’s ranked among the top 10 restaurants in Toronto on Trip Advisor and enjoys a Certificate of Excellence from the review site.

Jonathan attributes their success partly to their early education in hospitality.

“My dad cared very much about the guests who came into his restaurant. It wasn’t just about making a profit;

it was about making people happy. I think of our guests as coming into our home, treating them well and making sure they leave satisfied.”

This doting approach means they’re open to tweaking their menu based on customer feedback.

“We try to learn from employees and guests about menu items, portion sizes and anything else we can do to make dining a perfect experience,” said Jonathan. “We pride ourselves on having a comfortable and relaxed ambience while serving great comforting food. We want people to know that we’re a family-run restaurant where you can relax. The service is casual and friendly, not robotic or pretentious.”

Now that they’ve hit a sweet spot, the brothers expect The Elm Tree to continue to provide the food and service their guests are responding to while keeping things fresh and current. After all, it’s a family tradition.

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