

Your Number One Marketing Partner To The Restaurant Industry...

DISCOVER



Vol. 1 Issue. II

Cuisines



CANADA POST	POSTES CANADA
Postage paid	Port payé
Publications Mail	Poste-publications
40560502	

Liberty

ENTERTAINMENT GROUP

Nick Di Donato is

Entertainment's Engineer

By Adrian Fiorino

LEAVING BEHIND THE CAR EXHAUST and thick humidity of mid-August in downtown Toronto, one crosses a threshold into elegance: the Rosewater Supper Club - that posh dining venue on Toronto Street just off Adelaide - is auspicious throughout. Inside, the space is consuming with fluted ceilings, brilliant marble and to the left a mosaic waterfall - the epitome of taste.

The resplendent venue is but one in a gamut of hot spots served up by Nick Di Donato, Founder and CEO of Liberty Entertainment Group. For more than a decade, the entertainment mogul has redefined the city's nightlife and culinary landscape with his uncanny ability to recognize the 'possibilities' of unconventional locations and long neglected structures.

His keen eye has done it again: Di Donato is stirring up Toronto's lakefront with his most recent, and certainly his most ambitious venture yet. The Liberty Grand Entertainment Complex - a mammoth 100,000 square foot marvel in the Western section of Exhibition Place - opened its doors early last month. The Liberty Grand, more than any other project, rides at the crest of Di Donato's architectural accomplishments in hospitality.

But before Liberty Grand, before the unique dining destinations and well before the lights, lasers and music, there was *Lorenzo's*, the Di Donato's family owned restaurant. At 12, Nick Di Donato bussed tables while his brother Pat (now Executive VP at Liberty Group) flipped pizza dough in the storefront. The future Club King remained a busboy until age 18, when he could legally work as waiter. "The experience gave me insight into the 'hands on' aspect of restaurateuring," Di Donato recalls. "It gave me a good feel for the industry."

But despite the 'feeling' it gave him, Di Donato's parents wished more for their son. Laboring 7 days a week from 10am to 3am, they wanted Nick to experience a 'better life.' Hearing his parent's words, a young Di Donato entered the

ivy gates at the University of Toronto and acquired a degree in Engineering in 1981. Out of university, he became employed by Imperial Oil as their construction coordinator. But after 6 years he grew tired of the long hours spent hunched over dreary blueprints. "I missed dealing with people on a one-on-one basis," he explains.

So he returned to hospitality and opened P.M. Toronto (the city's first real sports bar) with brother, Pat - followed shortly after by Club Max in 1989. Club Max was Toronto's first warehouse-style club, and employed multiformating (playing different music on different nights). The 'King of Clubs' (as dubbed by WHERE Toronto) followed Club Max's success with the Phoenix Concert Theatre, Joker, Velvet Underground, and Karma Klub. All employ the multi-night concept and have remained successful as a result.

Since trendsetting worked with clubs, DiDonato decided to try it again with restaurants. The result: Left Bank, Di Donato's first foray into restaurateuring. Opened in 1994, Left Bank was the first dining venue in Toronto to provide a full night's entertainment, featuring a cocktail lounge, stylish eatery and dance facilities in one location. The idea was novel and enormously well received despite its then out-of-place location. Originally thought to be too far west on Queen Street, the venue extended the dining district in that region.

Following Left Bank's success, Di Donato opened the Rosewater Supper Club in 1996, marking his maiden voyage into *fine* dining. Originally the



A view from the upper-mezzanine of Rosewater

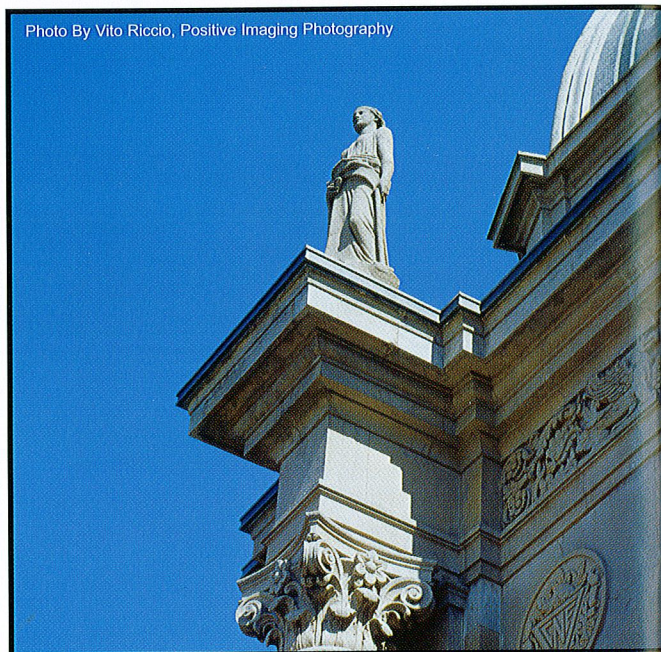


Photo By Vito Riccio, Positive Imaging Photography

A statue outside the Liberty Grand entrance

Entrance to Liberty Grand's Courtyard



Photo By Vito Riccio, Positive Imaging Photography



Rosewater's dazzling Main Bar

Consumer's Gas building, the Rosewater was meticulously restored into a multi-level, 180-seat dining gem with an upper mezzanine, piano bar, and cigar lounge. The 17,000 square foot interior boasts 22-foot ceilings and hardwood floors.

One block away is the Courthouse Market Grille and Chamber Lounge, Di Donato's most recent dining venture. The building is a 24,000 square foot edifice and possesses landmark status under the Ontario Heritage Act. Constructed in 1852, the structure - a former lockup for Toronto criminals - housed the old City of York's courthouse and courthouse gallows. Inside, the annex area accommodates functions up to 60, while the main room can hold 600 for cocktail gatherings. The restaurant is another 180-seat affair with an a-la-grille kitchen.

Di Donato knew the risks opening another restaurant not 30 seconds from Rosewater. With comparable spaces, he had to make the Courthouse different both in feeling and flavour so it would compliment rather than cannibalize Rosewater's business. So he gave it a casual décor: The tables are attractive, but require no cloths for their beauty and the dining space is open to create a bustling atmosphere. The food is down to earth: While Rosewater serves

Inside the Courthouse's open concept Grand Room for dining



modern French cuisine: i.e., King Cole duck cooked two ways with vanilla poached rhubarb or Arctic Char with pan seared foie gras, Courthouse serves 'comfort food,' including 12 oz. USDA Prime New York Striploin and Atlantic Salmon with a selection of sides.

Restoring the neoclassical structures that are Rosewater and Courthouse was painstaking enough reports Di Donato: "We wanted to emulate inside what already existed on the exterior." But his latest, and certainly his largest project - the Liberty Grand Entertainment Complex (built in 1926) - takes architectural mimicry to the next level. Before he happened upon the landmark, it was used only 3 weeks a year "as an exhibitor's pavilion," lending itself to various industrial and agricultural demonstrations. With no heat, air-conditioning, ventilation, sprinkler or electrical systems, the structure was an open shell, ornate and spectacular on the exterior, but an enclosure of concrete walls inside. So like with Courthouse and Rosewater, Di Donato respected the original architect, designing the interior to compliment the exterior. "From a personal perspective," conveys Di Donato, "I think it's important to preserve Toronto's classic architecture." But making the structure so perfectly seamless may prove bittersweet, he laughs "because no one will know how much work went into it when they enter!"

The spaces surrounding Liberty Grand are sublime, showcasing perfectly manicured greenery, burgeoning flora and spectacular waterfalls. Inside, the three ballrooms (The Governor's, Renaissance and Centennial rooms) can accommodate events from 150 to 3000. Crystal chandeliers hang gloriously from soaring 27-foot ceilings, while majestic Persian rugs grace the floor space. Three kitchens (one main, 2 ancillary) are staffed for private ceremonies, receptions or media functions.

The Liberty Grand has already been applauded by industry folk who admire its lustrous facilities. The Toronto International Film Festival recently used the Liberty Grand for its Opening Night Gala and the site will host next year's Papal visit. "The project came at the right time," says Di Donato, "because there is no grand ballroom in the City of Toronto." With the Liberty Grand well underway, the shrewd entrepreneur is already contemplating new projects - though he wouldn't divulge their nature.

Di Donato confesses that his love of lights, music and classical structures is only secondary to his family life. "One thing that keeps me motivated and driven are my wife and children," he says. Growing



The splendid Atrium Bar at Courthouse

up in restaurants, and seeing his parents work 15 plus hours a day, the 43 year-old father of two knows the difficulties of setting aside family time. But regardless of workload, he's always attentive to his loved-ones, admitting that his favorite pastime is watching his sons play hockey: "It's the only time I'm away from the industry, when I'm not thinking about work."

The reigning 'King of Clubs' has dealt entertainment to thousands and thousands. Congratulations Nick Di Donato for making the city a more exciting place to live and visit.

~ Discover Cuisines ~

Entrance to the Centennial Room at Liberty Grand

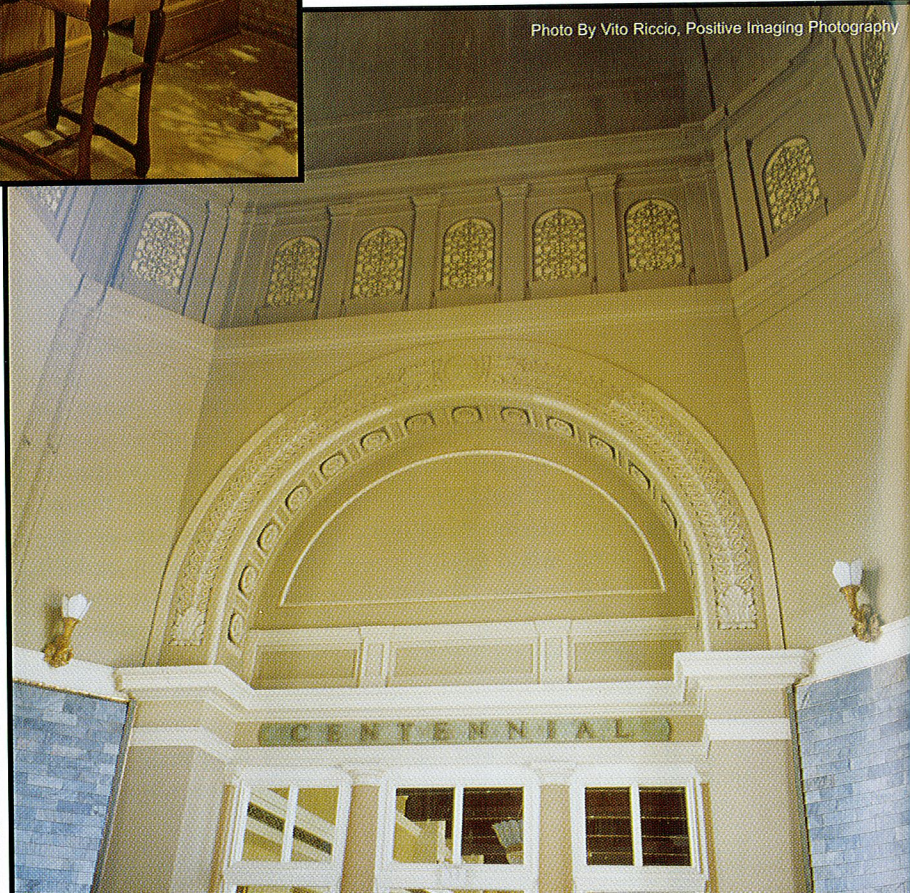


Photo By Vito Riccio, Positive Imaging Photography