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Starting from Scratch

Insight into opening a new restaurant in a historic downtown location

By Josephine Matyas | Photos By Tim Forbes

To really understand the establishment of Sir John's Public House in downtown Kingston, one needs to take a peek at the wheels turning inside Paul Fortier's mind. And a look at the inner workings of a restaurateur's mind? That's a busy place.

"This location was once the law office of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald," explains Fortier. And he should know: Before delving into the hospitality business, Fortier had a long career with the federal government as a historical curator. In 1990 he stepped away from 20 years of public service to pursue the intersection of history with his other passion: food. Fortier has made his mark on the Kingston dining scene through his company, Jessup Food and Heritage, with sites that include Fort Henry, Renaissance Event Venue and, most recently, Sir John's Public House.

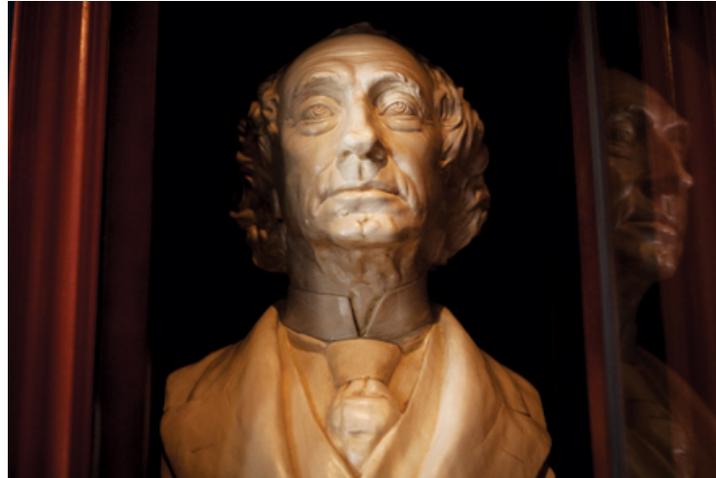
\$1 = 8 MEALS

DANIER
GENUINE LEATHER
HANDBAGS FROM
\$59
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The Stats
**SIR JOHN'S
PUBLIC HOUSE**
343 KING ST. EAST
OPENED:
AUGUST 2011
**SQUARE
FOOTAGE:**
APPROX. 1,000



SQUARE FEET
SEATING:
50 INSIDE, PLUS 20
ON THE SEASONAL
FRONT PATIO
NOTABLE:
THE LOCATION
OF SIR JOHN A.
MACDONALD'S
LAW OFFICE FROM
1849 TO 1860



For a passionate historian, what could be better than scoring one of the city's landmark buildings? "This is one of the older buildings in the downtown core," enthuses Fortier, who purchased the heritage property on King Street this past year. "It has been a home, a commercial space, Sir John's law office, apartments and a restaurant. I see this as a restaurant space, but I also see it as a historic site, with a very special meaning to our community."

Choosing a restaurant space can be a very tricky proposition. There are the usual logistics — location, space, streetscape, plumbing, wiring and renovations to bring things up to code — but add to that heritage considerations and things have the potential to become much more complicated. Luckily, Fortier knows his history and — as importantly — he is on solid ground with the role he wanted heritage to play in his new venture.

"This building has so many strengths," he says as he ticks off the list. "There's a new energy in the downtown core and much of it is centred at Market Square and on King Street. As well, Kingston has always branded itself as a heritage community with Sir John A. as its most famous son. This building is a historic landmark — it was his actual law office from 1849 to 1860.





"As we approach 2015, the 200th anniversary of Sir John A.'s birth, how fun is it to know his proclivity to enjoy a Scottish malt and to be in this very spot?"

The history, in other words, was a perfect fit. The actual space? Well, therein lay the challenges.

According to Fortier, when looking for restaurant space, the size is important. "The weakness of this space is its small useable square footage. And with just one entrance and one exit, the building code limits us to 50 indoor seats.

"There were some definite construction challenges," he continues. "While the space had already been a restaurant, we were turning it into something completely different. We undertook a major conversion from an Italian bistro with an enormous wood-fired oven to a 19th-century Scottish pub."

The beast of a wood-fired oven — tipping the scale at about 2,700 kilograms — took up about one-third of the interior floor space. "The floor underneath had been reinforced to hold the weight. We had to knock out the front wall just to get the huge white elephant of an oven out."

With the space opened up, Fortier completely rebuilt the kitchen adding some valuable elbow room and a walk-in refrigerator to what had previously been an office and a storeroom. Still, he describes the new kitchen space as tiny, likely the smallest restaurant kitchen in Kingston.



The close quarters provide an additional challenge for a restaurant that prides itself on making most of its meals from scratch. There's only so much room in the Public House's new kitchen, so much of the prep work is done at the more spacious facilities at Renaissance on Queen Street, Kingston's oldest surviving church structure and another of Fortier's heritage dining properties.

A little research showed that Sir John A. was a pretty conventional guy when it came to his dinnertime choices, and the menu — designed by Fortier — reflects both Scottish and Canadian culinary traditions. Deep-fried haggis fritters, tatties and neeps (translation: mashed potatoes and rutabagas), and chicken and ale pot pie served with home-cut chips are menu standards.

"Sir John A. was better known for his love of drink, with Scotch whisky and gin being his favourites," explains Fortier. The beverage menu at the Public House boasts one of Kingston's best collections of blended and single malt whiskies from all four of Scotland's main distilling regions. Fortier likes to think that Sir John A. would indulge and be impressed.

Once the wood oven had been removed, the main structural changes made and the menu tweaked, Fortier dipped into his impressive background as a historical curator and turned

his attention to creating the right period ambience for the new restaurant.

“There is no surface in here that hasn’t been completely refinished. Even the colours — browns, blues and the Royal Stewart tartan — are just perfect for the period feel we are trying to capture. On the first day we were open, people arrived and thought we’d been here since 1860. That’s when I knew for sure that we’d succeeded.”

There are a few finishing touches that Macdonald himself may have found amusing. On special occasions wait staff are decked out in kilts. A new gas fireplace warms the room at the flick of a switch. And a one-of-a-kind antique bust of Sir John A. himself keeps watch over the room from a custom-built cabinet above the fireplace.



It was a bit of a hunt to snag such a work of art, explains Fortier. “I was looking for something that would have a real impact and found this piece, circa 1889, from an art dealer in the Cobourg area. It’s a ceramic casting carved from clay — there may have been 10 to 20 castings made at the time, but I don’t know of any others that have survived.”

In the end, it’s Paul Fortier’s fascination with food and his passion for the past that have come together and come alive in this heritage property. Fortier admits that he has never worked harder, nor enjoyed his life more than he does now.

“There’s got to be a way to support these historic sites and to build meaningful relationships with the public. What better way to build a repeat relationship with your customer than through food and drink?”

January is a month that will hum with activity at Sir John’s Public House and at Renaissance. Call about special programming to commemorate Sir John A. Macdonald’s birthday on Jan. 11 and Robb’s Burns Day on Jan. 25.



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