



A “Special” Success

By Ruksana Hussain

In the February issue of *Independent Restaurateur*, we looked at late night happy hours, a feature that included one restaurant business from Ohio that had tried and denounced the trend. The restaurant, The Office Bistro and Lounge, has had success in the past few years; the business opened a second location and is now planning a third, scheduled to launch this summer. The owner, Steve Turner, was candid in sharing that he had resorted to coupon programs like Groupon and Living Social but to no avail. Which then begs the question—what really did work for Office Bistro? When many other restaurants are shutting down, what was their secret formula?

“It depends upon the type of clientele you are trying to reach. You can’t just cut your prices and say it’s cheap on Monday but on Tuesday we expect you to pay double...why fight that battle?” said Turner.

A game plan

With no prior history in the hospitality industry (he comes from a construction management background), opening

the first location in Akron in 2006 was more a matter of happenstance than anything else.

“We had constructed a commercial building that needed a restaurant. I could search for somebody or do it on my own,” said Turner. “It all comes down to management—what comes in and what goes out financially. The food and service have to be good, but if you don’t have good management, that seems to be the downfall of most small independent restaurants.”

Office Bistro started out as a martini lounge, but Turner soon realized beverages would not keep customers hanging around long. Why turn them away if we can keep them here? he asked himself. As a result, the lounge began to offer an upscale experience and a bistro feel. Menu items included sandwiches, wraps, and salads customers could choose whether they wanted a more upscale or casual experience. The first location probably wasn’t the ideal space for a restaurant. It had to become a destination to be successful.

Get social

“Marketing has to be targeted, otherwise you are just throwing your money out the window,” he shared.

His method was social media! Turner was big into it, as it is free and cheap.

“For the cost, it is the most effective but you have to keep up, there is a lot of work involved. Facebook has worked best—we interact there more, users are on it at least once every 24 hours. They are looking at updates, sharing so it grows exponentially. One post may reach several thousand people,” he explained.

Turner was also active on Yelp and several other review sites like TripAdvisor. He and the manager tried to touch most tables in person, at the restaurant, before diners left.

“I’d rather they tell me than tell the few thousand people that are going to see that review because then I have the opportunity to make that right. When people have left negative reviews and I have reached out to them, they have gone back and updated their review to reflect that. If you are not paying attention, the rest of the world is!” he said.

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Every day is special

Office Bistro's USP, though, is something uncommon when it comes to the restaurant business. All through the week, Monday through Thursday, in both locations, Office Bistro offers a different special deal each day. For instance, the Akron location offers Sunday Brunch, Monday Brews and Burgers, Tuesday Wines, Wednesday Martinis and Thursday \$3 Cocktails. These specials run continuously and consistently, week after week. And this is in addition to their regular evening happy hours.

“It gets us a good response,” Turner said, “Different things bring in different people, so wine night brings in more diners, cocktail night brings in more people to the bar ordering appetizers. We tried to spread it out and offer something to everybody to catalyze buying wine for food and so on. Each special is targeted at a different market, age group, section of the restaurant—a very focused, shotgun approach to getting the most out of each area at any one given time.”

Certainly, a lot of thought went into devising that plan. In addition, Office Bistro offers a loyalty program, gift cards, and even a fishbowl drawing for a chance to win lunch for ten guests.

“It is almost essential in this day and age to have a loyalty program. Updating your website is very important. You have to do a lot of things to see what works, have to do a lot of advertising for a restaurant,” Turner said.

Those efforts have paid off and how! In 2012, the second Office Bistro location opened at Cuyahoga Falls. At this point, the restaurant had loyal clientele, was well-known in the area, and the entrepreneur in Turner pounced on the chance to translate

the demand into another hangout. With the third location's opening looming ahead in the summer, he was optimistic for his restaurant's growth, always looking for new venues, in state and out. Rest assured, daily specials will be on offer there as well!

Editor's Note: Mr. Turner passed away suddenly not too long after interviewing for this story. We know he had a great vision for his restaurant and wanted to share his insights and dreams with our readers. May The Office Bistro fulfill its vast potential based on the foundation he created.

Find It...

The Office Bistro and Lounge
778 N. Main Street
Akron, OH 44310
www.theofficebistro.com
(330) 376-9550

For other locations, please visit the website.



Photo courtesy of Office Bistro

Caramelized Sea Scallops

with farmers market risotto and crispy fried leeks

Recipe courtesy of The Office Bistro

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| 5 sea scallops | 2 oz zucchini |
| 1 cup Arborio rice | 3 oz Crimini mushrooms |
| ½ tbsp. shallots | Fresh thyme |
| ½ tbsp garlic | Lemon juice |
| 1 cup chicken stock | Parmesan cheese- grated, for topping |
| ¾ cup mixed beans | 1 oz butter |

In a non-stick pan sear the scallops until caramelized. In a separate pan sauté garlic, shallots, zucchini, mushrooms, and mixed beans. Add fully prepared Arborio rice into the pan slowly. Simmer ingredients. Add Parmesan cheese, lemon juice, butter, and fresh thyme to finish.



Photo courtesy of Office Bistro