

Spotlight ON TORONTO

Story and photos by Dick Singer

The chef puts extra effort into the meat here

"Mark Cutrara can't come to the phone right now," says a male voice. "He's butchering ducks!" Appropriate! Cutrara, 37, chef of the Parkdale district bistro Cowbell, believes hands-on makes the dish.

A 12-year veteran of Toronto's finer kitchens, he has worked with top operators, including celebrity chef Jamie Kennedy. The experience taught Cutrara focus, detail and perseverance.

In an era where many think big, Cutrara and partner Karin Culliton sought to create small, intimate

and above all, exceptional. Their kitchen needs are mostly organic, sourced fresh and close to home.

An unwavering attention to detail that has quickly placed Cowbell in the forefront of Toronto's new eateries. In less than a year of operation it has set a standard that is difficult to better.

Big praise for a small 30-seat storefront operation with an eight-place bar and tiny front patio on Queen Street West, deep in the heart of Parkdale district, a formerly impoverished area now quickly becoming a location for sought-out dining and drinking spots. It is far from the buzz of Toronto's core. In this section, traffic rolls by a touch slower. Street parking can be found easily.

Parkdale is home to the restaurant-owning couple. There may be stress in the restaurant game but it can be nicely suppressed on your home turf.

Cutrara opened Globe Bistro in 2006 as his first foodservice operation. It worked, and continues to do so, but he moved on, wanting to specialize and do grand cuisine while adhering to his values.

To realize this, he put away the pans and joined the team at the Healthy Butcher shop. The aim was to learn butchery, to know every cut and slice of an animal. Not just the prime, in demand parts. The whole thing. Beast, fowl or fish.

He retains that connection and, with the shop's blessing, sources his meat directly from suppliers who seek his custom. He takes the entire carcass. "And we use all of it," he maintains.

Early this year Cowbell came into existence. Cutrara and company gutted the ground and basement areas of the

14-year-old building. The result is a warm and incredibly inviting atmosphere upstairs. Below is a fully equipped preparation and butchering room.

"We were working on a very tight budget," he recalls of sourcing furnishings and fittings from local used goods shops, antique dealers and artists. Its terrazzo tiles for the main dining room floor came from a neighbour, the chairs from another and so on.

The bar, located at the back of the dining room, is a triumph of recycling and ingenuity. Its top was butcher blocks, the front panels reclaimed wood and column facings from historic sites. Local artists' paintings adorn the walls. Cowbell is showing its third set of works. All sale proceeds go to the artists.

The mood, colours and shades, wood tones and reminders of yesteryear are nice, lending a sense of comfort and ease to patrons. One feels warm and valued!

Cowbell is about food done exquisitely. Grand bistro dishes created by a master and focused primarily on carnivores who want things just so. Vegetarians are not forgotten and equally tasty treats are offered to them daily.

The day's fare is presented on a chalkboard and there is no guarantee of steak or rib. Various techniques are used to prepare items from traditional roasting to slow cooking.

Key staff members include sous chef Guy Rawlings and manager Neal Murphy who assists in choosing the wine list. Eclectic and ever evolving, the list is mostly European but includes Calamus and other domestic Niagara wines.

"They have very good wines that go well with our menu," Cutrara explains, stating, "red outsells white—to match the foods."

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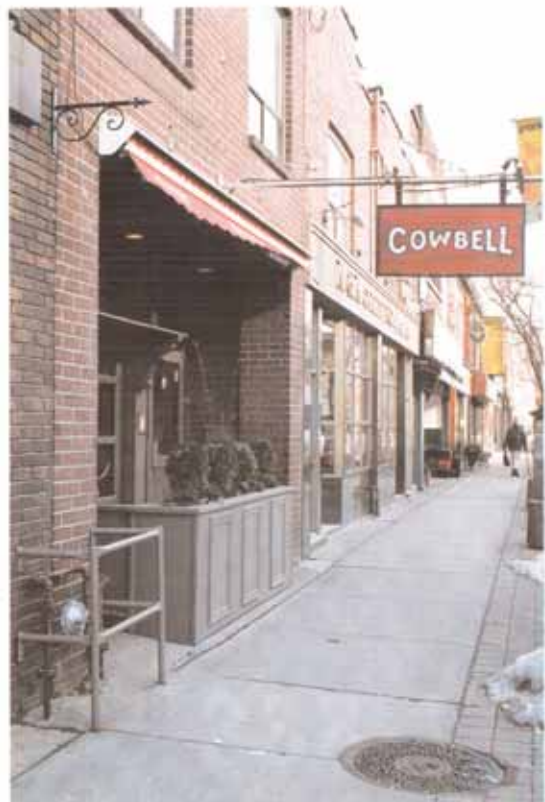
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Cowbell is located in a part of the city that is quickly developing as a place to eat and shop.

Cowbell has an impressive wine list with good value

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The list has a selection of Pastis, Pineau des Charentes, white port, sherries, sparkling wines and a rosé. 2007 Rose of Virginia, Charles Melton – Barossa Valley is \$65 a bottle.

The range is impressive for the restaurant's size and prices are value for cost. A 750 ml bottle of white starts at \$25 and goes up to \$90, the price for Goulburn Terrace 2003 Chardonnay from Australia.

Reds begin with a selection of domestic varietals such as Kacaba Vineyards. Imports, including a Gamay Noir for

\$40 up to Chateau Branaire (Duluc-Ducru) 1982 St. Julien, Bordeaux for \$500.

Prefer coffee or tea? The house organic fair trade coffee or a selection of loose-leaf teas is \$5. "We do not offer drip coffee," said Cutrara. It is processed through their espresso machine. A far superior brew indeed.

Quick to admit he is a touch overwhelmed by the attention the restaurant is garnering, Cutrara says all he is doing is "cooking the way Europeans did 100 or more years ago."

To savour the fare, book early. Reservation should be made up to a week ahead.

Cowbell, 1564 Queen Street West. Phone 416-849-1095. www.cowbell-restaurant.ca. Cowbell is open Tuesday through Thursday 5 p.m. until 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5 p.m. until 11 p.m.



Recycling and ingenuity went into furnishing and decorating the 30-seat restaurant. Daily fare is shown on a chalkboard.

