

Parkdale takes to slow food

Cowbell

Address 1524 Queen St. W.

Phone 416-849-1095

Hours Tuesday to Thursday,
5-10 p.m.; Friday & Saturday,
5-11 p.m.

Capacity 35

Dinner for 2 w/tax & tip \$90

www.cowbellrestaurant.ca



By **RICK MCGINNIS**
Metro Toronto

Profile I LIVED FOR more than a decade in an apartment overlooking the storefront where chef Mark Cutrara opened Cowbell at the beginning of this summer. It was a vacant lot for years, until a very utilitarian three-storey building went up in a couple of quick months, meant as an office building over a storefront that attracted a revolving door of restaurants over the years. There was a bar, and a Serbian restaurant with baroque linen and place settings but a dubious reputation. There was the Wroxeter and the Higher Grounds Neighbourhood Grill, all of whom had their hopeful moments before closing.

A longtime resident of Parkdale, Cutrara was more than aware of the spot's mythic curse when he took the lease on the place, after a



Cowbell owner Mark Cutrara.

RICK MCGINNIS/METRO TORONTO

splashy but brief tenure opening Globe Bistro on the Danforth, and an apprenticeship of sorts learning the meat-cutting trade at the Healthy Butcher down Queen Street. Even then, no one was more surprised when it looked like he was the one who'd broken the curse when Cowbell immediately garnered stellar reviews and full services every night. Opening Parkdale's first high-end, slow food restaurant was a risk, but he's glad he took it now.

"I don't think I could do

this menu in Yorkville or College," Cutrara says. "People here have a little bit more forgiveness to why I don't have a prime rib or New York strip loin on my menu every night. People are a little more curious or flexible — coming to Parkdale to experience what we're doing ... I was worried about Parkdale — I didn't think it would really happen. We're still catching up — we didn't prepare for this kind of success."

The genesis of Cowbell, Cutrara says, was a trip he took with his family to B.C. the summer before Globe's opening. His guide on a fishing trip was an organic farmer, and he traded some of his catch of sockeye salmon for some of his produce and lamb, and some shrimp he'd caught nearby. "I cooked a really wicked dinner all with food from one person. It occurred to me that that had never happened to me before in my life, and I don't think I could repeat it very easily. With that in mind I wanted to pursue that as the ultimate, and that's where we are at Cowbell, trying to duplicate meals like that, and to explore a little bit of terroir."

Terroir is a concept with its roots in wine-making — food and wine viewed through the

prism of geography, and it's inspired a rigorously local philosophy of food that finds its expression in Cutrara's kitchen with dishes like his Berkshire pork chop, served with a daub of mustard and a bed of toothsome prosciutto hash. The Berkshire, an heirloom variety of pig never seen in industrial farming, was grown by Fred De Martines of Sebringville's Black Bow Farms, and it arrives on the plate unadorned — a thick, juicy, richly flavourful wedge of pork, perfectly cooked, with a thick rind of fat crusted with tasty crackling and a faintly spicy aftertaste that comes from the pig's diet of mustard greens.

"We stand behind the product we get in," Cutrara says. "It would be a shame to cover that with a sauce, even if it was a reduction made from that animal. First of all, I want people to question it, like 'Why is it so simple?' or 'Can I have some more mustard?' I like people to interact that way with their food, just because I don't think people question food — where it's coming from, who it's made by, all the other problems that are behind the veil of food production. And when you have a good product, why cover it up?"