

Patient caffeine addicts getting spectacular reward

Parisian cafés set the tone for lavish coffee shop in historic Distillery area.

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BY DEE GIBNEY

“The café is the people’s parliament,” wrote 19th century French novelist Honoré de Balzac, himself a dedicated patron of France’s lively cafés.

And now a long awaited café is finally coming to Parliament – at least to the condo dwellers of the burgeoning, newly named “Distillery” neighborhood, bordered by Parliament Street on the west and Cherry Street to the east, just north of Lakeshore Blvd. And fittingly, it’s called Balzac’s. For the neighborhood’s caffeine starved residents, it can’t happen soon enough.

When the buyers, pioneers of sorts, purchased from plans four years ago, inspired by a vision of what the historical site could become, they were told by the then owners of the site that retail shops and markets would be in place by the time they moved in. Four years and three condo buildings later, there still isn’t even a convenience store.

But years of caffeine deprivation are soon to be compensated with not just a coffee shop, but probably the most spectacular coffee shop in all of Canada.

A 40 light, 12 foot wide chandelier – an architectural salvage find from a posh Philadelphia department store – hangs from a 37 foot peaked ceiling. Imported Paris bistro chairs cozy up to travertine marble tables anchored by antique cast iron pedestals scored from a Philadelphia antique store. The floor is black, white and terra cotta marble, edged with a diamond pattern border and pinwheel accents.

The bar is hand pressed tin on top of which sits a dazzling chrome espresso machine. Old coffee advertisement posters from the 1920’s have been reproduced as large oil paintings.

Owner Diana Olsen says she is so excited she has hardly slept in six weeks. Her grand opening is on October 18th.

“I’m running on adrenalin and caffeine,” she says with a laugh.

Fortunately she lives just across the street in one of the condos where she grabs a few hours when she can on the apartment's sole (for now) piece of furniture – a futon. Her constant companion, Bruce a cross Labrador and Staffordshire terrier snores by her side.

Olsen, 38, went into the coffee business ten years ago, launching a series of coffee kiosks first at Harbourfront, then at Ontario Place and finally the Toronto Island Airport, beginning with a \$15,000 new venture loan which she matched with her own savings. As the business grew, so did the number of kiosks.

“My degree in French literature made me unemployable and I came to realize that working in automobile financing was not where I wanted to be,” she says of her former job with a car manufacturer.

Coffee seemed to be a natural choice, given Olsen's love of French café life from her time in Paris working as an *au pair* and studying at the Sorbonne. And even in tough times, coffee is an affordable luxury. People will give up wine before they give up coffee she says.

But came the day when it was time leave the kiosks and get a roof over her head. “It was either quit – it was too much work and not enough money to be out in all kinds of weather – or find a different venue.”

In 1996 she learned of an old bakery in Stratford that had ceilings and walls made of pressed tin. She took one look and signed on the dotted line.

“It was the first and only place I saw,” she says. “No one was doing a café (in Stratford) on that scale.”

The same year she put her name on a list to open another café in the about-to be developed Gooderham and Worts neighborhood. But nothing ever came of it.

Then in December last year, when Cityscape, a developer known for restoring heritage properties, bought the site, a coffee shop was high on their list of priorities. But not just *any* coffee shop. Tenants for all the shops and galleries would be hand picked.

“We pursued her,” says David Jackson, one of the four Cityscape partners. Our emphasis was on a place with character and that had a relation to the arts.”

An arts community is Cityscape's vision for the historically intact site and in keeping with that focus, Balzac's mezzanine gallery will display the work of artists who are fellow tenants. It will also be a venue for functions and events from weddings to book launches.

"We're striving for a synergy between tenants," says Jackson.

As the first tenant, Olsen had her pick from the site's 45 historic buildings dating back to the early 1830's. She chose a charming square brick building at the end of the main cobble stone street, one whose façade has been featured in countless films. The entire site was, and will remain, a popular movie location because of this particularly unique private collection (the only one of its kind in Canada) of Victorian era buildings.

"I think Balzac is watching over me," Olsen says with a smile, citing the endless serendipitous events from locations and antique artifacts finding her, rather than the other way round, to the way everything to do with the design of the café just fell into place.

"Like the chandelier," Olsen says. "I knew this architectural salvage guy in St. Jacobs and asked him, 'do you ever find old light fixtures?' He said 'never.' Two days later he calls me from the U.S. and says 'you'll never guess what I'm looking at'."

She snagged the jaw-dropping piece for \$5,500.

"I want the place to look like it's always been here," Olsen says. So she's preserving everything from the worn rope marks on the window sills from where distillery workers once pulled the grain laden boats ashore (the site used to be at the water's edge) to the original brick walls.

Not to mention what is probably the oldest toilet in Toronto. The tiny room (non functional toilet intact) will be the phone booth.

"I want the café to be a dynamic place where people can exchange ideas," Olsen says. "And I would love to have poetry readings and live music from time to time."

Balzac, no doubt, would approve.