

SARASOTA

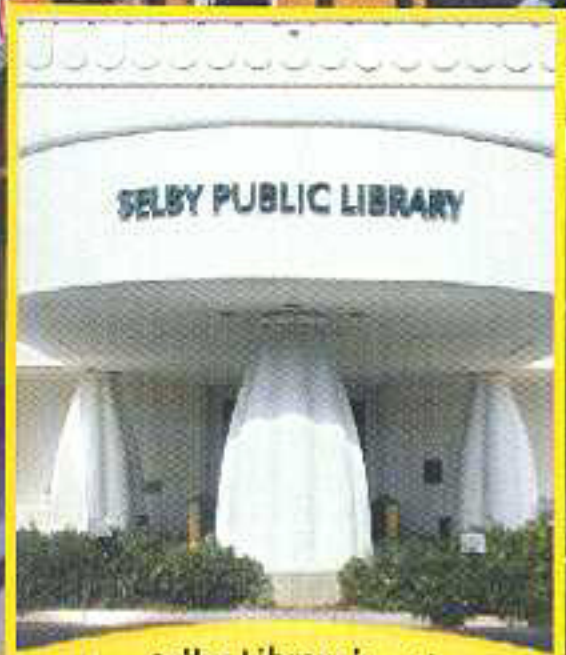
DOWNTOWN AND BEYOND

FREE

JULY 08

06

A RABOW COMMUNICATION ARTS PUBLICATION



Celebrating Selby Library's 10th Anniversary
SEE PAGES 38-39

WORD OF MOUTH - NOW DOWNTOWN (& DINNER TOO!!)

BY BRAD GIFFEN PHOTOS: KATHRYN BRASS

Don't let the heat of July confuse you. Sarasota restaurant Word Of Mouth is likely the only restaurant on the Suncoast whose halls are decked with boughs of holly. Word Of Mouth partners Jeremy Adams and Shannon Lugannani are collecting gifts all this month to help the local charity "Mothers Helping Mothers."

Adams and Lugannani's Christmas In July is one of several pleasant surprises at the Word Of Mouth location they opened in mid-April at Osprey Avenue's former Metro Cafe. Unlike Adams' two other, smaller Word Of Mouth locations, their new Osprey Avenue site soothes with the same urbane ambience created by Metro Cafe owner Betsy Nelson. Cool chrome, bright, wide windows. Hardwood floors. The other locations? "Well, the other two, I'd describe as shabby chic," says Adams. "English Tea Room. Teapots and cookbooks on the wall," he says with a trace of British accent.

It's also the first time, since Adams opened his Gateway Avenue location a decade ago, that he's teamed with a partner. Word Of Mouth co-owner Shannon Lugannani is a veteran of restaurant management, including several years with Ocean Properties, the third largest hotel company in North America. He and Adams met through mutual friends. Adams' young daughter and Lugannani's two toddlers attended Gymboree together. "Friends kept saying to us, you've got to meet," Adams say. "Finally we did."

So far, it's been a whirlwind of a partnership. Within three weeks of Metro Cafe's announced closing, Adams was determined to ride the resulting media buzz and launch his third Word Of Mouth. The difference between the two men's personalities became apparent: Lugannani was initially concerned by the challenge of opening a new restaurant in just three weeks. "I'm very methodical," says Lugannani.

Adams says, "I tend to be rather 'up and go'. Shannon complements me in many good ways. He's very levelheaded. He takes the time to read-through situations."

Despite Lugannani's trepidation, the new Word Of Mouth hit the ground running. The reactions have been incredible, they agree. "The local Laurel Park community has been wonderful. Its residents have supported us from the moment we opened," says Adams.

In the three weeks prior to opening, Adams launched a guerilla media blitz, handing out busi-

ness cards, delivering complimentary continental breakfasts to local school staff meetings and Opening Day invitations to residents and business owners living within a 2-mile radius of the restaurant. Former Metro Cafe owner Betsy Nelson generously provided Adams advice about the location and access to her 2,000 name database of customers. The payoff, Adams says, has been playing catch-up for several of the past eight weeks. "We really appreciate Betsy's help," he says. "It's all taken off so quickly - we're walking out of here at the end of each day like wounded soldiers."

Word Of Mouth has been in such demand that Lugannani and Adams have had to, at times, ferry food from their other restaurants to supply the new one. "We knew this was a great location," Lugannani laughs. "But we've been *really* surprised by the volume of customers right from the get-go."

Among the customers enjoying breakfast this morning are Longboat Key residents Arnold and Ruth Zackin. "It's a treat to find a Word Of Mouth so close to our home," say the Zackins, who normally trek south to the Gateway location. This morning, they're happily enjoying Word Of Mouth's fresh fruit crepes and spinach-swiss cheese omelettes.

The menu at this Word Of Mouth is loaded with delectables, although - because of limited kitchen space, its menu is less extensive than the menu at the other locations. The focus is, as always, on comfort foods like meatloaf, turkey and roast beef dinners, panini, and richly flavored black bean soup - favorites of the unabashedly meat-and-potatoes-kind-of guy Adams professes to be. "As a chef, I've worked with everything from sandwiches to Chateaubriand carved at the table," he says. "I can do pretty much anything." Adams worked for several international locations of Club Med, Las Vegas' Palace Hotel & Casino and, after arriving in Sarasota, the Ritz Carlton Hotel. He continues, "My background includes fine dining. But I'm not an epicurean. Shannon and I want to stay true to who we are. Good homestyle cooking at a good price - breakfast, lunch and dinners usually for under \$20."

Adams and Lugannani take a moment to talk about the risks of the restaurant industry. A recent study published by the International Journal of Hospitality Management finds nearly 26% of new restaurants are destined to fail in their first year.



THE NEW WORD OF MOUTH HIT THE GROUND RUNNING. THE REACTIONS HAVE BEEN INCREDIBLE.