

A Family of Eateries Branches out from Solaris Grille

By Barbara L. Sherf

Chestnut Hill's Solaris Grille will always be Executive Chef turned co-owner John L. Anderson's "baby," but his successful eatery is taking on a whole family of equally creative and diverse siblings. Those restaurant children are soaring to new heights, just as Anderson, 42, once did on the stage.

The 42-year old Flourtown resident and New York City native studied ballet at the State University of New York, Purchase, with his eyes set on a ballet career in the Big Apple. To earn an income he waited tables until one day, in 1990, his employer at Tropica Restaurant asked him to work in the kitchen.

"I found I liked the creativity involved in making a great dish. I loved the work and I found I was good at it," he added during an interview at his newest restaurant Tequila Joe's Burrito Bar, the former Colonial Inn, at Pennsylvania and Park Avenues in Oreland. He says his ballet and dance training keeps him quick on his toes in the kitchen and defines his sense of space.

Anderson, a self-described workaholic soon enrolled in classes at the Culinary Institute of America and his real life experience, coupled with his formal education, landed him a job at the Striped Bass, where he was appointed sous chef. He came to the Philadelphia area to be with his wife, who was studying law at Temple University, and the couple and their two children consider Flourtown their home.

His son Danny, 11, is a competitive gymnast with hopes of a spot in Olympic competition. Daughter, Josie, 8, is also keen on the gymnastic experience and he feels both have a "good, competitive work ethic." Both children attend public schools in Springfield Township. Anderson also co-owns and operates Bergey's American Sports Bar and Grille in West Conshohocken and will be breaking ground this fall on a new Mexican restaurant with a chop shop theme called El Camino on South Broad Street in Lansdale.

He is also a partner in the Sno Grille in Scranton and describes how he made his way to the northern part of the state.

"Two regular customers at Solaris wanted to start a restaurant up there and they approached me," says this very approachable visionary. "I said 'sure, why not?'"

The Oreland eatery boasts bright new colors, kitsch Mexican artifacts and a new wrap around deck with outdoor seating.

"Springfield officials were really great to work with. When they saw I bought the building I think they realized I was here to stay and this was no fly-by-night operation. They saw my vision and helped me make it work," He added.

His vision for Tequila Joe's was that of a family-friendly spot with equally friendly pricing. He has hit the mark on both fronts.

"We have a new kids menu with four options all at \$3.50, however kids eat free with an adult purchasing an entrée," he noted, adding that smoking is not permitted in the establishment until after 10 p.m.

He has brought some old favorites from Solaris Grille. Included on the Tequila Joe's menu is the signature

Solaris Chopped Salad, a medley of chopped fresh asparagus, snap peas, cucumber, avocado, bleu cheese, bacon, roasted red peppers and balsamic vinaigrette dressing. He plans to cross promote both restaurants giving customers the option of buying one gift card that would be good at either establishment.

The real crowd pleasers at Tequila Joe's are the traditional Mexican fare. Diners are given freshly made warm tortilla chips with one of two salsas, the chunky Pico de Gallo or the smoother Salsa Mexicana. The avocado dip, made with fresh ripe avocados, onions, cilantro, jalapenos and fresh lime juice is creamy and made daily. The Tequila Joe's Supremo is a stuffed burrito with fajita beef and chicken, sour cream, guacamole, rice and beans and cheese. At \$9.50 it is more than a meal.

Then there is the not so traditional, Mexican Shrimp Cocktail served in an large Margarita glass. Fresh shrimp is marinated in tomato, avocado, lime juice and diced cucumbers. It was tasty and refreshing. If there is room for desert, the warm Cheesecake Chimichanga was fabulous. It consisted of a cheesecake type filling in a fried outer wrap. Words could not describe the experience. The traditional peanut butter-chocolate pie and chocolate cake were also good, but the Chimichanga was the favorite.

At first glance, the margarita seemed a bit pricey, but when you consider that it was really more like two drinks in one, made with high quality tequila and served in a 12-ounce glasses made with swirls of color running through them. Made with fresh limejuice instead of a mix, who could argue with the price? At \$12 for a Patron Silver and \$8 for a Monte Alban Mezcal, my dining buddy and I were feeling full and fine as we left the eatery.

Anderson also utilizes local vendors wherever possible. "We buy from Killian's Hardware in Chestnut Hill and do all of our banking there. *Signs by Tomorrow* in Flourtown designed our logo and did all of the signage."

Anderson also believes in giving back to the community. When an Oreland woman's home burned down last year, he held a fundraiser at Solaris Grille for her. Recently they held a "Bike Night" at Bergey's to help pay medical expenses of two injured bikers. They have consistently supported the Chestnut Hill Rotary's Pancake Breakfast and given generously to the March of dimes.

"We even try to purchase the artwork for the restaurants at Chestnut Hill's Fall for the Arts Festival," he added.

Anderson, who works 6 days a week from 9 a.m. until after midnight would eventually like to see a some more siblings in the form of a small grouping of Tequila Joe's and El Camino restaurants in the area.

"I don't stop moving so nobody else around me does. We are constantly looking for new opportunities and testing ourselves."

For local restaurant consumers, that energy, creativity and desire to please is also quite refreshing.

Captions: Bartender Stefanie Bock, born and raised in Lafayette Hill and now residing in Conshohocken, gave this consumer an education on the different types of tequila available. Bock speaks fluent Spanish and the names rolled off her tongue with style.

Caption: Server Laurie Kimzey of Glenside shows off the cute, pink t-shirts with the saying “Our Burrito is Bigger than Yours” on the reverse side.

Caption: Restaurateur John L. Anderson is all smiles at the new Tequila Joe’s Burrito Bar, formerly the Colonial Inn, at Park and Pennsylvania Avenues in Oreland.

Caption: That’s a lot of nachos. At \$8.99 a plate the nachos are easily a meal for two. House fried corn chips are topped with melted cheese, jalapenos, olives, beans, guacamole, sour cream and salsa.

Barbara L. Sherf of Flourtown is a freelance writer, publicist, and communications professional. You can reach her through <http://www.communicationspro.com>.