



Moving into the kitchen

The stylish owners of Teatro Verde take the plunge into housewares with their chic new store at Bayview Village

By Anthony Stokan

Like so many shopping centres in Canada, Toronto's Bayview Village started life in the 1960s as an open air mall. Conveniently situated off the Bayview exit of Highway 401, it has stayed competitive as its owners overhauled the property every 10 to 15 years to keep up with current trends.

But this is, and always has been, a rather 'special' community. Planned in the 1950s, it was hailed as 'contemporary living in the countryside', at the northern doorstep of the urban concentration of Toronto. During that golden era, planners focused on pioneering a unique suburb where they would fit the community into the landscape and not the landscape into the community. The resulting curvilinear street patterns follow the natural contours of the land and highlight the beauty of the area. Nearly a quarter of the space in the Bayview Village community is green. It quickly became one of the most desirable suburbs and attracted well-heeled Torontonians decamping midtown.

The area started experiencing a metamorphosis in the 1990s and the mall responded with a modest update in 1997. Over the next 15 years, thousands of new condo units in the area were constructed and bought by a mix of young urbanites and empty-nesters, all of whom were über style conscious.

With all these changes occurring within blocks of the property, in early



Shawn Gibson and Michael Pellegrino, above, opened Teatro Verde Cucina, right, in April. Photography by Nolan Bryant.

Store Opening: Teatro Verde Cucina



2010 management acknowledged it was time for a major refresh. Parachuting in a new general manager, industry veteran Donna Percival worked with designers to improve and enhance the interior and augment the retail mix. The \$10 million renovation included luxe new common areas and five custom Swarovski chandeliers strung with over 100,000 crystal beads. Says Percival, "our objective was to create an environment like a boutique-hotel in terms of the experience and the unique retail offering".

In the past decade, it's become almost unheard of for an independent retailer to consider opening a specialty store in a shopping centre like Bayview Village. Yet Percival dedicated her efforts to attracting chic boutiques with unique offerings. Boutiques like Teatro Verde.

For more than 15 years, Teatro Verde co-owner and creative director Shawn Gibson and his partner Michael Pellegrino have operated one of the grandest

home fashion specialty stores in the country in Toronto's tony Yorkville district. A few years later they opened a second smaller more curated version of that store at Bayview Village. Percival was convinced they could create an equally dynamic concept anchored around the kitchen and home dining. Teatro Verde's reputation as a successful purveyor of unique home accessories and gifts, top tier floral and garden design was well established.

The creation of a third store based on an evolved concept that vacillated between two grocery anchors appealed to Shawn and Michael. Loblaws was at one end and independent specialty grocer Pusateri's was at the other. In the adjacent corridor is a dining area with bar counters and oversized sculptural lighting. This is no typical mall food court.

Their new concept store, which opened at Bayview in April, is called Teatro Verde Cucina.

"Michael and I wanted to create a space that had everything to do with the kitchen. For us, the kitchen is the hub of a great home and a space that we have always loved providing for."

Partner Michael Pellegrino's passion for the kitchen started early in life.

"I grew up in a bustling Italian family, with a history that included harvesting and making olive oil from our groves in Italy. The dinner table was always the centre of the room, long and full of friends, family and food. These memories provided the inspiration for Cucina, a life long vision for us both."

Four distinct sections make up the retail compartments of Cucina: *Trends* sourced from seasonal research and buying trips around the world, including tableware for luxury and casual use; the *Kitchen Library*, a quintessential selection of international cookbooks; unique *Kitchen Gifts*, everything imaginable for the extreme foodie; and finally, *Core Kitchen*, all the components needed to complete a perfect working kitchen.

As independent retailers, Shawn and Michael empower their staff to engage with their customers on a direct and personal level. In their other two stores, recognizing regular customers goes a long way to creating a sense of community and inclusion. Replicating the same sense of family and connectivity would give them a solid foundation with their new customer base.

With two leading grocery stores anchoring the shopping centre, the owners knew Cucina had to appeal to true foodies. The state-of-the-art kitchen offers innovative cooking classes.



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Shawn and Michael knew, however, that this concept had to be more than just another retail store. Their biggest task was enhancing the experience.

Teatro Verde Cucina offers one-of-a-kind cooking classes held in a state-of-the-art kitchen. The ambience reflects the interior style many customers would envy in their own home. They partnered with Thermador on all major appliances. At the cooking school, "The Chef's Series" gives customers the opportunity to learn from some of the best chefs in North America. Each class will be a bespoke experience executed by the chef with the audience in mind.

The second series is entitled "The Real Cooks of Toronto!" celebrating Toronto's ethnic diversity, using real people with a passion for cooking. This effec-

A \$10 million renovation of Bayview Village in 2010 includes the addition of luxe new common areas with leather sofas that resemble a lobby in a chic boutique hotel, below.



tively turns the store into theatre and gives a fertile presentation platform for those aspiring Top Chef status.

Shawn and Michael spent months evolving and refining the Cucina concept. Shawn believed they could update the kitchenwares market place.

"We did a great deal of research into today's younger consumer. Our inspirations were diverse and included organic, heirloom, farm fresh. Product quality, natural woods, and less packaging were all high on the priority lists."

He goes on to say "that inspired the store to be the overall packing – the backdrop for so many small products. We wanted to showcase essential items in a visually dynamic way, where the customer would decompress from their daily routine and do an investigative journey throughout the entire store."

Both are confident that as Teatro Verde evolves as a 'brand', so does its environment. Our store designs are a platform to bring all the attention to the product in a 'visually organized' manner that will retain the customers attention and enhance the desire to purchase. Cucina has captured that look with volumes created to break up the product categories. Within those categories, simple tone on tone colour and texture diversifies each mini story."

Methodical planning and an obsession with details let Shawn and Michael create a store interior that would be the

envy of any shopper contemplating a kitchen makeover. Customers are drawn into the store via the inventive lighting fixtures. Chandeliers are made of silver spoons, hanging kitchen lights are repurposed metal tea and coffee pots. Exceptional lighting seems to be a recurring theme at Bayview.

As an extension of their Home and Garden category they proceeded with realistic sales targets and performance goals. In the days leading up to the completion of their first quarter with the new venture, Shawn reported Cucina's performance was more than double their original expectations. "We've had strong sales along with great media attention and solid social media. More importantly, repeat customers have been beyond expectations and we are attracting a solid base of loyal supporters."

Cucina speaks eloquently to the continued polarization of retail and partners Shawn and Michael have brilliantly taken the exit to the high road. As pundits make sweeping generalizations about the pending collapse of bricks and mortar and an evolving landscape adapting to omni-channel retail, the virtual shelf, the consumer obsession with showrooming and lowest price, Teatro Verde Cucina is succeeding. The most important lesson to be gleaned from this new retail venture is that independent specialty stores need to step back from worrying about everyday convenience and low pricing and cater to the more lucrative and sophisticated market potential of an 'only here' experience.

Consumers still want face-to-face service when shopping in store. In this age of texts and social media, the greatest competitive advantage the specialty store can have is the ability to engage the customer and create experiences where customers get to socialize in person in real time. Cucina is a new and unique way for Toronto consumers to maximize the kitchen in all its glory. ☺

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