

Recipe for restaurant success

BY GEORGETTE GOUVEIA

Growing up in Union Beach, New Jersey, with his five brothers and sisters, Stephen Lewandowski was the adventurous eater, the one who tried the fish in the restaurant when the rest were ordering steak. Though his family wasn't in food, Lewandowski says his father loved to cook, and he loved nothing more than cooking with him on Sundays for a big group of family and friends. It's a tradition he continues with wife, Heather, a lawyer and real estate agent, and their four young children on Sundays and Mondays at their home in Easton, Connecticut.

"I'm an entertainment person," Lewandowski says. "I love nothing better than having 20 people over, around my table. And that's kind of the idea here, getting back to people coming together and having a meal."

"Here" is Townhouse, the Mediterranean-style restaurant that Lewandowski – the former executive chef of Tribeca Grill in Manhattan – opened on Jan. 18, 2020 in the space formerly occupied by Gabriele's of Greenwich, a lantern-lit brick building that reflects the townhouses on Church Street. While the exterior remains virtually unchanged, Lewandowski and his team – director of operations Dana Cifone; developer James Cabrera, who owns the property; and adviser Drew Nieporent of Myriad Restaurant Group, which includes Tribeca Grill – redid the interior in just 17 days with what Lewandowski calls "lipstick changes." A resurfaced countertop for the commanding bar to the left of the entrance, lighter floors and seven splashy abstract paintings by artist Rachel MacLeod only begin, however, to hint at a transformation by Richard Granoff, founder and managing principal of Granoff Architects in Greenwich. He's added modern touches to the building's classical bones, with a sedate palette of blue-gray, gray and white signaling a host of spaces that include



Stephen Lewandowski, owner and executive chef of Townhouse in Greenwich, combines a gift for cooking with a head for business and organization, thanks in part to years spent in elite restaurants and hotels.

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the Library (seats 16), the auburn-hued Wine Room (26) and the lucent Atrium (up to 34). The 3,400-square-foot dining area mirrors the 3,400-square-foot banquet space upstairs.

"With the pandemic, this played into our favor because of the different rooms," Lewandowski says. "We're getting a lot of social events, because people want to be in private spaces."

They also want something else that you get at Townhouse – banquet fare that is not the poultry, the beef or the fish entrée but rather the same cuisine as in the dining room, which Lewandowski describes as "Mediterranean with global influences, from France and Spain to Morocco and Tunisia all the way to Egypt" – and beyond. These influences are evoked in herbs and spices that Lewandowski says he uses to enhance the flavors of the cuisine without overwhelming them – Moroccan Za'atar, Aleppo chili, star anise, juniper berries, among them. (He stays away from butter and cream sauces.)

Flavor was the essence of our lunch at Townhouse, where we sampled a melt-in-your Burrata, pesto and sweet tomato cream arugula salad that evoked the well-traveled Lewandowski's story of picking tomatoes off the vine in Bulgaria; and meaty crab cakes luxuriating on a crunchy bed of roasted peas with bacon. (Did we mention the savory, pillowy pita triangles that accompany each meal?) If the praline cannoli-style cheesecake appeared a bit too pasty for our dessert expectations, we have fond memories of another visit to Townhouse and a chocolate mousse passionfruit cake that proved a bittersweet revelation.

LEARNING THE BUSINESS

Despite warm childhood memories of food, family and entertaining, Lewandowski wasn't necessarily thinking of food as a career. He had toyed with the idea of college as a path to work in finance but instead wound up in a local deli/catering business after Keyport High School. A friend suggested culinary school so Lewandowski applied to and was accepted into The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. His 22-month path to a 1995 Associate's degree would take him to an internship at Hunters Run Country Club in Boynton Beach, Florida. After The CIA, Lewandowski headed to Manhattan and the now defunct Abbey restaurant, then to the Gotham Bar & Grill; and The Ritz-Carlton New York on Central Park South, where he was chef de cuisine of its high-end Fantino restaurant and part of the closing team as it became the InterContinental Hotel. (This is not to be confused with The Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park, which occupies the footprint of the former Hotel St. Moritz.)

But Lewandowski wasn't done with The Ritz.

At The Ritz-Carlton Boston, he cooked for former President George H.W. Bush, Queen Noor of Jordan and cellist Yo-Yo Ma as executive banquet chef. At The Peabody Orlando, now the Hyatt Regency Orlando, Lewandowski had five restaurants and 64,000 square feet of banquet space under him as executive sous chef.

"I was learning organization, but it took away from my cooking," he says. So when an opportunity came to become Tribeca Grill's chef de cuisine, Lewandowski took it, graduating to executive chef in 2003. There he rubbed elbows with co-owner Robert DeNiro, who'd run through the line in the kitchen to avoid the paparazzi; investor Bill Murray, another kitchen devotee; Bruce Springsteen, Bono and Jay-Z.

"I look back now and think, I didn't take enough pictures," Lewandowski says with a laugh.

THE GUY WITH THE NUMBERS

Talking with us at length during a humid late-spring day just itching for a storm, Lewandowski says he now realizes that everything he has done in his career was a preparation for his 2012 move to Connecticut. "I needed more stability," he says, for his growing family. For him that meant owning his own restaurant. First, there were the Harlans (2012-2019) – Harlan Social in Stamford, Harlan Publick in Norwalk, Harlan Haus in Bridgeport and Harlan Brasserie in Hartford. Meeting Cabrera in 2019, Lewandowski says he decided to partner with him in "what was basically a turnkey operation," raising nearly \$1 million to refurbish what became Townhouse. No sooner did the restaurant open than it closed to dining on March 16, 2020, due to the pandemic, though it did do takeout. Townhouse reopened May 17 of that year for outdoor dining.

"Like any business, we had to pivot," Lewandowski says, "and I think that's where our experience came in."

On the one hand, the lockdown gave him and his team time to work out the kinks in the restaurant. On the other, he adds that government assistance has made it hard to hire workers not only for Townhouse but throughout the food supply chain, making for inflationary prices. It's getting more difficult, Lewandowski says, to earn that .8 to .10 cents on \$1 that is necessary for success in the restaurant industry.

Still, he's excited by the prospect of returning patrons and catering such events as wine dinners. "I love cooking," he says. But it's clear he's also a man with a head for numbers. And with that, he's off to oversee the evening menu – and pay his taxes.

For more, visit townhousegreenwich.com.