

All the Wright moves

The Coast, May 6th, 2004

by Liz Feltham

Jane Wright's restaurant Jane's on the Common is the talk of the town. After only eight months in business, The Robie Street eatery has nabbed both best new restaurant and best brunch honours in this year's best of food readers' survey.

For most women, a mid-life crisis involves substantial reevaluation, a reflection on their lives thus far, and where they're going—a reality check of sorts. Jane Wright's mid-life crisis manifested itself in the form of Jane's on the Common, the neighbourhood restaurant that's taken the SuperCity by storm.

Wright, an activist and former NDP caucus member, seems genuinely surprised by the success of her diner, which opened last Labour Day.

"I'm amazed at the amount of attention we've gotten," the petite blonde says. "It's a happening little place, we're working at capacity every time we're open." Although, she does admit she knew it would be busy at first because of her large circle of friends and acquaintances. "I knew they'd come once out of interest, and it would be up to us to keep them coming. Knowing so many people has given me a huge leg up."

That leg is bolstered through former high profile jobs with the NDP, Planned Parenthood and the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union. Originally from Ontario, Wright came east 20 years ago to complete a Masters in Library Science at Dalhousie, and stayed.

"I love the ocean," she says. "I love that in 20 minutes you can be out of the city, sitting on a beach and there's nobody there. The city's always been really wonderful to me. I feel so lucky for the job opportunities presented me."

"Big jobs" she calls them, referring to her long, intense work days in what she refers to as her "past lives." It's those long workdays in "adversarial" environments that precipitated her mid-life epiphany. Turning 45, she realized she'd never seen the person who delivered her mail.

Facing a personal struggle as her mother battled terminal cancer, Wright wanted out of the adversarial environments. After some soul searching, she decided opening a restaurant in her own neighbourhood would serve to restore her connections to home and family, although some might argue that the life of a restaurant owner is every bit as demanding as her other "big jobs."

Leaving her other lives to open a restaurant might make some question her sanity—it's an unforgiving business, with a high failure rate and low investment return. But Wright thinks it's a good fit. "I missed the energy of working in restaurants, from my university days," she says. At 13, she lied about her age and got a job waitressing at a truck stop; years later, she opened a catering business. "I had a boring job so I did it on the side," she laughs. "In some ways I feel I've prepared my whole life for this, the people I've met and connections I've made, from raising the money to set up the campaign so that everything comes together on one day."

Deciding on the location was easy. She frequently ate breakfast at Jane's in its former life as the Common's Grill. She liked the location, the large windows. Of the former greasy spoon, she says wryly, "I could write a novel about cleaning it up, putting the deep fryers on the truck and saying good-bye to them."



Researching for Jane's, she took out "literally every book in the library on how to open a restaurant." She asked questions of chefs and proprietors of places she liked, including Brenda Critch and Daphne Hocquard of Elephant's Eye cafe, and Fid's Dennis Johnston, whose kitchen tour helped with her own kitchen layout.

For the decor, she turned to Breakhouse Design. She wanted classic, "like a black sleeveless dress from Talbots"; she snagged the licensing rights from the National Gallery to her favourite painting, Lucas Cranach the Elder's "Venus," which is the focal point of the restaurant. It's her dining room table, the wooden one that doesn't quite fit in with the other black tables and chairs. She says seeing other families sit around it in the restaurant "makes me smile." Of the menu, she says the theme is "comfort food with panache." As a single working mother, she would take her two children to Athens Restaurant, where she knew a healthy, "home-cooked" style meal was relatively inexpensive. She wanted to recreate that for others.

The name, Jane's on the Common, refers to common comfort food as well as the area. "We priced the menu so that people could eat here ad hoc on a Tuesday night," says Wright. "There's nothing too rich on the menu, so that people could conceivably eat here two or three nights a week."

To find the right person to head up her kitchen brigade, she had prospective chefs "audition" with soup. Wright feels the measure of a restaurant lies in its soup, a sentiment many food-savvy people would agree with.

She's quick to give props to her head chef, Henry Strong. "He's talented, relentless, passionate. I'm so proud of the stuff he comes up with, he's amazing."

Wright's main culinary influence is her mother, who "loved to entertain and cook, always bringing people together around food—always trying out new recipes," she says. "We grew up on a farm, and we lived off the land before it became trendy to do so." Wright remembers the lunches she took to school, "beef tongue sandwiches on whole wheat bread at a time organ meat and whole wheat bread weren't trendy. No one ever wanted to trade lunches with me."

That was in her past, and she's not sure what's in store for her future. A return to politics is not quite ruled out; she admits she's been asked to take a crack at running for her own seat; she mentions championing the cause of chefs and cooks, whom she feels are woefully underpaid and underappreciated. But for now, the restaurant is her life.

"My whole life has been activism, politics, labour movement," says Wright. "All these jobs involved fighting battles" (including death threats while at Planned Parenthood). And there's no doubt that working in confrontational, demanding environments helped her prepare for the many obstacles she's faced in her "new life."

Along with the usual new restaurant issues like finding proper equipment, getting permits, and qualified staff, Wright dealt with "once-in-a-lifetime disasters."

"Our first six months we've survived a hurricane that shut us down for two days, a snowstorm that shut us down for two days." Her biggest challenge? "The cash register," she laughs, "they've changed a lot since I used one last."

"I was always kind of a black sheep because of my politics and activism, it's been really wonderful for me to be able to send the clippings of the reviews and stuff back home—it's like I've found something. My mom seems so proud."

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