Client: Ford's Filling Station

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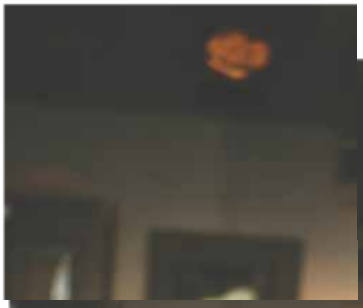
Ben Ford's Filling Station Aimed At Full "Community" Service

By Cara Dolan Berry

Proprietor and Head Chef, Ben Ford flows through the intimate dining room of his trendy Culver City gastro pub with a comfort and ease that parallels the place itself. The sandy-haired, sun-complected, self-proclaimed California boy is evidently happy to be at home in Culver City.

"The place was right, the time was right," states Ford, "and you just can't shop for that. You have to be lucky enough to come across it."

Ford likens Culver City to the bedroom communities nestled in the Hollywood Hills where he grew up as a privileged son, but finds the unique studio town to be a bit more representative of Los Angeles and rooted in its genesis. Ford's expansive knowledge of Culver City's history and make-up is both passionate and impressive. The original land grant from an agricultural family and the diverse generational residents clearly resonated for him.



"Culver City is bordered by substantial ethnic neighborhoods," he elucidates, "and the result is an amazing blend of cultures and tastes."

Ford points out the unique communities that frame Culver City, including the upper-middle class African American neighborhood of Baldwin Hills to the Northeast, the ensconced Hasidic Jewish enclave to the North spanning Beverlywood and Pico, the thriving working class Latino community that shares Mar Vista with an influx of young professionals to the West, the hub that is UCLA and Westwood and the breezy, affluent adjacent "del Reys," Playa and Marina.

The result is an eclectic mix of neighbors overlapping in a small, self-contained city built around an historic studio lot, now populated by Sony Pictures Entertainment, but once the home of MGM and its legendary film contributions to the advent of Hollywood.

What was missing was a downtown district that reflected this kaleidoscope of culture while nurturing the village environment that cradles it. Ford had been laying in wait to anchor such a re-imagining and knew just the type of joint to jumpstart it.

"I had always wanted to catch an area experiencing a renaissance," said Ford, "but I never quite caught it, till here, till now."

executives could go coming from a studio meeting," said Ford, "This is not where people come to make their deals. It's where they come for the down time."

"People enjoy the simplicity of place," said Ford, "and that was the intention of it. I'm honored that other restaurants are using my interpretation of the gastro pub for orientation."

Ford downplays his accomplishments while revisiting his own journey to them. Son of blockbuster actor, Harrison Ford, he feels fortunate to have avoided the pitfalls suffered by his childhood peers and credits his early discovery of a talent all his own. Baseball.

"When I was young, I learned what it was like to have my own successes and failures," said Ford, "and it allowed me to survive...be the person I am today."

Ford excelled at the sport at US and was offered a professional contrac But, like the unhappy ending of the storie of so many gifted athletes, his conclude with a career-stopping injury.

"I got hurt, so I had to find some thing else I was good at," stated Ford, "an there are an amazing amount of washe up athletes in cooking."

At the time, the mid 80s, Ford wa aware that Wolfgang Puck was making th job description for chefs more diverse, a invitation to become a chef and take it a far as you wanted to.

"I went to San Francisco and star ing knocking on restaurant back doors said Ford, "That's how it was done bac then."

He was aware of three bona fid culinary schools in the U.S. at the time an was intent that he would study at one them.

"But first," Ford recalls, "I had t survive, pay my dues and find a way t make it there."

He reminisces reverently about h journey to Culver Boulevard and apprec ates it weaving through "smart" restau rants including Opus Seafood and Che Panisse. Most affection, though, is clear felt for Camponelle [SP???] -- neighborin to the East near La Brea - which Ford see as the harbinger of the sense and styl that would define the emerging Culver Cit downtown district.

Ford has helmed his own eaterie before, including Chadwick in Bever Hills. He warmly brags that his Chadwic family is often found settled in and enjoyin a bite among their Culver City neighbors a his Filling Station.

Ford wanted a community based restaurant and worked together with the city from day one to ensure that the eatery he ultimately established would be what was good for the Culver City itself. To complete his commitment, Ford relocated from Cheviot Hills to digs just a block away from his Filling Station, thus making Culver City both his professional and personal residence.

"There was a sense that I could make a home here," said Ford, "and we're really happy to have been here from the beginning of it all."

Ford's Filling Station began its courtship with Culver City on Valentines Day, 2005 and the romance is approaching its 2-year anniversary. Ford did not stop at finding the right place and the right time. He asked himself what the right tone would be-what kind of restaurant could feel at home in while it would be "at home" in this emerging downtown district in this unique and connected village.

His answer was the gastro pub, a concept whose etymology blends the community concept of the "public house," commonly abbreviated as "pub," and "gastronomy," the art and science of good eating. The hybrid pub concept began in 1991 London, took Europe by rage and quickly crossed the pond in 1994 when the Spotted Pig opened in New York's West Village, where manifest destiny stalled until Ford's Filling Station in Culver City became what Chef Ben boasts to be the first authentic gastro pub "West of the Mississippi."

The conceit takes the local pub - where they pour a great drink but dish up the equivalent of gruel -- and elevates it to a hybrid ever loyal to the folksy feel where "everybody knows your name" and the cocktails never disappoint, yet with a menu somehow reminiscent of traditional "pub" fare but with culinary craft and organic quality, often expert in a specialty usually relegated to more formal dining.

Ford describes the gastro pubs in London and the balance of Europe as diverse and eclectic, where they relish the unexpected.

His West Coast iteration was designed with fidelity to the concept while fashioning it for the community. He notes burgeoning local eateries now championing the portmanteau featuring ethnic cuisine such as Indian and Thai. He feels responsible as the "curator" of the concept in his hometown metro but sees other local attempts to interpret it lacking the requisite association to their respective communities.

"What L.A. wants is something less forced, more laid back," said Ford, and what L.A. waits to discover, Culver City now revels in.

"We needed a place here where grips could go coming off the set and where

"In the same way that Chadwick was committed to organics, the Filling Station is committed to community," compares Ford.

Seeing his Filling Station's place in Culver City as dynamic, Ford is excited that honeymoon has evolved into a strong relationship and is ready to take his 'public house' to the "next level" with his upcoming dinner lecture series.

"I've had the idea to do the series for a couple years now," said Ford, "but we had to the do the growing with the community before we could start the next phase of the concept."

The first chapter of the six-part volume is slated for January 23 and tagged "What the Hell is a Gastro Pub?" Ford will integrate his menu, dish-by-dish with a talk about the genesis and concept of the gastro pub. He looks forward to being joined by a special guest master brewer from New Belgium Brewery, makers of "Flat Tires" beer. Each theme of his series will be expanded by guest speakers who enhance and elaborate on the presentation, and a signature of any 'pub' worth its hops is great beer.

Ford is teasingly reticent to elaborate more on what to expect from that Evening, or the succeeding special five, at his Filling Station. He wants folks to be a bit unsure by design of what to anticipate, thus realizing the 'unexpected' nature of the gastro pub itself.

Proceeding lecture themes in the series are, in no particular order:

"Cooking By Hand," where Chef Ben will elucidate the unwritten rules of the "slow food approach" to cooking;

"Snout To Tail," featuring a menu based in the commitment to harvest the 'whole animal' and understand the misunderstood parts of it. Ford credits Fergus Henderson as a guru of this type of cooking, which now enjoys a cult following;

"Heartland Dinner" will highlight the 'breadbasket' of our country and its approach to all-American ingredients, such as the incredible cheeses of Ohio. It is to be a showcase of everything 'down home;'

"Artisan All-Stars" uses a sports metaphor relevant to Ford to introduce "local people that do things in an amazing way." This evening will feature special guests such as California wine vintners, cheesemakers, etc; and

"Pig Out Dinner," a presentation similar to the 'Snout to Tail' concept but focusing specifically, together with guests from Heritage Farms, on what is culinary about the 'whole hog.'

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Ford defines that there are basically two approaches to cooking: 1) using only the breast meat from the chicken; or 2) using all of the chicken, from claws on its feet to the, "you know, thing on top of its head." Ford, of course, uses the whole chicken.

The lecture series, to Ford, continues to develop his new community's relationship with his 'pub' by connecting it to their understanding of the tastes they love.

"Everyone thinks it's about the food," said Ford, "but it's not just about the food. It's about the community...how they live. And the food has to match that."

With his new community in mind, Ford took as much care with the room where neighbors would gather as he did with the menu that would feed them. He points out the colors and textures that define his dining room - including the vaulted, raw wood beam ceilings, the earth tones and leathers muting walls and furniture, the bookcases and boardgames that set off the cozy bar area and the industrial simplicity of the polished concrete floors, open kitchen framed in stainless steel, the like stainless patio furnishings and the winding vents that transform the din of chatting patrons to aesthetic noise.

"I believe in functional art," notes Ford, who proudly shares his family's history as woodworkers and craftsmen.

"...aside from being actors...and other things they've done," Ford adds as his charmingly subtle and sole tip of his chef's hat this evening to his famous father.

Further to his faith in functional art, Ford does not neglect sound in favor of the sights, smells and feels of his Filling Station. The music filtered through the eatery's air succeeds at complementing, while never distracting from the gastro pub experience. Ford handpicked the dusty, rock and blues riffs with a loyalty to well-coiffed musical tastes he credits to a metamorphous layered by vintage bands, local artists and the influence of family tastes. Like Ford himself, his affinities in music are happily rooted in California, beginning with the "Bakersfield country sound" that influenced him growing up and maturing into a "Bohemian Rhapsody Blues blended with honky tonk."

When asked the obvious question of what instruments he and his family play, Ford confesses none.

"We love anything that we can't do," said Ford, "...like most people."

Ford swells when speaking of his family and what can be called an immigrant working class ethic. While he did not follow his father's footsteps to Hollywood, he clearly carries a tradition of rolling up one's sleeves to achieve artisan status with jobs well done. Himself the beaming father of 6-year-old Ethan, he can only smile at the query as to whether his son will take over the family business he is ably establishing.

"I took him to a restaurant last week and he rejected the shrimp cocktail," laughed Ford, "he said it was 'rubbery and tasteless."

Ford recalls his son appearing to taste his food carefully even as a baby, holding it lingering in his mouth, shifting his eyes to identify what he was eating.

"He re-energized me as someone who takes the time to taste the food," said Ford.

Ford cooks with Ethan and, as for baseball, says he plays a little, but is "still getting his feet under him." Regarding his legacy, he is not sure.

But what does seem sure is that Ethan appears destined to be as proud to be a "California boy" as his Dad and fated to remember Culver City as a childhood home.

"These are pictures of my family on the walls," effuses Ford as he looks fondly around his pub, "my books on the bookshelves, my favorite music playing...my food. It's holistic."

After a thoughtful pause, Ford concludes, "It's the metaphor of the 'Filling Station' made complete...a place to 'fill up' ... my home."

"What the Hell is a Gastro Pub"
Dinner Lecture hosted by Ben Ford
Wednesday, January 23, 2008
6:30 pm to 9:00 pm
$75 Per Person / Reservations Required
Ford's Filling Station
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