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Test kitchen and top chefs keep Earls Kitchen + Bar moving forward

by MICHELLE DA SILVA on JUN 25, 2014 at 3:21 PM

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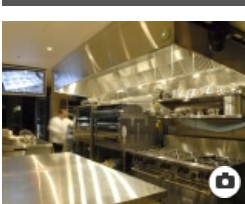
STORY PHOTOS **3**



The Earls Kitchen + Bar chef collective includes David Wong, Dawn Doucette, Jeff McInnis, Tina Fineza, Andrew Hounslow, and Hamid Salimian.

VANCOUVER-BASED RESTAURANT CHAIN [Earls Kitchen + Bar](#) started as a casual beer and burger joint over 30 years ago, but its management team has been working on cooking up a new concept for the past few months.

PHOTOS



In an increasingly competitive market that includes other fast-casual restaurants, such as Cactus Club Cafe, Browns Socialhouse, JOEY Restaurants, and Moxie's Grill & Bar, the Fuller family-owned Earls has struggled to keep up.

On June 24, the company unveiled a test kitchen at one of its downtown locations (905 Hornby Street) and a product-development team that includes some of the city's most accomplished chefs. Mo Jessa, president of Earls Restaurants, is hoping that new dishes and a bit of star power will help push Earls to the front of the pack.






"I think we got complacent," Jessa told the *Georgia Straight* during an interview at the recently minted "flagship" location. "We were leading. People knew us as the leaders and innovators in casual dining, and there got to be a point where we probably started to take it for granted."

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About a year ago, Jessa proposed converting the second-floor space of Earls' 244-seat Hornby Street location into a \$1.2 million test kitchen and hiring a team of chefs that the restaurant refers to as their "chef collective". One of the chefs whom Jessa called was Hamid Salimian.

While giving the *Straight* a tour of the test kitchen, Salimian said that joining Earls nine months ago was an easy decision. Named [best chef in the Georgia Straight's Golden Plate Awards](#), Salimian had recently left his executive chef job at Diva at the Met at the time, and the 15-hour-a-week product development position at Earls complemented his positions as a chef instructor at Vancouver Community College and as [co-owner of gluten-free flour line NextJen](#). Salimian's experience as captain of Culinary Team Canada for the Culinary Olympics also prepared him for his role at Earls.

"We're all playing for the same team," he said when asked about the hierarchy in the test kitchen. "At the end of the day, we're just trying to make tastier food."



The new Earls Kitchen + Bar test kitchen occupies the second floor of the Hornby location.

Joining Salimian in the kitchen is another chef who has competed on the world stage. David Wong, who was previously executive chef of the Fairmont Pacific Rim and its restaurant ORU, [represented Canada in the Bocuse d'Or competition](#) in 2009. In an Earls video presentation, Wong stated that Asian flavours influenced his cooking, and that he plans to bring new local seafood dishes to the restaurant's menu.

[Tina Fineza](#), the co-owner of Service Excellence Hospitality Consultants, has left her mark on a number of Vancouver restaurants including La Mezacaleria, East of Main, Les Faux Bourgeois, and La Taqueria. In the Earls test kitchen, she will continue to create recipes based on Asian street food and pan-Latin dishes.

Meanwhile, Dawn Doucette, who has worked as a product development chef at Earls for over three years and [competed on the fourth season](#) of Food Network Canada's *Top Chef Canada*, draws on West Coast flavours for her dishes.

The chef collective also includes Jeff McInnis, an American chef who consults remotely for Earls, as well as Andrew Hounslow, who is the test kitchen's sous chef. Hounslow, who started as a dishwasher at Earls' Langley location in the early 2000s, recalled deep-fried mozzarella sticks being a top-seller at that time. Salimian assured that diners can expect more inventive items on the menu these days.

"We're creating dishes that are worldly and capturing flavours from everywhere," he said. Salimian also looks forward to introducing Middle Eastern flavours to the menu.

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Earls Restaurants president Mo Jessa (right) introduces Earls Kitchen + Bar's chef collective.

 MICHELLE DA SILVA

At the Hornby location, diners will have a chance try new menu items on a weekly basis. Dishes will be introduced to the public as they are created, and diners will be able to provide feedback to the chefs. In addition, Earls is tapping into the growing popularity of food TV by installing audio-visual equipment in the test kitchen, which customers will be able to watch in the dining room. For an even closer view of the chef collective, lunch-time diners can reserve the three-seat chef's table and enjoy a direct view into the test kitchen.

Jessa told the *Straight* that in the over-saturated chain-restaurant market, Earls needed to change up its formula.

“I think the Millennials and generations going into the future are not really big fans of chains, so how does a chain respond to that? One thing I can tell you is that what Earls has to do is better relate to the community in which it operates in,” he said. “Even designing the restaurants, we’re going to get away from the cookie-cutter design and ask, ‘What does this place represent? How can we take advantage of the local material, local availability?’”

With over 60 restaurants across North America, including a new location in Miami and ones scheduled for Boston, Chicago, and Washington, DC, Jessa stated that it was more crucial than ever for Earls to make adjustments. He said that although menu changes are underway and each Earls location will attempt to carve out its own identity, diners who visited the restaurant 30 years ago will still be able to enjoy a familiar burger and beer.

“I think people actually want to see Earls and what we’re good at than try to pretend we’re something that we’re not,” he said. “People used to look forward to what Earls was doing. We’ve got to get back to that place, so it’s just going back to something that we know works.”

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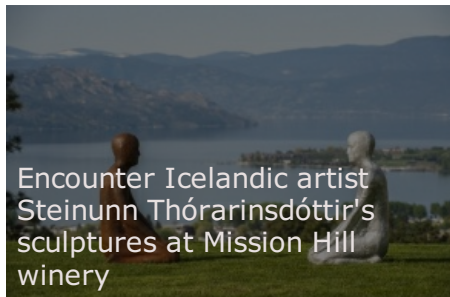
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RUK

JUN 25, 2014 at 3:40 PM

Hey, that's the second Diva At The Met chef to move to Earl's after Michael Noble.

That's also the first image of Earl's workers in the restaurant where they are not wearing miniature black lingerie slips. Hooters servers have more class, and at least the restaurant is honest about its appeal.

2 13 Rating: -11

ACMESalesRep

JUN 26, 2014 at 12:23 AM

I have never seen Earl's staff in "miniature black lingerie slips". Perhaps you're thinking of Cactus Club?



Rating: +5

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