

Facebook group helps residents find dinner and support local

If you've ever wanted to order in dinner without any specific hankering, sometimes the choices can be overwhelming. But a local Facebook group is working hard to take out the guesswork and help you support local restaurants at the same time.

Aurora Restaurants & Food News, administrated by Ray Macdonald and Joe Anselmo, has been a lifeline for local eateries since the start of the pandemic.

Its concept is simple: providing a forum for restaurants to share their offerings and patrons to share their tips for some good eats.

'It's about having some fun and keeping it light hearted,' says Mr. Macdonald. 'As much as myself and Joe are the main admins of the group, the members really are the driving force and do an amazing job. For example, there are five new food businesses opening up on Yonge Street in Aurora. I have lived here my entire life and this is the first time in many years where I have seen the food industry really open up on Yonge Street.'

'I went into one restaurant (Bermuda) that was two days old, the owner gave me some food to try and it was phenomenal. I did a post on it and it completely exploded. Everybody banned together and at the end of it I said, 'Let's show Bermuda what this Town has to offer,' and his business exploded. It proved to me this group is so powerful as a collective and it really is a driving force behind the restaurant community.'

The restaurant and food industry has been one of the hardest-hit since the start of the global pandemic.

Revenues have taken a downturn after being forced to pivot to curbside and delivery, as they have on the brief windows of time they have been allowed to open at limited capacity in between lockdowns. Add in the uncertainty that comes with when and how they can reopen and it's been a recipe for trouble. Some have not survived, but others are hanging on, thanks to the ingenuity of owners and the support of the community as a whole.

'Our members have rallied in the group and really pushed forward the restaurant industry and the community in Aurora,' says Mr. Macdonald. 'Recently, a woman asked about local vegetarian options and there are over 200 restaurants or food-based businesses in Aurora, including beer and wine-making. The post exploded because now all the vegetarians have something to talk about and it becomes a community.'

Facebook groups can, in the view of Mr. Macdonald, have a negative connotation but he and his fellow administrators have worked diligently to raise the bar, including moderating posts to keep the tone of the group positive and he hopes this positivity will continue a year from now and hopefully into a post-pandemic world.

'We only allow positive-based content. No swearing, no bullying, no keyboard warriors, no aggressive or snide remarks. I get ridiculed for setting these rules by people, but these are the people who quickly leave the group, and quite frankly we are okay with that,' he says. 'It drives traffic and conversation, but it is not positive a lot of the time. If people feel airing out their bad experience at a restaurant, what they're not cognizant of is the restaurant owners have a family, the family has kids, the kids need somewhere to live in the community, they pay the mortgage, they drive their cars, they pay the bills. Because somebody didn't get a sauce that is supposed to come with some sort of meal and they decide to go to Facebook and lash out seems kind of ridiculous. There are better ways of complaining than bandwagoning and then burning the bandwagon.'

'I think there is a lot of power to work together in Aurora as a community. In November, we allowed non-restaurants to post in a group and it was an opportunity for these businesses to get eyeballs, for them to be seen. When we opened that up, there were 2,800 members but now we're more than 5,000. We want to be able to take the group as a restaurant group and see if there is a way to collaborate with non-restaurants on occasion.'

For more on Aurora Restaurants & Food News, visit www.facebook.com/groups/1855809974676711.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter