Cafe Flora: the more things change, the more they stay the same

By Nancy Leson

As a journalism student at the UW, my graduation requirements included a class where students were required to publish stories in the local press. Way back then, before those of us with writerly aspirations had a blog (and next thing you know a book contract), those "clips" were journalistic currency: a bridge to a career as a wordsmith.

I still remember being scolded by my instructor, "If you don't learn to write faster and do an internship in Olympia, you're going to have a hard time finding work at a newspaper!" (Headline from shortly after graduation when I got my first paid gig at Seattle Weekly: "Neener, neener, neener!") You see, I never wanted to write about politics -- though I sure wish I'd learned to write faster. My passion was food, and I recall the thrill of seeing the first restaurant story that bore my byline -- a profile of an innovative new vegetarian restaurant:

The full headline read, "Cafe Flora more than just a good value," and the jump-page header shouted, "Flora packs in diners." Which, as I've said time and again in the 17 years since I first set foot in the place, remains true today. The restaurant scene has changed in so many ways since I was a waitress-cum-undergrad. When Flora opened, building with "green" ideals and materials, taking advantage of local ingredients, buying from organic farmers, composting kitchen waste and keeping an on-premise herb
garden was far from the industry norm. Cafe Flora was a trailblazer, as I reported for the Madison Park Times:

*Political correctness is the buzzword of the 90s, but Cafe Flora is providing more than lip service in that department. The restaurant was originally an abandoned laundromat next door to a four-unit residential building. Rather than destroying the four-plex, the owners moved it to 22nd and Madison, keeping it in the neighborhood and donating it for use as affordable housing. The original structure of the laundromat was incorporated into the restaurant's design. Cafe Flora's interior includes energy-efficient refrigeration and heating, toxic-free fiberboard tables, and a non-toxic paint. Outside, an enclosure houses a recycling operation that includes an industrial size computer [sic]. A large herb garden adds aesthetic as well as culinary value to the property.*

By the way, I'll never forget seeing that line about the "industrial size computer" in print. It should have read "composter" -- an editor's error, not mine. I was mortified! But I forgave that editor long ago, and laugh about it now that I've made a mountain of page-proof faux-pas myself.

Few restaurants come with a mission statement, but Cafe Flora did. The owners (a couple who chose to keep their names out of the spotlight) and their managing partner (the late, great Scott Glascock) met through the peace movement a decade before. With Cafe Flora, they wanted to open more than just a "restaurant." Instead, they hoped to forge a center for their community. And that community was meant to embrace their employees as well as their customers.

They did just that, working with their architect to design a large open kitchen, built with a skylight so their staff might work in comfort. There was a children's play area and a changing table in the restroom -- not yet the restaurant fixtures common today. Their original menu was the work of chef Jim Watkins, late of the Aveda Spa near Minneapolis (who'd later go on to work wonders for the food-service operation at my alma mater). With that menu, Glascock explained in '91:

*"We wanted to overcome the stereotypes associated with vegetarian food. We wanted to showcase great vegetarian cuisine from other parts of the world and at the same time provide a pleasing environment and good service."*

Bear in mind, this was long before Seattle had fine-dining meatless options like Carmelita and Sutra. Instead, we had places like the venerable Moosewood-esque Sunlight Cafe and the tiny spiritually motivated Silence-Heart-Nest.

As a chronicler of restaurants and a Cafe Flora fan, I'm pleased to report that while other iconic restaurants are closing, Flora is not only surviving, but thriving. And nearly two decades after its debut, the more things change, the more they stay the same.
Four years ago Nat Stratton-Clarke took a job as buyer for Cafe Flora -- procuring produce directly from local farmers, shopping at farmers markets several times each week and seeking out local products to showcase in Madison Valley. Soon, he was running the restaurant as GM. Then, late last summer, the restaurant quietly changed hands. Original owner David Foecke, now living in the Bay Area, decided it was time to move on, and when he looked for someone to continue carrying out his mission for Cafe Flora, he didn't look far.

"David took me out to dinner," recalls Stratton-Clarke, "and he told me it was time for him to step away from the restaurant. He said "I could sell it to anybody, but I believe in this restaurant, and the community, and I believe you have the right values to keep them going.""

In August, 27-year-old Stratton-Clarke became Cafe Flora's new owner, and he proudly notes that he works with a dedicated staff of longtimers. "Janine Doran, our executive chef, has been here around 15 years. She's worked every station in the house. Our operations manager, James Sutherland, came on three months after Flora opened -- as a barista."

On Sunday, right after brunch, Stratton-Clarke will close his restaurant briefly for a quick cosmetic makeover. And when it reopens for lunch on Thursday, he and his crew will unveil a newly renovated dining room. "Instead of hiring a big contractor to do the work, we're doing much of it ourselves," he says. "I just finished sanding 20 chairs. We've got our cooks, baristas and waiters painting. We really believe this is a community effort. And the sense of community here is phenomenal."

Carpet will be replaced by soy-stained concrete, rather than the toxic acid commonly
used in the staining process. New walls, display cases and a door to the children’s play area have been fashioned from recycled wood. Much of that wood was scavenged from local farms. Berry crates from Alm Hill Gardens and an old beehive from Rockridge Orchards will be made into shelving. An old barn door from Local Roots Farm is set to become a wall. And additional seating at the newly configured bar area -- whose liquor display cases are also reclaimed -- will spotlight a recent addition: a cocktail menu.

photo: Jerome Healy

Heading into a new era, the dining room decor better reflects the farm-to-table concept that Cafe Flora and its new owner espouse. Meanwhile, the menu continues to offer such beloved dishes as Portobello Wellington and my favorite, Oaxaca Tacos:

photo: Ilya Moshenskiy
Unchanged is Flora’s garden atrium (a great spot to eat brunch):

*photo: Greg Gilbert/The Seattle Times*

Herbs from the garden I wrote about in 1991 are still in use in the spacious kitchen, whose recipes are yours for the price of the Cafe Flora Cookbook, dedicated in 2005 "In loving memory of Scott Glascock." As for that industrial-sized "computer"? It's no longer there, though there is a garden worm-bin.

These days, says Stratton-Clarke, "We fill two huge Dumpster-sized bins of compostable waste every week." Those bins are emptied and their contents made into compost at Cedar Grove. In return, he says, Cedar Grove's compost is used in Flora's garden plot. What's more, the circle is unbroken when you take food to-go: it's carted off in compostable packaging products from Cedar Grove.

"Cafe Flora was at the forefront of 'green building' when we first opened," says Stratton-Clarke. "From our flooring to the glazes on the windows to the natural lights in the kitchen. Now we’re just taking it a few steps further. We're excited about nudging Seattle’s understanding of eco-consciousness to the next level."

[http://blog.seattletimes.nwsource.com/allyoucaneat/2009/03/20/cafe_flora_then_and_now.html](http://blog.seattletimes.nwsource.com/allyoucaneat/2009/03/20/cafe_flora_then_and_now.html)