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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

It Takes a Village to Open a Bistro

By TOBY BARLOW

Detroit

I WAS recently sitting at the bar of Le Petit Zinc talking to the owner, Charles Sorel, when he said something I found shocking: “I can’t imagine opening a business anywhere but Detroit.”

From a local, I would have just written it off as city pride, but Charles is, as he himself puts it, a citizen of the world. Born in the French Caribbean and reared in Paris, he ran a French joint in Brooklyn’s Fort Greene and lived in Brazil before winding up here. When I pointed out the risks of starting up in a city as troubled as Detroit, he shrugged it off. “When I moved to New York in the late ’80s there was not a day when someone in the city wasn’t robbed or beaten or killed,” he said. “This is so much better than that.”

A year ago, Charles opened Le Petit Zinc with the simple belief that there was a market here for a crêperie and cafe that served fresh organic food at a decent price. But that was certainly no guarantee of success. Not only was the economy cratering, but the building itself, an abandoned day care center tucked between a working-class Irish neighborhood called Corktown and a few abandoned warehouses, was on a street with no foot traffic. The only thing the place had going for it was a rundown playground out back that was good for outdoor seating. For the first five weeks after opening, when he was the cook, waiter, busboy and janitor, he had no idea what to expect.

Now, we are all raised to think of business as a sort of vicious spy-versus-spy, cutthroat activity where every competing establishment is out to stick a shiv into the other. You’d think that this kind of blood thirst would be even worse in Detroit, which — with Jimmy Hoffa’s disappearance, Eminem’s lyrics and our old, quaint Devil’s Night tradition of burning down houses — has acquired a certain reputation for toughness. But Charles discovered that the neighboring Detroit restaurants actually had quite a different reaction to a new competitor.

The owner of Slows, a barbecue place nearby, not only helped him get his permits, but also built tabletops for him at no cost. Jordi, the owner of the Cafe con Leche coffee shop, hooked him up with his coffee supplier. Dave, who had recently opened Supino Pizza, even dropped everything one day to get the paper Charles needed for his credit card machine.

Most surprisingly, just as Charles was starting up, Torya Blanchard was opening another downtown crêpe place called Good Girls Go to Paris. Instead of treating Charles like a rival, Torya happily exchanged recipes with him, even coming in one day to help make his batter, an act of crêperie solidarity that would surely have made Detroit’s founder, Antoine de Lamothe Cadillac, extremely proud.

“They want their neighbor to make it,” he says. “It’s different from anywhere I’ve been. Here, your success is their success.” Even his suppliers have shown a generosity he finds surprising: the Avalon bakery charges him wholesale prices even if he orders just one loaf.

In other ways, too, Charles seems to have timed things well, opening just when Detroit residents with an agricultural bent were beginning to take advantage of the 40 square miles of unoccupied open land here, an area almost the size of San Francisco. Greg Willerer, for instance, sells Charles spinach, flowers and zucchini at an affordable price, all grown within the city limits. Charles also planted his own garden out by the patio, putting in tomatoes, basil, peppers, thyme, parsley and beets.

Maybe it's that adage that nothing brings a community closer than having a common enemy. For the restaurateurs, the residents, the urban farmers and the community activists now working to reshape the city, the enemy is Detroit's own reputation. They know they will succeed only if they are a part of a larger, collective success, one that makes downtown a thriving destination again, and so they're working together to make it happen.

Which leads to another entrepreneurial advantage Detroit possesses: instantaneous and automatic publicity. "Open a business anywhere else, and no one will notice," Charles said. "Open it in Detroit and everyone talks about it."

Sure enough, people are now driving in regularly from affluent suburbs like Bloomfield Hills and Grosse Pointe to try his smoked-salmon crêpes and ratatouille, a considerable achievement considering many suburbanites come downtown only for Tigers games or a night at the symphony. While I was there, the place was bustling with a diverse crowd that seemed more than satisfied.

"This is the best restaurant ever. I would eat here all the time if I had more money," beamed a woman dining alone at the bar.

"Somebody send that lady a dessert!" shouted Charles with a smile.

Toby Barlow is the author of "Sharp Teeth."

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