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Aspen

CULTURE/CHARACTERS/COMMENTARY

TIMES WEEKLY



LIFESTYLES OF THE

LOCALLY FAMOUS

ASPEN KITCHEN ENCORE

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON WHAT WENT WRONG

WORD ON THE STREET

hasn't been flattering for Aspen Kitchen lately.

"The way they shut down was terrible," says one local

restaurateur, alluding to the venue's abrupt closure last fall.

"They didn't pay a bunch of people. It's unacceptable."

Another popular comment: "They didn't pay the locals." A sticker seen around town declares, "Boycott

Aspen Kitchen!" And Facebook user Paul Alan Dorich captured public outcry in a review dated Dec. 26, 2016, just 11 days after Aspen Kitchen reopened under new ownership on Dec. 15: "Don't bother paying for your meal...they stiffed Aspen," he wrote.

Executive chef and now owner Matt O'Neil agrees that the finale to a tumultuous two-and-a-half-years was "devastating." Yet the company he works for, Craveable Hospitality Group—which was only *managing* Aspen Kitchen during the brouhaha—has become a scapegoat, he says.

Craveable was not the owner at the time of the closure, thus it was not financially responsible. It is financier Patrick McGrath of Rocky Aspen LLC who flaked out on payments since day one, according to O'Neil. And let's be clear: McGrath has zero involvement in the new Aspen Kitchen 2.0.

"Certain vocal members of the community have been rough on us because they don't know the whole story," O'Neil says. "It wasn't up to us to pay (outstanding invoices) in the first place. We were owed the most money of all."

In summer 2016, federal court proceedings were well under way surrounding Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection filed in March by disputed owner Rocky Aspen LLC. On Aug. 2 a court-appointed trustee, Michael Staheli, assumed full control of the Aspen Kitchen business.

Though it was reported that O'Neil quit in August, he was, in fact, promoted. As Craveable Hospitality culinary director and corporate chef, he moved to New York to help open another

restaurant, allowing him to promote sous chef Jake Burkhardt as new executive chef.

"He stuck with me for two years through all the crap," O'Neil says of Burkhardt. "He proved he was able to take over the project. I had taken on my new role. This trustee decides, after a lot of back and forth, that Jake was uncomfortable with this trustee." Burkhardt resigned.

It was Staheli who closed Aspen Kitchen on Sept. 15, 2016. "We had a party booked for 50 people, it was business as usual," O'Neil says of that day. "We (Craveable) were the new management company, but (Staheli) was the new CEO or boss. Investors were no longer in control of anything. He decided to shut it down, very abruptly, which we advised him not to do."

To have Aspen Kitchen fall through O'Neil's fingers, following two years of turmoil in the wake of lawsuits against Rocky Aspen LLC stemming from original construction of the property dating to 2013, was demoralizing, he says.

"We couldn't talk to (staff) legally when (Staheli) decided to shut restaurant down. It wasn't our decision—we were off the project. He laid everybody off. It's hard because trust barriers are broken: 'Why couldn't you help us?' We couldn't help! That was the most heartbreaking part."

So Craveable Hospitality did the only thing it could do: Put forth a plan to buy Aspen Kitchen at long last. Craveable submitted a bid to bankruptcy judge Elizabeth E. Brown on Nov. 11.

"Pat McGrath also had the chance to bid," O'Neil explains. "He put a bid forward that was better than ours. The day comes around that he's supposed to fund the bank account and buy the restaurant. He didn't come up with it. We saw this coming."

O'Neil told Brown that Craveable's offer still stood. "It was 6 p.m. on the 1st of December," O'Neil says. "She accepted. I packed my stuff and by 7 a.m. the next morning I was on a flight back to Aspen. We needed to open in 12 days, before the Christmas rush. The judge knew it was crunch time." Brown waived McGrath's option to appeal the ruling.



As for the thousands of dollars of employee compensation and mechanics liens lost in translation, "When we paid for the business, the court decides what happens to that money," O'Neil says. "We can't say, 'Pay this guy and that guy.' Through all of this, we look like the bad guys, because we were running the property. All these misconceptions started happening."

Once back in Aspen, O'Neil was tasked with explaining what happened while attempting to rebuild a team to relaunch Aspen Kitchen.

Here's where the idea behind this column began: An estimated 80 percent of cooks and dishwashers and at least five core front-of-house employees—maitre d' Kateryna Sukhanenko, server Halli Burnsworth, and backserver Yoan Benevides included—came back to Aspen Kitchen. Many ousted servers and managers had found new jobs in the three months that the property sat dark; those who were able to rejoin, such as Burnsworth, cite chef O'Neil's return as a driving factor.

Why would these workers jump at the chance to get back on board? *Because O'Neil and Craveable Hospitality Group didn't screw them over in the first place.*

"I missed it, and was very happy to join the team again," Sukhanenko says. On staff since opening day as a host, and later a manager,

Sukhanenko adds that O'Neil's new ownership of Aspen Kitchen made her decision easy.

"He's the soul of the kitchen," she says. "He loves this restaurant. He wants this restaurant to be successful. Since the opening we've hosted a lot of previous workers. I think some of (those) people have this feeling that they'd love to some back (but timing was off)."

Sukhanenko believes the family atmosphere at Aspen Kitchen has changed—for the better. "Each and every person who works here is into the successfulness of the restaurant," she says. "They're more involved and more supportive."

New general manager Marc Ellert-Beck concurs. "We believe in our chef, our menu, our concept," he says. "We're here under different pretenses and different leadership. Meet me, meet our team, try our food. Our goal is to be connected to the community and to integrate." (See "5 Ways to Win Locals," opposite page.)

O'Neil calls his staff "the lifeblood" of the operation and thanks them daily. "We appreciate our employees, we know how hard it was for them to go through this journey with us," he says. "Give me a chance and I can change your mind. I'm a firm believer of *time heals*."

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IF YOU GO...

Aspen Kitchen
 515 Hopkins Ave., upstairs
 970.300.4525
 kitchenaspen.com
 Open daily 5:30-10 p.m.

Rickhouse Social
 Open Wed-Sat at 6 p.m.; Sun at 10 p.m.
 AK bar menu served until 12:30 a.m.

Aspen Kitchen executive chef Matt O'Neil launched a bar menu of playful, addictive bites, such as tater tots with house-made creme fraiche and caviar (middle) and General Tso's cauliflower. "It's food I like to eat," he says.



5 WAYS TO WIN LOCALS

GIVE BACK

Aspen Kitchen's "Sweet Support" program directs \$5 per featured dessert ordered to an area charity each month. In March, proceeds from executive pastry chef Tracy Wilk's decadent chocolate-chip cookies and Kahlúa-spiked milk benefit the Colorado Women's Education Foundation. April will support Tippy Taxi, reportedly in danger of ceasing operations after 35 years. On March 25 Rickhouse Social hosts a "Save Tippy Taxi" party.

A NEW, FUN BAR MENU

Executive chef Matt O'Neil keeps it playful with "white trash" tater tots (to slather with housemade crème fraîche and American sturgeon caviar); pork belly donut sliders; signature "Clothesline Bacon" lacquered with lavender honey; a bone-marrow bourbon luge (with a side of cowbell); crispy, addictive, sweet-sour General Tso's cauliflower; and a monster 30-day dry-aged burger with gouda and garlic mayo on housemade beef-fat brioche bun coated in everything-bagel seasoning (all \$14 to \$25). "One way to gain people's love is give them a good burger, right?" says GM Marc Ellert-Beck.

20% LOCALS DISCOUNT

"We offer an additional 20 percent off bar menu prices as an incentive," Ellert-Beck says, "This restaurant fills a niche in the community of being casually sophisticated." Roaring Fork Valley residents who sit at the bar and order off the bar menu need only to show ID.

STAY OPEN DURING OFFSEASON

Again chef O'Neil plans offseason specials. Yoga brunch on the Aspen Kitchen patio, in collaboration with Lululemon downstairs, is in the works.

WHISKEY!

Aspen Kitchen has partnered with Breckenridge Distillery to open the new Rickhouse Social speakeasy lounge downstairs (formerly Rec Room Aspen). In addition to craft cocktails and DJ beats, chef O'Neil's bar menu is served in Rickhouse Social until 12:30 a.m.—and the same 20 percent local discount applies. (By the way, a *rickhouse* is a room in which whiskey ages.)