Live music on the weekends, a rockin' bar, a new All Day/All You Can Eat Sunday Buffet menu and 24/7 discounts for Golden Buckeye Card holders, has Phil the Fire ready claim prime positioning as the place-to-be!

That ol' fire that just keeps on burning

Phil the Fire interview PART II

By KEVIN CHILL HEARD

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"My whole thing is, on my business card, our motto is 'Perfection is our goal, excellence is our standard,' and I didn't put that as some cliché – that's what I truly believe. We have to strive to

be perfect. Because, for Phil the Fire, 'good' is the kiss of death. If we're good, [people will think], 'They should have just stayed closed.' So good is not good enough." – Phil Davis.

By now, many of us know the story of Phil Davis' rise and fall and rise again as the proprietor of the oft ballyhooed eatery called Phil the Fire.

Those familiar with old school martial arts flicks where the defeated Kung Fu hero leaves his temple torn asunder, battered, bruised and shamed, knows that the hero will retreat to a mountain in search of wisdom and perfection of his style and then return to the scene of his inglorious fall to avenge his honor.

In many ways such is the story of Phil the Fire.

Sporting the Phil the Fire smile that greeted folks at his former Shaker Square location and the ill-fated downtown location, Phil is still rockin' that warm greeting and same smile for guests at his new Beachwo
od location at 3750 Orange Place.

But, something is different about Phil.

It's what old folks call a countenance. Maybe it's the look of a survivor. Perhaps it the cold air reminding him of those days he spent as a grown a$$ man getting yelled at by a 20-something year-old supervisor while lifting UPS boxes, trying to make whatever money he could after the collapse of his beloved restaurant. Maybe it's remembering days so dark that he once considered ending it all, but thought better and clearer in the light of fatherhood.

Whatever the reason, he has the countenance of the dude who returned to his new temple a master of several styles.

"The whole Phil the Fire story started with humble beginnings," recalled the wiser Phil Davis. "I

mean, I was selling pies out of my car. I was doing peach cobblers and banana pudding. That's how it started. And then I went to the Civic, in the basement of the Civic [Center on Mayfield and Lee]. You have to understand, against all odds Phil the Fire has succeeded. When I opened up, nobody had ever heard of chicken-and-waffles in Cleveland. And believe me, people were saying, 'Chicken-and-waffles, nobody's going to buy that.' I heard that all the time. My nature is I've never let naysayers dissuade me from something. If I believe in something, I'll go for it."

With expectations for the return of Phil the Fire being as high as that proverbial mountain he climbed for his Wu Tang meditation, Phil shrugs off any notion that he was nervous about his impending challenge.

"Here's the thing. I told my staff that the expectations for Phil the Fire are higher than they are for any other restaurant in Cleveland," recalled the **restaurateur**. "They couldn't be any higher. I [wasn't] nervous, but I'm very cognizant of the fact that the expectations for Phil the Fire are through the roof. So, I've sort of disciplined myself not to get too high or get too low about the situation because I have to stay even-keel."

When the initial interview with Phil Davis took place, it was only a week or so after his grand opening. In a conversation about operations ensued, the topic of timeliness of service, his response to the issue, which had followed him from his old Shaker Square days was to the point.

"I'm not satisfied with where we are," he stated. "We're bringing in consultants. We're trying to get the food out faster. I recognize that there are imperfections above anybody else."

And while it still takes a while for your grub to arrive, Phil is quick to point out that Phil the Fire isn't Fridays, Ruby Tuesday's, or any other joint that may have ready-made meals or microwave foods.

Phil smiled and said, "We don't even have a microwave on the premises" … which says a lot for a guy who "invented" a microwave – the iWavecube!

“We make all our meals fresh,” bristled Phil, “We even stir our own cornbread from my recipe!”

Not that we think he gets down back in the kitchen with some Jiffy Mix, and while he goes on to say he is always looking for ways to cut the wait, he will still let you know that it takes a little longer to whip-up the homemade cake and pies invented while up on the mountain getting his new and improved style together.

When pointed out that his meals are a little more costly at his new spot, he looked at me and said, “I’m in Beachwood now.” And with some tongue-in-cheek humor, he said the same folks complaining about his prices and time of service stand in line even longer and pay just as much, if not more, for food at the Cheescake Factory without all the fuss.

“But my point is that people remember the investment I made in the company, in the food. Just like now, I’m not satisfied with where we are now because I know we can do better. I’m always pushing for better food, fresher food, and better service.”

And as far his enhanced business acumen, he stated, “We trademarked ‘Phil the Fire’ and now we own the trademark for ‘Comfort food for the soul.’”

“Here’s the other thing and this is really important,” Phil insisted. “This phenomenon, it could only have happened in Cleveland. Cleveland’s big enough where you don’t have to know everybody, but its small enough where people feel that they know you. There are a lot of people who come up and give me hugs and high-fives because they feel that they know me. Cleveland
is that kind of community. I swear to God, this story could not have happened in any other city except
Cleveland
.”

Not one to rest on even the most current of achievements, Phil is happy to announce the following changes underway: The addition of Joe McKenzie (aka Joe Mack) as the new executive kitchen manager, who brings over 30 years of kitchen management experience from Bennigan’s, Cheesecake Factory, and most recently, Brio/Bravo!

He added an Xpress Lunch Menu with lighter fare and lighter cost.

Ten years after introducing Northeast Ohio to Chicken and Waffles, Phil the Fire is introducing Northeast Ohio
to the “Sweet Potato Waffle.” Phil stated, “Not only is the sweet potato waffle more nutritious than a traditional waffle, it is so good, you don’t need to add syrup. And that’s my honest opinion!”

He’s also claiming another “first” with something called Jumpin’ John (a combination of red beans “and” black-eyed peas served over rice). He is also partnering with Deliver Me Food so that people can have Phil’s unique tastes delivered to their home or office.

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“Make no mistake, my goal for the Phil the Fire is not simply to be the best soul food restaurant or best new restaurant in Northeast Ohio. My goal is for Phil the Fire to be recognized as the best restaurant in Northeast Ohio. So, we are always looking for ways to enhance the dining experience of our guests. We have a lot of outstanding restaurants here in Cleveland and I know that we have our work cut out for us before we achieve our goal. However, I have never been one to shy away from a challenge.”