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WednesdayFood

By Kara Baskin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

It's an American success story: Michael Feighery, 57, moved from Dublin to Manhattan, where he became a butcher's assistant at Smith & Wollensky. He worked his way up to CEO, traveling to Las Vegas, Miami, and ultimately to Boston, before leaving the high-rolling steakhouse world behind to open his own restaurant, Liberty & Main, in Dedham.

Now he lives in Braintree. "It's a great story. We moved from Vegas, and the real estate lady showed us a place in Milton. She said, knowing I had two daughters, 12 and 14, 'You'll love this. It's a dry town.' I'm like, 'What's a dry town?' So we moved to Braintree," he says.

What's it like to open a brand-new restaurant in a world where restaurants are still recovering from the pandemic? How did you manage to pull that off?

I don't know. It's a great question. We started this conversation about a year ago, with WS Development, which is the landlord for Legacy Place.

There was empty space in their Hingham shops, but they really wanted an Asian concept in there. ... But they came back, I think within weeks, and said, 'Listen, do you know anything about Dedham?'

My basic conversation with them was: 'I've been in the corncob to do something not cookie-cutter. It's going to be a combination of all the stuff that I've seen, traveled, experienced, want to do. And you're going to have to have some faith in me, because there's not much you could compare it to, except for my track record.'

So they were very engaging; they were very cool. They had a lot of really recognizable brands and anchor tenants in their restaurants. So I think it was very brave to give me this opportunity.

Is this the way of the future: more restaurants in Hingham and Dedham? Is it safer to do that than to have a restaurant in the city?

I think in the old days, you built in the cities, because of the exposure, and you had all the business opportunities. You're not dependent just on residential, or business, or conventions. Multiple businesses could support you. And now it's working backward. You're building in the suburbs, or the satellites of the cities, and you build up a clientele.

Hopefully, in 15 months, 10 months, I don't put a timeframe on it, the demand is there and when the cities return, they want your locations back in the business districts. It's the reverse from what it was.



GETTING SALTY
MICHAEL FEIGHERY OF LIBERTY & MAIN

Steakhouse vet rewards himself with a new restaurant for a job well done

Let's talk about Liberty & Main. What's the philosophy?

It's comfort American food evolved. OK, lobster escargot? What is that? Grilled bacon and peanut butter? I mean, we all recognize bacon and peanut butter from being a kid. If Elvis were still alive, he'd be eating one of those right now. Croque monsieur is a nod to the restaurant that was here before [Aquitaine], as well as the escargot. So it's really taking American ingredients that are very recognizable. From COVID, people resort back to what they know.

They want things that are recognizable, that are safe, but they want them evolved a bit. So we're using those ingredients with French techniques. It's things people are familiar with in a different vehicle.

Tell me about your background.

I started with Smith & Wollensky in 1985 in Manhattan, the original at 49th Street and Third Avenue.

I walked in off the street, and they gave me a job as a butcher assistant, which really is a very posh word for opening boxes. They wouldn't let me touch meat for about four months. When they ask you to do something, you say yes, and yes, and yes. So the more yeses I said, the more opportunities I got, and the more exposure I got.

I was surrounded by some amazing professionals in the business who really took me under their wing and gave me an opportunity. After a few years, they put me in the front of the house as a manager. I just love the hustle and bustle from, you know, the big steak knives, the dining room, just the energy. I was hooked straightaway. And then, after a few years, I got

'Liberty & Main ... [is] a little play on how the revolution started here in Boston and for me, this was my own little revolution.'

more important positions. In 1997, they asked me to go and open the first one down in Miami as the opening team coordinator.

We hadn't opened any Smith & Wollenskys in 20 years. Then we opened four in 13 months, which was quite a challenge, putting that team together. We opened in Miami, Chicago, New Orleans, and Las Vegas. After we

opened Las Vegas, I turned around to my boss and said, 'I need a break.' So I became the general manager in Las Vegas and worked there for 14 years, became the regional director, and then eventually the president.

But I was feeling like Don Henley in the Eagles. I love the Eagles. I have nothing but respect for them, but I wanted to sing my own songs and write my own music. And, you know, I'm not a young guy. My sister-in-law in Ireland said, 'It would be a shame if you just finished your career without doing something on your own.' ... I was feeling at the end that it deserved somebody else, and I deserve something else, too.

What brought you to New York?

I was a chef in a hotel in Ireland, which is where I met my wife in 1983, a place called Ros-league Manor. I was a chef for nearly three years. And it was the '80s in Ireland. There weren't many jobs. The economy was bad. I had pretty good experience and thought: Why not go to America? I'd been intrigued with America. I had cousins who worked in the restaurant business, and they told me America is the only place where you can be rich and cool and poor and cool. If it works out, I can be rich. And if it doesn't work out, I

can still be cool. I headed off, lived in the Bronx, and met a few people who told me about these restaurants.

I walked in. When I filled out the paperwork, I had no real papers. I had a small work visa, but it only was for a couple of months. And all my paperwork was kind of expired at that stage, and everybody in the restaurant — the chef, the bar manager, the GM, the AGM — asked me all these questions. I got a bit of Irish and said, 'Listen. Do you guys know the situation?' They said, 'No, we're not worried about that; we're worried about your address. Who said to write down that address?' They were all born on that street 40 years ago, where I was living in the Bronx, by complete accident. They took me under their wing and looked after me ever since.

What was New York like in the mid-1980s, in restaurants?

"Wall Street" had just come out, the movie. Everybody had slicked-back hair and was spending. The three-martini lunch: When you saw people for lunch, they rarely went back to work. There were no cellphones, so we had to install phones on the walls for guests and to answer reservations. They'd take the phone out of your hands while you were taking a reservation to call in to work or call down to Wall Street. A lot of marketing folks were there because of the Fifth Avenue location. I started seeing all these cejus as important as sports stars in their field. It was really pleasantly intimidating.

What's your favorite city to work in?

Las Vegas, because that was my first real restaurant where I stayed on. I was really in charge. And I'm a pretty transient guy. I traveled around a little bit when I was a kid, doing some catering for bands that came on tours of France and Belgium and Holland.

Vegas is such a transient place. It was the first place I really felt at home. It was weird. People were always visiting; they were always in a great humor. They were coming out to enjoy themselves. So it wasn't like you were dealing with locals every night with a certain expectation. These people were coming with the intention of really enjoying themselves. So all we really did was give them a blank canvas to really experience what the restaurant was, and it was a huge success. That makes it a lot easier, right? I didn't have to worry about the actual costs. Every genre, every person you could possibly meet came through that door. It wasn't unlike New York City.

What's your take on Boston as a city in general and as a restaurant city?

I love it. I'm a bit of a history

buff, certainly Irish history and American history, because I think they're so entwined. The culture, how everything started here, that's where I kind of got the name Liberty.

When our offices were downtown — I can say it now — there wasn't a lot of work to do as a president, so I'd walk around a lot. You'd see the cobblestone streets and the old buildings. You start to recognize them from books and movies that you've watched. Everything kicked off here. I was in awe of that. I was born in London and lived in London until I was like nine. It was very similar in a way. You could have this amazing fast-food restaurant beside something that was the most historic building, and people would walk by it every day, not realizing 300 years ago, America was reinventing herself right here. I feel tingly, with goosebumps, right now just talking about it.

Why the name Liberty & Main?

I hope it comes across right. Liberty & Main was my freedom from Smith & Wollensky to do what I wanted to do. It's a little play on how the revolution started here in Boston and for me, this was my own little revolution for myself, that I thought I had earned. But I wouldn't be here without all the opportunities they afforded me.

I have to ask you this: Does Irish food get a bad rap?

It used to, very much. Back in travel a lot. The Celtic Tiger hit Ireland. There was a lot of disposable income. So they traveled a lot, they went to great destinations and experienced great culinary. And when they got back to Ireland, they're like, 'Why can't we get this here?' They started to demand more. Chefs got out of their comfort zone.

You'll find some of the most amazing restaurants in Ireland, from anywhere from north to south to Dublin to Galway. Kin-salee down in Cork is a culinary mecca. You can find any restaurant that would compete with any restaurant on the continent or in the United States.

Any favorite places to hang out in Boston?

Mr. Dooley's downtown, on Broad Street. You walk in the door, close your eyes, and you're back in Ireland. It has the best pint of Guinness. The best staff — maybe too familiar! I haven't been there in months. You walk in and they say, 'Pint of Guinness, Mike?' You know for that next hour or seven you're in good hands.

Favorite snack?

Doritos.

Interview was edited and condensed. Kara Baskin can be reached at kara.baskin@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @kcbaskin.