



## **Mission gives added flavour to rural landscape**

### **Giant Three Hills restaurant takes great taste beyond major centres**

John Gilchrist, Calgary Herald

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As a native of Wetaskiwin and someone who has spent many hours traversing the byways of Alberta, I am frequently disappointed by the quality of dining options outside the larger centres.

Certainly there are some gems -- Huckleberry's and Terra Cotta in my hometown, Fireside Place in Carstairs and South Fork in High River, to name a few. And I'm sure there are more. But beyond the mountain and lake resorts and those towns within bedroom distance of the big cities, few communities are able to support restaurants of size and quality.

So when I pulled into the parking lot of the Mission Restaurant in Three Hills (750 2 St. N., 1-403-443-3611), I was tempted to shout out a big thank you because the Mission Restaurant is impressive. As in \$3 million impressive. I haven't seen a lot of \$3-million restaurants that seat more than 200 people in towns with a population of 3,500.

The restaurant's look was inspired by the Spanish missions of the American southwest and Mexico. (The architecture and interior design were handled by Riddell Kurczaba from Calgary.) With its desert tones and long, lean lines, it would look at home in Phoenix or Albuquerque and doesn't seem out of place in the tree-sparse landscape of Three Hills, a 90-minute drive northeast of Calgary.

As I strolled up the wide, pebbled sidewalk to Mission's entrance, through the big wood-and-glass doors, I could see a gaggle of smartly dressed young ladies standing by the hostess station. They saw me at the same time and, as a group, sprinted to the doors to spring them open. There were big smiles and big welcomes all around as they ushered me into the room. It was somewhat overwhelming, but I was impressed by the enthusiasm, the spirit and, I might add, the athleticism of the group. (I found out later that most are members of the local college's basketball and volleyball teams.)

The full-team press was not initiated because the young ladies had little else to do. On a Sunday afternoon only 10 days after they had opened, Mission was packed. And it was as impressive inside as it had been outside. I looked through the dining area, a high-ceilinged, bi-level room highlighted by flat-screen televisions and cozy fireplaces. Families and groups of varying sizes seemed to be enjoying their lunch in the sunwashed room. I peered into the spacious, open kitchen and watched the cooks prepare pizzas and quesadillas and slide them into a gas-fired forno oven. I saw them scoop out bowls of soup, plate salads and grill thick steaks under the watch of executive chef Karl McDonnell, a graduate of England's Leigh College Culinary Institute. It was a calm and proficient bunch, especially considering the newness of the facility.

I tried the tomato soup and the "Burger with a Mission." Good food, well prepared. It's not pushing any culinary boundaries, but the Mission features quality products and uncluttered preparation presented in a straightforward manner. If I could compare it to something more familiar, Mission would be similar to a higher-end Earls.

So why does a \$3-million, 200-seat restaurant exist in Three Hills? Despite its diminutive size, Three Hills is a bustling college town. For 85 years, the Prairie Bible Institute has been what they call a centre of higher education for Christians. With more than 500 students from around the world -- young people from across Canada, the United States, South Korea, Japan, Namibia and numerous other countries study here -- and an aggressive expansion program, the Bible Institute generates a lot of activity. So visiting instructors, relatives and other colleges' sports teams are a key market for the new restaurant -- as they are for the sparkling new Best Western hotel that sits across the parking lot. In a nod of respect to the college's values, Mission doesn't serve alcoholic beverages.

The restaurant is owned by a group of six local shareholders -- the Mission Restaurant Group -- and managed by Gordon and Bonnie Snell, who are among the investors. They are local ranchers who thought they would diverge from the cattle business into something different. Now, instead of a herd of Angus cattle, they have 75 staff to contend with. And they're already thinking of expansion. Once Mission is up and running smoothly -- and has its 80-seat patio open (great view!) -- the partners may look at other under-restauranted small towns around Alberta.

I say "thank you" again. And good luck!

As an aside, when I spoke with the folks at the Mission a few days ago, they informed me that they hosted more than 1,500 people last weekend. That's almost half the population of Three Hills.

Although many roads lead to Three Hills, if your trip takes you through Airdrie, you might pop in for a quick caffeine buzz at Benjamin's (304 Main Street Square, 945-3735). Serving Big Mountain coffee, Benjamin Locking pulls a creamy espresso and brews pots of various roasts. Sometimes you just need a good coffee to contend with Highway 2.

*John Gilchrist reviews restaurants for CBC Radio One. The 6th Edition of Gilchrist's My Favourite Restaurants in Calgary & Banff is now available in bookstores across southern Alberta. He can be reached at [escurial@telus.net](mailto:escurial@telus.net) or 235-7532.*