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Restaurant Profile: Justin Cucci's Root Down & Linger Restaurants

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by Kate Parham

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Much like his restaurants, which are housed in revamped gas stations, mortuaries, and brothels, Justin Cucci's history is unique, to say the least. Originally from New York, Cucci grew up in the restaurant business, working front-of-the-house at his family's place, the Waverly Inn. But, when he decided he wanted to open his own restaurant, Cucci knew he

needed to gain experience in the kitchen. So he connected with a few restaurants in Denver and pretended to be a new employee with no restaurant experience.

"I knew if they knew my background, they wouldn't hire me, so I played dumb, working as a \$9 an hour line cook, picking up everyone else's slack," says Cucci, who worked his way up to sous-chef before opening his first restaurant, a café in Key West, where he served as chef and owner.

Eventually, Cucci made the move back to Denver, where he opened Root Down in 2008, one of the first local and sustainable restaurants in the city. His building? A former gas station. "I had been on a mid-century kick, and the building, which was from the 60s, drew me in. I loved the simplicity of the architecture and the lines, and its proximity to downtown," he explains. "I thought the neighborhood would take off, so I told the landlord that I wanted to open an organic, vegetable-focused restaurant there, and he let me. It's such a bonus to have a story on top of the architecturally beautiful building, so I really tried to respect and accentuate its history."

Vintage Cool

Cucci achieved this by leaving some of the original details of the building intact—including the aqua tiled walls and orange bathroom porcelain—and adding his own personal touches, such as a wall of vintage telephones. He also used the original compressor from the gas station for the hostess stand. His menu was equally unique: globally influenced, seasonal cuisine with a "field to fork" mentality that is as organic, natural, and local as possible. Dishes like Carrot & Thai Red Curry

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Soup, Sweet Potato “Falafel,” and Veggie Burger Sliders became instant hits.



Just a few years later, Cucci’s landlord came back to him with a building six blocks away. “I wasn’t interested at first, then I saw the building. I got him a proposal by the end of the week.” This time, Cucci would transform a former mortuary into an “anti-entrée”, small plates hotspot specializing in urban street food (think dishes like Masala Dosa, Buns, Chicken B’srilla and Raw Meze Trio).

It seems Cucci had found his shtick: take something old and make it new again. “I didn’t set out to do this, but I’m obviously drawn to historic buildings. And after Linger, I became more cognizant that these types of buildings, that wouldn’t typically make a great restaurant, could actually. The more unspeakable the better.”

Those stories are rocket fuel for Cucci. “Before I can come up with the restaurant’s concept, I have to spend time in the building, and research the time period. For Root Down, I studied old gas station signs and design, and at Linger I looked through funeral home catalogs.” But it’s a fine line. “You don’t want to beat people over the head with it, so it requires a lot of subtlety.”

Cucci walked that line by decorating Linger with items like vintage funeral fans, apothecary jars for water glasses, prescription clip boards for the bill, and a mural depicting a scene from Harold & Maude, the classic cult movie revered for its themes of life and death. The restaurant, which is composed of two buildings, is also designed around the film; with one side Maude, the other Harold. There are other unique touches, too. The bar is made from LiteBrites, and up on the rooftop, which provides 180-degree views of Denver, Cucci has a food and drinks “truck” in a vintage RV.

“Some people might not set foot in here because it was a mortuary, so we try not to address it unless people ask questions,” says Cucci. “Of course, they’re going to notice our nods if they’re paying attention. We don’t make excuses.”

Creative Cuisine. Dazzling Beverages

With so much imagination, it’s no surprise that Cucci changes his menus four times a year at both restaurants. “We’re way too creative and collaborative to sit and look at a menu for a year straight,” he explains. And while both restaurants have their own focus, for Cucci it’s all about flavor. “I love food from around the world, but I don’t want to go to 20 restaurants to get it, so I created these bastardized dishes with tons of flavors. I love foods that hit all the palette in one bite.”

But it’s not just about food. Both restaurants are known as much for their beverage programs as they are for the cuisine, says Mike Henderson, beverage director for both properties. Though the focus of each program is different, both strive for balance. “I wanted to create a menu that has equally great cocktails as it does an impressive wine list and beer selections,” says Henderson. “We pay attention to all aspects, ensuring that one area never falls short. It’s about the whole experience.”

Like the food menu, the beverage menu is swapped quarterly. “Certain things are seasonal,” notes Henderson, “but we really look to see what our guests are drinking and what’s selling. The majority

of the time we drop the bottom 25 percent and bring in new stuff.”

One constant, however, is mirroring the bar program with the food. “At Root Down, we do a lot of fresh herb and citrus cocktails, utilizing items like beets, lavender and jalapenos,” says Henderson. “Linger covers a lot of global styles, from sangria to tiki cocktails.” The most popular item at Linger is the red sangria, a blend of red wine, brandy, orange curacao, lemon, and orange juice. At Root Down, it’s the “Pepper Blossom,” made with vodka, St. Germain liqueur, basil, jalapeno, lemon, and grapefruit juice.

Fiscal Restraint

One way Henderson has been able to keep costs down at the bar is by avoiding the big name brands, such as Bombay Sapphire, and instead opting for small-batch labels. “We want to bridge the gap between our well program and the next level of Beefeaters,” says Henderson, who keeps the average bottle cost around \$7 to \$14 for the well program. He looks for brands that may be lesser known, and are certainly less expensive, but that win in blind tastings with the staff. For those guests that have a preference, however, all brands, big and small, are stocked behind the bar.

“Most importantly,” insists Henderson, “we try to find brands that represent the same commitment to the environment and quality standards we have at the restaurants.”

Much like his process of developing concepts for his restaurants, Cucci also works backwards when it comes to costs. “I never went to business school, so if we put a menu item on, I make up a price at the moment and then we figure out later if it works,” he explains. “I hate looking at it as a dollars and cents thing. I always worry that we’ll sacrifice quality if we go to costs first.” His food goal is to be around 33 percent, without compromising any components.

That’s not to say there are no rules. “We don’t raise prices as a gut reaction. I don’t want to create an environment where my staff is too focused on their bonus, and will compromise integrity to hit it.”

Staffing Right

For Cucci, it’s paramount that they hire employees who are married to integrity. “We have to have that culture where we do it right, and that boils down to finding the right people,” says Cucci. “Our strongest suit is our staff, they’re the ones connecting with the guests; food is just another component.” The key qualities he looks for when hiring are empathy, awareness, and communication. “I’m super involved and invested and I try to create a culture of empathy for each other, for the guest, for the food,” he notes. “If an employee doesn’t have that it won’t work, because while the tactical part of the business is very easy to teach, you can’t learn empathy.”

Cucci has also found the key to maintaining a great staff is promoting from within. “Most people in my restaurants started as something else, like our hostess who was really into wine and has since become our sommelier. We do really well with recognizing those skills and then breeding that person here.” Thus, his turnover rate is extremely low.

Perhaps the biggest reason for Cucci’s success is his ability to see the big picture. “There’s a lot of great chefs and great food, but there’s very few restaurants that connect on the level that I crave,” says Cucci. “Most restaurants are one or two dimensional; I try to find what the fifth dimension is. Food is important, but I have to look at it as a whole: the lighting, the culture, the music, the people, and the atmosphere. Restaurants have to work on many levels and layers.”



Positive Stress

Though Cucci has had many triumphs, it hasn't always been easy. "We have what I call positive stress; we're too busy." Though that maybe every restaurateur's dream, Cucci admits he was unprepared for the crowds. "Our biggest challenge is figuring out how we accommodate this many people, from parking to food and service."

One way Henderson has dealt with the high-volume is by making the beverage program more efficient. "We try to find ways to serve people as quickly as possible. We have several cocktails that we make in bulk and put through our draft system to have them on tap." Henderson, who also runs cocktails through soda guns and uses staff made infusions, syrups, and juices, insists that, "it's a way of maintaining quality and consistency."

Bringing in Business

When it comes to advertising and promotions, Cucci makes an effort to keep it minimal.

"People are constantly bombarded with useless info, so I hired a publicist to do the anti-thing. We filter our information and then let people discover us." The same goes for special dinners. "I'm not really into them, but if a staffer wants to do one, I step back and let them own it."

One area Cucci doesn't skimp on, however, is happy hour. "It's a cultural thing in Denver, and such a great way to get people in for small bites and build energy at the bar." Both Root Down and Linger have food and drinks on their happy hour menu, most priced under \$5. "Anyone who doesn't do it is really missing a big opportunity," says Cucci, who calls happy hour the gateway drug. "You have to smoke a little happy hour before you can snort dinner."

What Next?

Now that both Root Down and Linger have become established, Cucci is looking forward. Root Down just opened a second location at the Denver airport this March. In the fall, he plans to convert a former brothel turned adult video store into a live music venue, complete with great food and drink. "I wanted to take Root Down and make it accessible to people who travel, without dumbing it down or sacrificing integrity and quality," he notes. As for the fourth venture, there's no name yet. In typical Cucci fashion, first comes the space, then the concept. What will he think of next?

Kate Parham is a freelance food, travel, and lifestyle writer based in Washington, DC. Her byline has appeared in *USA Today*, *Cooking Light*, *Plate*, *American Way*, and *Robb Report*, as well as numerous other publications. Learn more about Kate at www.kateparham.com.

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