

CRAZY THINGS I HAVE DONE – THE INDIAN SUMMER RESTAURANT

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In most towns restaurants come and go. When I was growing up in Ann Arbor there was a restaurant on South State Street up near the University of Michigan campus called The Virginian. It was not related to the TV show but was a typical American restaurant. I don't recall ever going inside.

However in 1971 an organic farmer (and friend), Ken King along with Rick Peshkin founded the "Indian Summer Natural Foods Restaurant" in the space where The Virginian used to be. This was significant because as one of the first examples of the old guard being replaced by the new alternative-culture (I refuse to call them "Hippies.") Suddenly on one of our main streets was an organic foods restaurant where I was welcome, the owners of which I knew, and they actually had food that I would eat!

People from all over the area would come, young new-age folks like myself, to eat food there, especially their natural-grain pancakes with maple syrup. Who could forget them? And they had incredible un-yeasted bread fresh each day produced by a spiritually-minded baker by the name of Dana Wilkinson. What an experience to just walk uptown to Indian Summer and have a whole-food breakfast or lunch. It was amazing to me! It was like my generation was taking over, coming of age. This was our idea of a restaurant.

Everyone who meets me knows what an enthusiast I am. If I get my mind all wrapped around an idea I think might be fun, I am like a bulldog about seeing it through. And it came to me one day that everything about Indian Summer was great except the décor. The way it looked inside was a hangover from past restaurants that had been there - drab. And I never pass up a chance to help create a new sense of space or mandala. I offered to paint some designs on the walls for them and they were foolish enough to let me do just that.

And of course, being a good entrepreneur, it is hard to talk me out of whatever my dreams are set on. At the time I was deep into macrobiotics (still am!) and along with the macro craze came a love for Japanese culture, design, and everything Asian. Macrobiotics more or less came from Japan. I wanted to make a visit to Indian Summer memorable by having simple food symbols all over the walls. No one stopped me.

Of course I knew very little about designing restaurant décor and not all that much about Japanese design. After all (so I told myself) I designed the logo for Eden Foods, why not do something striking on the Indian Summer walls. I naturally love color, design, and making large images visible to all. At least that is how I remember it.

So in I came, paint brushes in hand, and began creating these large 4-5 foot logo-like designs on the walls. Of course I liked them. But I especially was enamored at the time with honeybees, the hive, the cooperation in the hive, and so on. I had read all kinds of books about bees and beekeeping but had never kept any actual bees. Anyway, I got it in my mind that along the back wall, where the servers endlessly came in and out, was a perfect place to put my bees... and I did. I had honey bees on the right and left side of the back wall and a huge honeycomb with yet another bee sitting on the comb stretching across the center.

You can check out the photos here for more details. So what's the problem? Well, the problem came when customers who were not so fond of bees or any kind of "insect" at all began to complain about all these giant insects on the wall. It 'creeped' them out. And up to that point the staff at the restaurant went along with me until customers started complaining and then, like any good business person, they went along with the customer, who is after all 'always right'.

The next thing I knew is that I was given like ten-minute's notice that they were painting over everything I had done which is why these few photos are kind of 'not good'. I cleaned up a couple photos since the reflection was drowning out the image.

So there you have the story of my very brief career as a restaurant decorator and designer. I had failed to realize that not everyone liked the honeybee and to many folks they appeared all too much like some nasty insect.

And yes my feelings were a little hurt, for from my point of view these were all very lovely images with a simplicity and boldness you don't find everywhere. In fact it was soon true that you didn't find that kind of boldness and simplicity anywhere. They painted it over.

I have dozens of these kinds of entrepreneurial failure stories I could tell. Sometime I will tell you in detail how I created my own restaurant and what a fiasco that was.

