

Old Mill a landmark with a storied past

By LISA RAINFORD
Weekender Staff

Once an industrial building constructed on the banks of the Humber River as a sawmill for the proposed town of York, The Old Mill has managed to retain its historical roots while earning a reputation as a Toronto landmark.

It's unlikely that entrepreneur Robert Home Smith – who opened The Old Mill Tea Garden in 1914 on what would become the first day of the First World War – foresaw the success the city's first industrial building would experience over the decades. But 90 years later, The Old Mill remains a favourite haven of leisure and recreation.

At the helm of The Old Mill is Michael Kalmar, its president. He and his father George purchased the site in 1991 when, says Kalmar, the economy was headed into a tailspin. Undeterred, the two “battened down the hatches” and set about bringing the establishment in style with the times. The Old Mill was a business the duo knew plenty about, and they were attracted to it for its one-of-a-kind status.

“We felt it was a little dated,” Kalmar told *The Weekender*. “Our goal was to preserve the business

that The Old Mill was doing and build on it.”

The Kalmars worked hard to maintain the same period look and design while updating the dining room, ceiling, carpet and walls. Their trick was to make improvements in such a way that they weren't noticeable. The mill has always held appeal for weddings, leisure seekers, restaurants, and other local markets. This has not changed under the direction of the Kalmars, but The Old Mill's offerings have. In October of 2001, they opened The Old Mill Inn. Again, efforts were made to make the addition appear like it had always been a part of the original mill.

Last summer, Kalmar christened what was known as the Tea Room Grill, The Terrace Restaurant and Patio. He revamped the restaurant's look, menu and signage with the goal of attracting a local clientele. He wanted the restaurant to be perceived as not just a “special occasion spot.”

One of his newest initiatives is the introduction of an Italian buffet in the mill's dining room on Thursdays for lunch.

Before the Kalmars took ownership, under the proprietorship of William Hodgson beginning in the early 1970s, The Old Mill Restaurant underwent extensive

renovations, as did the mill's original rooms, including the Garret and Humber Rooms.

Hodgson was careful to maintain their themes. In January 1974, Hodgson expanded the mill to include additional banquet and meeting facilities – the Royal Oak, Portage, Mill and Brule Rooms. The Print Room was reopened in October of the same year as a lounge adjoining the main dining room, followed by the addition of the Tea Room.

The York Room was also created. The Old Mill Flower Shoppe opened just in time for Christmas 1980. May 1986 marked the opening of the new wing with four additional banquet rooms - the Guild Hall, Balmoral, Westminster Rooms and Kingsbrook Suite.

The Old Mill Inn, many years in the planning, boasts 60 rooms and suites. Nestled in the Humber Valley, The Old Mill Inn is steps away from Toronto's bicycle and walking trails and just 15 minutes from downtown. It is the ideal location for outdoor activities, events and receptions.

As its motto says: “Vallis Humbria Angliae Pars Anglia Procul” (“In the valley of the Humber, a bit of England, far from England.”)

For more information, log onto www.oldmilltoronto.com



Weekender photo/IAN KELSO

At the helm of The Old Mill is Michael Kalmar, its president. He and his father George purchased the site in 1991.