

Unique Dining Experience in Berks County – by Crystal Coffelt

Peter Toll began his venture in the restaurant business in Dewy Beach Delaware where he ran a famous seafood restaurant, The Rusty Rudder. He catered to Pennsylvania tourists for years before deciding to bring the experience of an authentic seafood restaurant to Pennsylvania.



Before opening a seafood restaurant in Berks County, Toll experimented by opening a seafood stand on Route 222 in Kutztown. He sold over 100 bushels of crabs in one weekend and had to drive to Maryland daily to pick up fresh crabs in order to keep up with the high demand of his customers. It was then that Toll knew he would be successful in

opening a restaurant that served seafood from a traditional eastern shore menu.

In 1992 Toll opened his first seafood restaurant, The Crab Barn located in Berks County Pennsylvania. He purchased and restored a 300-year-old barn that had once been part of the Underground Railroad. Peter put a lot of time and effort into converting the old barn into a restaurant. “It was hard work; I didn’t expect to be standing on scaffolding cleaning bird droppings off the roof of the barn.” The Crab Barn became a “well oiled machine” and grew to generate their largest revenues in 2005.

In the summer of 2003, Ted Hartz, former Dean of Kutztown University’s College of Business, approached Toll at the Crab Barn suggesting that he franchise the Crab Barn and informed Toll about all the services that the Kutztown University SBDC had to offer. Although Toll didn’t franchise the Crab Barn, he decided to open an additional restaurant, Ocean Blue.

Toll had found a location for his new restaurant at 6th and Penn Street in the Wachovia building. The space had become available after Café Stratton dissolved in 2004. Before opening Ocean Blue, Toll

approached the KUSBDC looking for a consultant to aid in obtaining a lease agreement with Wachovia bank.

Kutztown University SBDC consultant Bruce Sommers helped Toll "in every way." He fine-tuned Toll's business plan and helped ascertain a lot of the funding needed. Most importantly, Sommers gave Toll the confidence to go into Wachovia, the banking giant, and tell them what he wanted. Sommers also gave him advice in the area of management. Sommers told Toll to step back and stop interfering. "Set standards; just let people do their jobs." Toll adds, "It gives me comfort to know that Bruce has been there and done that, he knows every aspect of running a business. I'm a cook, not a business person. Bruce always knows what I am up against."

In 2005 Ocean Blue opened their doors. When customers enter the restaurant they walk into a "Zen" like atmosphere, feeling relaxed and at ease. Ocean Blue has an elegant setting with a baby grand piano playing classical jazz music and dim lighting to set the mood. Toll says, "Ocean Blue has a contemporary feel with casual pricing; it is unique and there is nothing like it in Berks County."

Toll has many ideas for the future of Ocean Blue. He is planning on offering Valet parking to add to the convenience and to make his customers feel more comfortable about parking downtown. He also owns a transportation company called PMT enterprises. He is thinking of possibility using his limousine service to transport customers to local hotels.

The most difficult thing that Toll had to overcome was "finding the right relationships with people that he needs on his team, such as banks, bankers, accountants and lawyers." He also had to learn to cope with the stress of owning multiple businesses. He has also found it difficult to keep up with the different markets. "Every day there is a different type of event at the Sovereign Center, which brings in a different type of crowd in each day. Each crowd brings a new learning experience."

The Crab Barn, Ocean Blue and PMT enterprise have created over 125 jobs in Berks County, 40 of those positions are at Ocean Blue. Toll is now primarily involved with the marketing of Ocean Blue and his wife Pandy Toll is now the General Manager of the Crab Barn. Krista Mallon who has been employed with Toll since day one, 14 years ago, is the General Manager of Ocean Blue.

Toll has one more project in the works. He wants to open a traditional Memphis Tennessee BBQ House in the very near future. This restaurant will be set in a wooded area in a log cabin with a screen porch and a smoke house. He plans on opening it seasonally and using the restaurant for banquets during the off season.

For more information about Ocean Blue, go to www.oceanbluebarandgrille.com. For information about the Crab Barn, go to www.thecrabbarn.com.

