



Justin and Gregg Wolfe
PHOTOS BY STEVEN MARTIN

BOTH SIDES NOW

With the addition of The Early Bird diner, the Wolfe brothers play to a whole new crowd **BY KYM WOLFE**

WHEN DOES LATE NIGHT turn into early morning? If you're Gregg or Justin Wolfe, you probably peg it at around 2:30 a.m. That's when business at the Nite Owl lounge winds down and people head over to The Early Bird diner for a bite to eat.

The side-by-side bar and restaurant are actually two halves of one enterprise owned and operated by the Wolfes. The brothers, both experienced musicians as well as food-and-beverage professionals, opened the Nite Owl two and half years ago with the notion of introducing Londoners to a different kind of nightclub experience.

"We wanted an alternative experience, not a dance club or an Irish club; more of a hole in the wall that you would find in a big city," says Gregg.

"I've played in every state, across Europe and in Japan,"

adds Justin. "You get a good feel for the culture of different places, and that definitely influenced what we did here."

Last year, when the store next door to the Nite Owl became vacant, the brothers decided to expand their small, uber-cool lounge. Breaking down part of the wall that separated the two spaces, they opened The Early Bird in February. And like their vision with the Nite Owl, the Wolfes were intent on offering Londoners a slightly different kind of dining experience. The décor is decidedly funky-retro, with diner booths, pop art, old movie posters and four prominently displayed Elvis busts—painted to look like the members of Kiss.

The menu has its own unique twists, too.

"At first glance, it's fairly familiar diner food, but then you realize it's much more artisanal," observes Sarah Labatt, who

dropped by The Early Bird for Sunday brunch with her daughter, Emma.

"We call it comfort food with a fine-dining twist," says Justin, a nod to his previous experience as a chef at Garlic's of London and the lamented local landmark, the Verandah Cafe.

Many of the menu items, like the Texas-influenced bacon fried pickles, were inspired by foods the brothers had experienced in their travels. They also incorporated comfort foods they learned to make in their grandmother's kitchen. "Baba lived to be 104," says Justin. "We learned all about perogies and borscht from her."

Back then, of course, neither brother suspected they would one day be cooking up Baba-style perogies in their own restaurant. After graduating high school, both Gregg and Justin played and toured with different bands, but never together. Between tours Gregg lived in Toronto, working in bars and for a music management company. Justin spent his down time in London, working in local restaurants and in construction.

"I was working in kitchens, doing renos, anything to make money when I wasn't on the road," recalls Justin. It turned out to be useful experience. The Wolfes invested considerable sweat equity in creating The Early Bird—Justin even tiled the kitchen and washrooms himself. "We're applying everything we picked up along the way," he says.

Of their years on the road, Gregg says, "We had a pretty good run of it. [But] as you get older, it's hard to get away, to leave for months at a time."

When it became evident that it was time to settle down, the brothers did a little soul searching and decided to open a bar together. Thanks to available space at an affordable price, London won out over Toronto, and they opened the doors to the Nite Owl in 2009. The brothers liked that the space was a little off the beaten track, in the quirky block of Talbot Street that runs between York and King Streets.

Billed as an upscale rock lounge, the Nite Owl offers a different musical experi-



LEFT The Nite Owl lounge now Homemade pulled-pork sandwich with poutine side. Elvis does Kiss

ence every night of the week. Tuesday, for instance, is heavy-metal night, featuring a different guest deejay every week. "We usually have a member of a local metal band bring in their own music collection," says Gregg. "It's cool for their fans to hear what they listen to and what has influenced their music. Metal is such a broad genre with different aspects to it—it's different every week."

Wednesday is punk rock night with DJ Brandon Eedy, who is also a music promoter and books all of the Nite Owl's live Saturday night entertainment. Thursday is "bring your own vinyl" night with DJ Justin Chasty, or, as Gregg calls it, "record nerd night." Patrons bring their favourite vinyl and Chasty will play one full side of each. Often people will introduce their record with a story about why they chose it or a memory attached to it. "On Thursdays we have very eclectic music and a really diverse age range, from the older record collectors to the younger guys who are all excited about vinyl," says Gregg.

Friday features soul, blues, Motown and modern rock. "There's a real mix of people, from about 25 to 45. If the Knights are playing we'll get some post-game hockey fans," says Justin. The first Friday of each month is also the launch party night for the visual artist of the month. The Nite Owl promotes local artists by hanging their work, with the display changing monthly.

Saturday is for live music, anything from rock and roll to rockabilly to hard rock. Because the stage area isn't large enough to accommodate some full bands,

Gregg says, "We'll sometimes have a member of a large band perform a solo acoustic or stripped down version." There is no cover charge, something the Wolfes feel encourages people to come out and listen to some live music that they might not be familiar with.

Sunday is '90s rock night, the last weekly gathering before a much-needed day off, since both the Nite Owl and The Early Bird are closed on Mondays. "It's become a bit of an industry hot spot on Sunday nights," says Justin. "Staff from local restaurants and bars will come by after they're finished work."

The Nite Owl has also become a bit of a go-to place for visiting musicians, says Gregg, noting that band members performing downtown will often wander over after their show, including members from Kid Rock and Billy Talent after their shows at the John Labatt Centre.



Since opening The Early Bird, the brothers are finding a nice synergy between the two joined, yet distinct, operations. With The Early Bird open to 1 a.m. on weekdays and 4 a.m. on weekends, it draws a steady stream of customers not only from the Nite Owl, but from surrounding bars as well. Something of a pleasant surprise, notes Justin, was the unexpected flow of people the other way. "They'll finish eating and continue their evening with a drink on the bar side."

The back of The Early Bird features a tiki bar where high-end cocktails and craft beers are served. After 9 p.m., admission to the Early Bird is restricted to over 19 years. Music is piped in from the Nite Owl, and since both sides are licensed, customers can enjoy a drink wherever they choose.

As if all of this wasn't enough to occupy their every waking hour, the brothers Wolfe are once again making music together with their new band, Beards of Prey. And while they have not ruled out the possibility of playing on the road again, for now they are happy to roost in London, surrounded by good music and good food. Baba would certainly be proud. *ccc*