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BUSINESS

Cameron Mitchell reflects on 30 years, celebrates 100th restaurant



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Cameron Mitchell openly admits that his ego once drove him to grow his company too big, too quickly.

After achieving his goal of having 10 restaurants by 2000, he made the near-destructive decision to add eight more.

By 2008, he had amassed 40 restaurants and sold his 19 Mitchell's Fish Markets and three Mitchell's Steakhouses for \$92 million. But he planned to open another eight in two years.

"I was kind of reading my own press clippings and full of hubris there," said the 60-year-old restaurateur, who lives in Upper Arlington. "That was a big mistake. And then, of course, the Great Recession happened at the same time. I always say it took some lousy entrepreneuring to get into that mess and some great entrepreneuring to get out of that mess."

Today, with more than 60 restaurants nationwide (including its sister Rusty Bucket eateries), Cameron Mitchell Restaurants is poised for another growth spurt; the goal is to reach 70 by the end of 2024. That expansion includes the forthcoming Cap City Fine Diner in Cincinnati; forthcoming Mediterranean fine-dining restaurant concept in Easton; forthcoming Butcher & Rose steakhouse Downtown; newly opened Valentina's in Dublin; and high-end Italian eatery Cento—his 100th overall—which opens Tuesday in German Village.

But this time, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants is more sophisticated, the plans are sounder and the post-COVID-19 recovery is going well. And as Mitchell celebrates the company's 30-year anniversary and looks to the future, he hopes to set the company up to succeed well after he is gone.

“That’s the biggest achievement I could ever have—if I can have the company transcend me,” he said. “That it's still healthy and growing, and people are building careers with the company.”

More: Cameron Mitchell Restaurants Opens Valentina's in Bridge Park

'The industry saved my life'

Mitchell began working in the restaurant industry following a troubling period of taking and dealing drugs, stealing and battling poverty as a teenager.

“I grew up with nothing,” Mitchell said. “I was a high school dropout and a runaway, and I scraped pennies (together) to buy a box of macaroni and cheese and make without milk and butter because I didn't have any.”

At 16, he turned his life around, returned to school and got a job as a dishwasher at a steakhouse to earn the money his single mother didn't have to give him.

“The industry saved my life,” he said.

After graduation, he attended the Culinary Institute of America in New York, and returned to Columbus, where he worked his way up from sous chef to operations manager for 55 Restaurant Group before forming his company with the opening of Cameron's American Bistro in Worthington in 1993.

Over the next three decades, Mitchell built an empire, which now ranks among the country's largest independent restaurant groups, according to Nation's Restaurant News, which reported that the company anticipates sales of more than \$470 million in 2023. (CMR confirmed those projections to the Dispatch.)

Mitchell lists the expansion of his Ocean Prime seafood and steakhouse to New York City and Beverly Hills as highlights. His restaurants have played a key role in the development of Short North and Bridge Park in Dublin. He also has built a successful catering company and the nationally renowned Budd Dairy Food Hall.

“I'm honored to have witnessed somebody so passionate about their career for this amount of time,” said Mitchell's wife, Molly, who is 53. “His success story is appealing to people because it is rare. ... He just never believed it couldn't happen.”

More: Cameron Mitchell's The Pearl a distinct gem among its Short North surroundings

A 'people-first culture'

Mitchell attributes his success to his "people-first culture," where the staff members come first, so they are happy and motivated to care for customers. And he centers the company's approach to hospitality on a specific mantra, which is also the title of his memoir: "Yes is the answer. What is the question?"

"He roots for everyone's success," said Brent Crawford, principal and founder of the firm Crawford Hoying, which developed Bridge Park.

"Somebody can come into the Cameron Mitchell Restaurants doing dishes, and move all the way up to an executive chef. ... Cameron has always been about giving people the opportunity to be the best version of themselves."

Crawford Hoying is also partnering with CMR to open a luxury boutique hotel at Bridge Park.

Cameron Mitchell also has helped Experience Columbus win bids for high-profile conventions, according to the tourism organization's president and CEO, Brian Ross.

John Barker, president and CEO of the Ohio Restaurant Association, credits Mitchell with elevating the "fine-casual" dining scene.

"I have heard some restaurants say, 'If I can just get somewhere near a Cameron Mitchell restaurant, I'll get all the people that can't fit into his restaurant because it's sold out all the time. ... I can't tell you how many people have said to me, 'Hey, can you get me in Valentina's?' And I say, 'No, I can't get in.'"

More: Cameron Mitchell's El Segundo offers muy magnifico entrees, happy hour fare and margaritas

What's on the menu at Cento?

Mitchell said he hopes it's "really hard" to get a reservation at Cento.

"It's probably the restaurant I'm most excited about," he said. "We wanted to do fine-dining Italian for years. We wanted to be in German Village for years. It was just so hard to get in there."

The restaurant, which has 100 seats and a patio, features entrees such as branzino, duroc pork chop and swordfish; a variety of pasta; and an antipasto menu of burrata, octopus and

more.

“I’ve never seen anything like it in Columbus,” Mitchell said. “I’d put it in Greenwich Village just as easy as I would put it in German Village.”

First Look: Cento by Cameron Mitchell

Getting through the pandemic

Mitchell has weathered his fair share of storms, including the coronavirus pandemic, which threatened the industry—especially during the “stay-at-home” order.

“It was absolutely terrifying,” Molly said.

“I had no doubt that he would figure something out. He went to the office every single day by himself and wrote out every possible scenario of how he could carry his company through this. And he did. ... But once they were allowed to reopen, there was no staff. And then once there was staff, there was no product. It just was one thing after another.”

Although the company is doing much better today—“we had a terrific January and February,” Mitchell said—there are lingering effects of the pandemic, including more turnover among managers, who are leaving for opportunities that are more flexible and include work from home options, he added.

“The second issue is the mental health of our people,” he said. “I call it the underlying current. Part of it is our political turmoil. Part of it is the unsureness of our economy.”

Mitchell said his restaurants are more expensive due to increasing labor costs. In the industry overall, he said he has noticed some decline in quality of service and food, despite the higher prices.

“You have just an overall younger staff out there,” he said. “When you have a less-experienced staff, that translates into less well-delivered service or food quality. We have tripled our efforts into training. ... But it will continue to get better.”

More: Have we reached tipping fatigue? Bars to coffee shops to carryouts solicit consumers

The 'Mitchell Hall Model'

Mitchell also believes the Columbus restaurant scene will continue to improve as the city grows; he cited the lack of “huge, dense Downtown” as a challenge.

To further support the local industry, Mitchell donated \$3.5 million to Mitchell Hall, the Columbus State Community College’s new Hospitality Management and Culinary Arts building, which opened in 2019. The facility includes teaching kitchens and labs, a culinary theater, a full-service restaurant, bakery and more.

“Thousands of graduates will come through there,” he said. “And their impact on the Columbus food scene will be very strong over the years.”

CSCC president David Harrison said Mitchell Hall has attracted students from around the state and beyond to the program.

Citing Mitchell's contributions, and the school's ability to raise \$10 million in private funding under his leadership, Harrison said the collaboration has inspired other ventures. For example, CSCC has partnered with OhioHealth on an initiative to address current workforce gaps by attracting more students to nursing and other health care fields. Together, they will establish the OhioHealth Center for Health Sciences academic building.

OhioHealth contributed a \$25 million endowment for faculty and staff, while the college will use voter-approved bond funding for renovations. At least \$12 million in private funding will be raised for additional student support and equipment.

“That's the Mitchell Hall model expanded exponentially,” Harris said. “The learning that we have gone through with Mitchell Hall really prepared us to think even bigger.”

What's next for Cameron Mitchell?

Mitchell has already started teaching his children, all in their 20s, about the business. His oldest son is a manager at Ocean Prime in New York City. His daughter has interned with the company. And although his other son has aspirations to break into film, he, too, has worked for the company.

“I certainly couldn't be happier if they all ended up intertwined in the company somehow,” Molly said.

As for their dad, his new restaurants and hotel will certainly keep him busy.

“I can easily sell tomorrow and retire and never do another restaurant again,” Mitchell said. “But growth is what fuels our company and opportunity for our people. ... I always joke that I’m in the fourth quarter of my career. Maybe I’ll get some overtime, who knows?”

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