

WARMING UP to the Idea



By Peter Saunders

When Heidi Wagner would travel with her husband Cory from their home in Edmonton to visit her relatives in Colorado, it became a family tradition to eat out at the Melting Pot, a local fondue restaurant in an historic building. The non-rushed, multi-course dining experience allowed them plenty of quality time to catch up with one another.

It was only later when Cory, as an owner of thoroughbred horses, visited Kentucky and saw a newer restaurant with the same name that they realized it was a franchise. This led Heidi to consider opening her own location in Edmonton, an idea she studied further while on maternity leave.

"There was nothing like this at home," she says. "The experience is more interactive than other restaurants, with the server making the fondue right at your table, and you're spending about two or three hours there. The concept works well in a cold climate and Edmonton has similar demographics to Colorado. I studied to be a teacher and never thought I'd open a restaurant, but if someone else beat me to it, it would be a missed opportunity."

Heidi contacted the franchisor in late 2008 and signed an agreement the following February. Construction began in August 2009 and the 557-m² (6,000-sf) restaurant opened in March 2010 on Calgary Trail in South Edmonton.

It was the first Melting Pot to open outside the U.S., where there are already 145 locations. As such, Heidi had to establish her restaurant as an appealing destination for local customers.

"We ran radio ads, used a lot of social media and exhibited at a bridal fair a few weeks before we opened," says Cory. "It has just mushroomed from there."

Cory, who works in financial investing and real estate, helps his wife out with accounting and other back-office paperwork, as well as looking ahead to further locations. Heidi holds a development agreement to open another Melting Pot in Calgary and two in Vancouver, which are expected to be announced over the next few years.

"We think Calgary and Vancouver will surpass Edmonton," says Heidi, "but the process has been slower than originally anticipated."

"It's been a bit difficult finding space in Calgary, where the economy never really slowed down," adds Cory.

The Melting Pot also hopes to expand elsewhere in Canada soon, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). **33**