



THE NIGHT SHIFT

Shagadelic, baby!

Your friendly neighbourhood Firkin just got a big, brash, extremely British makeover. **BY PAUL AGUIRRE-LIVINGSTON**

Nothing will make you believe that Toronto is changing for real like the modernization of something you didn't know could be out of date: a British pub chain. Last month, the forces behind the well-known, and well-frequented, Firkin Group of Pubs summoned members of the media to Rosedale's The Quail (1055 Yonge St.) for the official unveiling of its company-wide rebranding. It was the Firkin's latest outpost to go under the knife and come out with a boisterous new Brit-nationalist veneer, a modern-fusion dinner menu, seasonal cocktails, and an attitude to match.

Established in 1987, Yonge and Eglinton's Fox & Firkin was the first of a now 32-location-strong empire conceived by two South African buddies. As the group's 25th anniversary approached, director of marketing Larry Isaacs says a reinvention was necessary. "The market is changing: People are becoming healthier and looking for different experiences." The company launched an 18-month research program, interviewing successful chefs, university professors, current managers, staff, and patrons. The result was a series of observations about what people actually thought of the pubs. "We asked all the hard questions," says Isaacs. "We

got all the answers we didn't want." The Firkin simply wasn't considered cool anymore. "Over the past 20 years, you've seen a lot of new restaurants come to the city. The consumer has become more discerning—they're looking for craft beers and healthier foods, a cooler vibe," Isaacs explains.

The new look for the chain comes courtesy of Mackay Wong, which counts Pickle Barrel, Wayne Gretzky's, and Glow, Rose Reisman's Shops at Don Mills resto, as clients. The first makeover debuted at Goose & Firkin, near York Mills and Leslie. Yonge and Davisville's Bull & Firkin came next, then locations at Woodbine and Steeles, and Queen and John. By 2013, nine pubs will have been refurbished. The company will then take a break to study how successful the rebranding has been.

Gone are the red-velvet banquettes and dark-wood finishes. There are still staples like darts and billiards, but now there's Warhol-esque pop art of The Beatles. There are Sherlock Holmes and Queen decals on the restroom doors. There are bowler-hat light fixtures over a communal table, a new lounge area with Union Jack-clad couches under dim lights, and a Brit-rock soundtrack. It's a tribute that

makes Britain—at least the Britain of 45 years ago—look like the only place worth being.

The Firkin is hoping to capture the business of 25- to 45-year-old suits, both single and married. "We call them FLEs: fun-loving extroverts," says Isaacs. The elusive female clientele is also top-of-mind: "One of the things that pubs have always been known for is that they're a man cave," he says. "When you walk in the door, you'll find 10 guys sitting at the bar, maybe their pants are a little bit low. It's not a comfortable place for a group of five girls to come and drink, so we've tried to address that." The new lounge area is supposed to help ease women into the cave.

Corporate chef David Godfrey, who got his start at Canoe, will try to lure in FLEs with his menu, which presents a hefty salad section and trendy items like fish tacos and Parmesan-crusted grilled cheese alongside bangers and mash. The Firkin has evolved beyond a house red and white to include a (very modest) wine list with personal decanters. They have their own brand of Butler's Pale Ale, and a drink-pairing menu is in the works.

On opening night at The Quail, people weren't sure how to take the change. One couple was



USELESS INFORMATION

A firkin is a unit of cask measurement. One beer firkin equals 40.9 litres.

"super excited" because they'd never been to a Firkin but liked it enough that they wanted to return. A young lawyer who considers the Rosedale pub his local haunt said the makeover was "unnecessarily stupid," and hopes the old rule to "never bring a date to The Quail" will remain in effect. "When have pubs ever looked this clean and perfect?" asked another guy, who felt duped by the new charm. A friend hiding in the corner said it best: "A pub is a pub is a pub."

According to one long-time Firkin bartender, who works at another remodelled location, the changes have helped attract a different set of people. "I like an old-school, dirty, dingy pub, but I also like a cleaned-up one," he says, noting regulars expect him to dislike the reno. "It's not like we turned into Denny's or something." Isaacs sums up the change in a sentence: "We have brought the British funk back into pub culture." Though I doubt authentic Brit pubs would be so brash in their patriotism, I bet the Spice Girls would dig it. ■

i Next up: North York's Frog & Firkin (4854 Yonge St.) will relaunch later this month.