

Service and Design

An Interview with Curt Huegel, Proprietor, Bill's Townhouse



Campagnola dining room (left); Bill's Townhouse dining area (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to his current post, Curt Huegel was a Principal with LDV Hospitality. He has also been a Partner with Lugo Tailored Lifestyle and Scott Conant Management, as well as an Owner for Lenny's. He is a graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park.



Curt Huegel

RESTAURANT BRIEF Bill's Townhouse (billstownhouse.com) is a new restaurant in a familiar space, opened in the spring of 2016 by a team who were longtime admirers of its inherent charms. Throughout a near-century tenure (and few incarnations), the three-story restaurant at 57 E 54th Street has seen its fair share of history and reinvention. Today, Bill's Townhouse serves Classic American Cuisine in the heart of Midtown.

What got you into this business and what has made it an industry where you have stayed?

I somewhat got into it by accident. I moved to New York to get a job on Wall Street after college. A brother of a friend of mine owned a bar on the Upper East Side and offered me an interesting deal to run it while I was looking for a job, and I never left. I became his partner.

Are you more interested in the restaurant part of the business, the nightlife, or the lounge?

I'm definitely not interested in the nightlife side. I do like the bar aspect and the restaurant aspect. I can apply my feelings on hospitality to both. They both require listening to guests and putting them first.

Do the areas you're interested in all tie together?

They all tie together in my head in that everything I own now is the kind of place that I enjoy spending time at. My wine bar downtown is a very easy and approachable wine bar for a casual meal, and my two restaurants were two of my favorite restaurants in New York before I bought them.

What is the key to staying relevant and having sustainability in this market?

Whatever I do, I do with the approach of creating something that isn't just relevant today, but will be relevant 10 years from now, and that requires doing things in a classic way,

like service and design. Of my two restaurants, one has been around for 30 years, and Bill's is still somewhat similar to what it has been since 1924.

In both of those cases, was it important when you came in to keep the history of each but make them your own?

With both, I spent a lot of time studying the places, and listening to the people who were the customers. I also researched what was written about both places before I took them over, and tried not to impose my will on either of them.

In both places, if I'd come in and changed them too much, they wouldn't have been as well received.

How do you define the position for each restaurant in the market?

They both had an established position in each of their markets, so it was about what we could do to improve on the things people told us that we were doing wrong, and how we could also improve on the things people said we were doing well.

It was about going back into the kitchen, buying better product, and working on some new dishes, while not changing so much that people would notice. I'm not looking to have a PR splash that changes things overnight – I'm looking to own businesses that I can grow year over year.

What are the keys to success in this business?

Many people get into this business for the wrong reasons. If owners do this with the intent of creating places for guests and paying attention to those guests, and not making it about themselves, then success will follow.

Much of that comes back to the people you hire. What do you look for in the people you bring in?

I have never hired anyone off a resume because personality is something that can't be taught. The restaurant business isn't rocket science, but it's about creating opportunities.

Do you actively seek growth opportunities or is it about what comes along?

I've been very fortunate in that the deals I've done have been very natural. I tried to buy Bill's 10 years ago and couldn't get it done, but it came back to me.

Will you avoid building multiple locations even though you can branch out if you want?

I'm about doing it the right way. I'm about opening restaurants and making sure they're on solid ground and have good financials, and that they're working, that they're making money, and then I will look to do the next thing.

In an industry with a lot of personalities, is it true that you don't like to be written about?

I understand that there is a part of that which people want today from the restaurant owner. While I'm pretty private, I understand for the betterment of my business there are things I have to do.

Do you ever appreciate not just what you have today but the wins throughout your career?

I don't do it as much as I should. The things I've done over the past 25 years have floated one into the next. Starting in this business was tough, but the most important thing is looking at what I did wrong and trying to make sure I don't repeat those mistakes.

How deeply do you get involved in the business and when you have multiple locations, is it harder to be as engaged?

My philosophy is to hire the right people and put them in front and then be there to help them in making the business we all want to make. I'm not doing this alone.

It's about trusting people I've hired, and trusting my gut and our philosophy on how we want these businesses to run.

Will you talk about your recent opening of a country-themed establishment?

It's called Printers Alley and it's on 40th Street. I've always listened to country music since I was a kid. In New York, I had always gone to places in the city to listen to country or be in an environment like that. Those places have gone by the wayside.

About a year ago, some friends of mine who were like-minded about wanting to do it got together to open Printers so we had somewhere to go.

What advice do you give young people early on to build a sustainable career in this industry?

It's a business that one needs to learn from the ground up. People who are in this business who didn't wait tables or wash dishes have a bit of a disconnect, and the people who work for them can see that. ●