

Shawnigan Lake bar and grill named to Small Business B.C. top 10 list

Ashley Gaudreault
News Leader Pictorial

Darren Cole is a fun guy. He's pretty passionate about being the top dog at Steeples' Bar & Grill in Shawnigan Lake too.

He recently overhauled the popular, ex-church establishment from white tablecloth, fancy feasting to more a chill, family-oriented casual hangout.

The changes haven't gone unnoticed either. Cole says Steeples had its best year yet.

It is currently in the race for the number-one spot on Small Business B.C.'s Successful You Awards top 10 list.

Owner/manager Cole's waiting to hear if the Shawnigan hot spot will make it into the top five.

If that were the case, as a top-five contestant Cole would prepare a presentation and deliver it to a set of judges at the Hyatt Hotel in Vancouver. The ex-motivational speaker says he's got the competition in the bag.

"A lot of it's about passion. Passion is huge," he said of Steeples' success, also noting after a year of "reprogramming our market" they've had their best year yet.

"Our customers and the community they can sense it."

Steeples made its debut Dec. 17, 2000 with previous owners Michael and Daphne Francis's grand visions of retaining 50-year Sylvan United Church's heritage.

Cole's career saw him managing many Vancouver Island restaurants and hotels during a 33-year span, he bought out the Francis to become a full owner/operator in 2008.

On Feb. 1, he'll also be purchasing the land and building.

Not long after Cole took over, he came face to face with the economic downturn, which meant he was forced to make "creative changes."

Changes started to roll in. Prices have dropped considerably.

"We do try to get as much local, organic ingredients as we can and when we do, we'll feature them," Cole said.

Background dining tunes include everything from Norah Jones to Toby Keith. Cole changed the paint from a deep burgundy to an earthier palette and rich wood tables are now naked.

Cole also knows how to throw a wicked shindig. During the past couple years, he's hosted a wide variety of community functions, fundraisers, theme-parties and galas.

They've done benefits for the Shawnigan Museum, Jr. A Islanders hockey team and the South Cowichan Rotary Club, to name a few.



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Steeples' Darren Cole (left) celebrates his status as a contender in Small Business BC's Successful You Awards top 10 list with chefs Dan Merrifield and Jarret Balfour.

"It's great to be such a part of the community. The community supports us and we support them."

That's his recipe for success.

"We get involved with as much as we can."

Cole gives props to his staffers, including chef Dan Merrifield, sous chef Justin Yariwon and fellow manager Christle Pope.

"Each and every one of you that has survived this real-life restaurant reality show can look in the mirror and know whole-heartedly that you are

a huge part of this and that is what I want for all of us, the awareness of how to manifest success," Cole wrote in a letter to staff before he headed off on a winter vacation.

The eighth-annual Small Business B.C. Successful You Awards is a province-wide event that recognizes and celebrates contributions B.C.'s entrepreneurs make to their local communities and global economy.

Local company Macdonald & Lawrence Timber Framing Ltd. is also in the running.