

one week wonder

by Joel Samberg

When you've got just the **right mixture of positive attributes,** people realize you're special in no time at all

Elegant, city-view eateries have graced the Jersey side of the Hudson River for decades. For most, it takes months, if not years, of mixing and matching all the various elements that go into a restaurant's character to finally establish the right formula for success: cuisine, style, décor, ambience, personality and the elusive "it" factor.

For Frank's Waterside, it took less than a week.

Two and a half years ago, developer Scot Heagney and Chef Sam Mickail built a seafood restaurant along the Hudson in North Bergen—and in many ways the right elements were in place even before the doors opened for the first time. They took Heagney's penchant for chic, functional design, blended it with Mickail's award-winning culinary skills, added a phenomenal view of Manhattan and some classy entertainment, and finished it off with a healthy serving of personal charm.

The result—the immediate result—was a restaurant that everyone from statewide politicians to the Sopranos have chosen as their very own. Indeed, *The Sopranos* has filmed there, as have shows such as *Law and Order* and MTV's *My Super Sweet 16*. Top businesspeople and noted entertainers consistently frequent Frank's, just like they have since the beginning.

More importantly, lots of regular folk looking for a high-class spot to eat by the Hudson River quickly made Frank's the hottest new spot on the Palisades.

"We built it from scratch. There was absolutely nothing there," notes Co-Owner and Executive Chef Mickail, a veteran restaurateur who at the age of 24 was already running the kitchen at New York's famed Terrace in the Sky at Columbia University.

The site may have begun empty, but with Mickail's own reputation in the wings, it was a safe bet to assume that Frank's Waterside would hit the ground





Executive Chef Sam Mickail



running. Raised in France and educated in the culinary arts in Switzerland, Mickail, who claims he never wanted to be anything but a chef, had won many major awards by the time the opportunity came along to take part in a new Hudson waterfront venture. Between his time at Terrace in the Sky and Frank's Waterside, Mickail spent several years with the Knowles family at their enormously successful New Jersey restaurants, including the Manor and the Highlawn Pavilion, both in West Orange.

"They weren't happy to see me go," he understates. But the lure of running his own place, where his personal stamp could be larger and more rewarding than ever before, was a powerful one. So, in January 2004, Mickail and Heagney introduced Frank's Waterside to the North Bergen waterfront.

The restaurant won points by hiring Jono Frola as general manager. For one thing, Frola has been responsible for lining up Frank's vibrant weekly music schedule. A guitarist and vocalist who has himself played with many notable pros throughout his career, Jono plays live jazz, often as part of a duo, when he's not wowing customers as GM. The lively Sunday jazz brunch is a particular favorite of the discriminating crowd, and Frola has proudly announced that a steel drummer will soon bring a nice "island" touch to the already stunning outdoor terrace.

With the noted Crab House and River Palm Terrace among their nearby neighbors, the Frank's partners knew that, whatever the strength of their skills and reputation—not to mention a fine menu replete with fresh fish and fantastic meat dishes—they would have to work extra hard to attract newcomers who were first discovering the area, while also winning converts from the formidable competition. As Mickail is quick to point out, it takes just one night to lose a customer who might otherwise end up talking to 30 or 40 other people

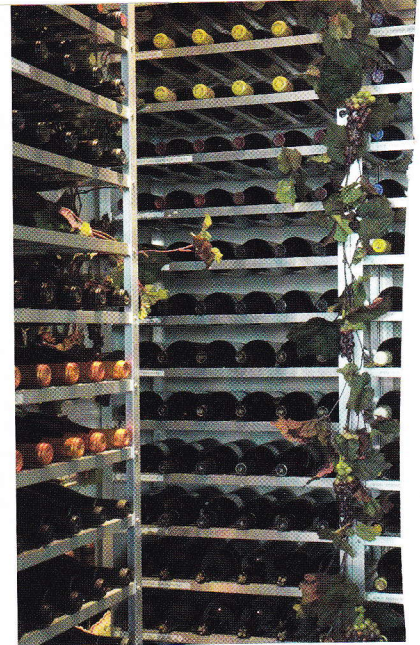
about Frank's Waterside, whereas it can take up to six months to win that same customer back.

"Now," Mickail says, "we're happy to report that we have a tremendous number of regular patrons. The hard work paid off." As did the reputation that preceded it.

Even on those foggy or misty evenings when the glimmering lights of skyscrapers across the river refuse to materialize, patrons enjoy the place for what's inside. Heagney, who has proven he has an eye for motif, made sure his architects and designers installed plenty of cherry wood décor and attractive hardwood floors, and that maximum use was made of the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, particularly by the waterfront.

Clearly Mickail feels at ease entertaining in this setting. "I treat this place like it's my own home, and all the patrons as if they are my personal guests," he says. "I think that's what distinguishes us from many of the other restaurants around. Sometimes it isn't easy to make everyone happy. But I always try. I'll never pass up an opportunity to talk to someone. I want them to feel as if they're the only ones here, even though there may be 150 other people sitting all around."

When a team with such talent, experience and chemistry is combined under one roof, the results can seem almost magical. Frank's Waterside lucked out, in that sense. So did New Jersey's dining public. After all, whenever this team adds a new touch to the restaurant, it doesn't take patrons long to realize that it was a good decision. Usually less than a week. NT



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(Reservations Recommended)

