

February 25, 2011

## Is this North America's greatest sports bar?

By RACHEL BRADY  
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

*Toronto's Real Sports Bar & Grill caters to a broader audience than the hockey-and-beer gang*

Your senses are aroused as soon as you walk into Real Sports Bar & Grill.

Nightclub music pulses through your body as you watch a hockey fight unfolding on a two-storey-tall HD screen suspended above an ice-frosted bar.

Game-watchers kick back in leather seats. Groups of men and women cozy into booths, their heads on a swivel as they scan a dizzying array of screens and peer over at the VIP lounge.

Men in suits preside over tables full of laptops and beer.

Women are dressed to impress - and they are not to be outdone by the stunning servers in little black dresses.

In this sports bar, you can wear heels without stepping around peanut shells.

Located adjacent to the Air Canada Centre in the heart of Toronto's condo alley, Real Sports transcends the typical grill where men gather to watch hockey, football and basketball. Opened eight months ago, the 1,000-seat locale is regularly filled to capacity, and reservations are often impossible. More than 250,000 patrons have visited to date. ESPN mobile already voted it the best sports bar in North America, and it's so hot that the owner, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, is considering offers to establish similar venues in Canada and the United States.

Real Sports' recipe includes TV action, music, food, drinks and maybe, just maybe, the opportunity to meet someone: sports bar meets meet market.

"It's really corporate during the day, lots of business meetings," said Melissa Wyciszkievicz, a server at Real Sports. "Then at night, tons of fans - lots of jerseys, lots of tourists, lots of men. And the women know that. They know it's a good place to meet guys."

To devise the concept, MLSE food and hospitality experts visited bars, restaurants and night clubs across North America to observe best practices. They hit everything from little corner pubs to ESPN Zones, Las Vegas sports books and glitzy celebrity-owned spots such as Jay-Z's swanky line of sports clubs called 40/40 and Justin Timberlake's Southern Hospitality. Sampling chicken wings and geeking on sound systems and designer palettes, they scrutinized every detail.

"We travelled nearly every inch of North America, and we learned that the chicken wing is the king of the sports bar," said Michael Doyle, MLSE's vice-president of food and beverage. "But we also observed lots of other things: the importance of audio-video, the feel of a great arena-like room, how to get away from the male-dominated bar where women feel uncomfortable, and how vital it is to have a really great menu and high-end decorative finishes throughout the bar."

Creating a wow atmosphere was critical. Rockwell Group, an architecture firm known for its work on grand projects like Oscar sets, concert theatres, stadiums and luxury hotels, designed Real Sports like a theatre - 26,800 square feet over two levels - which cost \$12-million to build. It has 199 television screens, including the gargantuan high-definition screen over the bar that is claimed to be the biggest in any sports grill anywhere.

Those who enjoy man-cave-themed, home-team sports bars with cheap food are out of luck. There are no pool tables, framed jerseys, posters or pennants.

Instead there are modern art installations: sculptures of famous trophies in sports, hockey-stick-inspired chandeliers, and a bar glazed like a sheet of ice. It has neutral tones and night-club lighting, modern furnishings, a golf simulator, and booths to dock your iPod or laptop for a business lunch.

MLSE says the bar's clientele is 40 per cent female on average. Football-heavy viewing days tend to skew just 25 per cent female, but it was a hot spot on Valentines Day when there were about 50 per cent of each gender.

"We've heard great things about this place and had to see it for ourselves. It's more like a lounge than a sports bar and the food is amazing," said Stephanie Suckling of Mississauga, who was with a table of female friends before a Bon Jovi concert. "You don't feel like you're just here watching a hockey game. You feel like there's more going on. A lot of single girls meeting guys."

Aside from the big screen, another source for gawking is the players' lounge, routinely filled with not just members of MLSE's teams - the Maple Leafs, Raptors, and Toronto FC - but also other sports figures such as Mike Weir, Dana White and Manny Ramirez. Actor Cuba Gooding Jr. requested that an obscure boxing match be put up on a screen. Actor Robert Downey Jr. wondered when the place would be franchised.

"Everywhere you look, you've got a screen. You're not missing nothin'. It's the best bar I've ever been to," said Toronto Raptors forward Amir Johnson. "I'll Tweet about it when I'm there eating wings and watching highlights."

Real Sports isn't the only Canadian sports bar tapped into the upscale trend. When it started its research five years ago, MLSE visited Flames Central in Calgary, considered Canada's biggest and best at that time. While MLSE intentionally chose not to go wild with team paraphernalia, as Flames Central did, Real Sports does borrow from Flames Central's polished, night-club-like, grand atmosphere.

Red Card in Vancouver offers a unique take on the trend by using high-end Italian cuisine, retro-chic decor and European flair to capture a clientele largely made up of soccer enthusiasts.

"It's not usually what one would expect from a sports bar, it's way cooler and more stylish," said Laura Rizzo, Red Card's vice-president of marketing. "It's somewhere most of our past patrons would feel comfortable bringing a date or just watching the game with your friends."

Aaron D. Allen, a global restaurant consultant and industry analyst, says this trend is here to stay, reasoning that when faced with a choice in down economic times, consumers are either tending to pay a little less and choose fast casual such as teriyaki or pitas, or pay a little more for an above-average menu and more of an experience.

"We've been seeing this trend develop over the last three years. Sports bars are going way beyond cheap wings and beer," Allen said. "Warmer tones, better and more expensive food, details that appeal to women like nice washrooms and hooks for purses. The big TV screens already draw in the men, but these added touches are a direct hit with women, too."

As for expansion, "this model could certainly be tweaked to work in another city like Vancouver, but we're not getting ahead of ourselves right now; we're not even a year old yet," Doyle said. "But we really understand this market in Toronto, and we're really working to make this a real destination."

*With files from Michele Sponagle*