

# Toro's

## Liquor, Beer & Wine Store & Neighbourhood Pub

by Jonathan Niven

### A Vernon Tradition Lives On

When Carlo Dagostini went to Vancouver to visit Expo '86, he didn't realize how that trip would change his career and life forever. While he was in town, Carlo met Dave Crown and the two hit it off and Carlo spent a lot of time with Dave over the next few weeks. It had always been a dream of Carlo's to get into the pub business, and his time with Dave fueled his enthusiasm.

In 1990, Dave brought Carlo on as a partner at Toro's Neighbourhood Pub in Vernon. The pub was built in 1977 with a Mexican theme, which was very popular in those days, and while the pub has gone through many renovations over the years, it has maintained its Southwestern and ambiance. The pub does not rely on sports as its main draw so its theme, décor, food, and quality service keep their customers coming back.

In the early years, for most pubs in BC, food offerings were somewhat basic and took a bit of a backseat to liquor sales. From the beginning, however, Toro's had a reputation for providing good quality food and lots of it. As a result, the pub quickly became a favourite with locals, and particularly hungry workers, who appreciated large helpings.

Food became an ever-increasingly important aspect of the pub. Carlo explains, "The quality of our food and our service is what sets us apart. It's an equation that is very basic: What is the quality of your product and service compared with your price? We offer great service and that's what has made us successful. Our reputation is very important. In a smaller community, you can't afford to get a bad reputation. That kind of thing can stick with you for years."

Of course, great food and excellent service are just two aspects that contribute to the making of a great reputation. As with so many communities throughout BC, a neighbourhood pub's reputation also comes from its community



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involvement. Toro's is no exception. The pub sponsors many local sports teams and events with one of their major benefactors being the Jubilee Hospital Foundation. Over the years, the pub and its patrons have donated thousands of dollars to this worthy cause.

It's that kind of reputation and the quality of service that keeps customers coming back. In fact, some of the pub's customers have been regulars for the past 18 years! It's almost like an episode from Cheers. The pub has one server who moved away for over 10 years, and when she moved back to Vernon and got a job at Toro's again, she was amazed to see a few of the same patrons (on their favorite stools) still there. "That's just the kind of pub we are," suggests Carlo. "People feel very comfortable here, and we make sure they are well treated."

Another key to the operation is Toro's Liquor Store. When Carlo was designing the store, he made sure he listened to his wife. She had mentioned that she really didn't like going into most liquor stores. She felt uncomfortable with the experience, and when she did venture into an LRS - or government store for that matter - it was as quick a trip as possible.

This got Carlo thinking about the layout of liquor stores, their décor and atmosphere. When he built his store, he made sure it was "female friendly" in many ways. Lighting, displays, product placement, staffing, and ambiance were all key considerations in the planning and layout of the store. The result is a liquor store that is esthetically pleasing and caters especially well to female shoppers.

The store features a very wide selection of VQA products. Of course, being in Vernon, one would expect that, but Carlo went above and beyond to ensure that his store offered some of the very best selection in the entire region. Sight-lines, product displays, and merchandising were all carefully planned to appeal to people looking to take their time selecting products and to feel comfortable doing so. The result is a store that features prominently in the overall business model and is frequented by many loyal customers from miles around.

Carlo loves what he does. You can just hear it in the way he describes his pub and his passion for the business. When asked what advice he might pass along to someone just getting started, he didn't hesitate with his answer. "If you're going to do it [get into this business], you have to go all the way. If you just want to settle for par, it's not enough - not in this business. Your customers expect a lot and will demand it from you. Just doing things 'good enough' won't be good enough in the pub business."

It seems like a simple enough solution. Give customers what they want, treat them well, and your business will grow. It is simple in theory, but in practice, it is difficult to deliver year-in and year-out as Toro's has done for the past 30 years. Carlo has seen many trends, themes, and fads come and go. The one thing that has not gone out of style is excellent quality at a fair price. That's always a recipe for success. 

