



BEYOND *Salsa* AND CHIPS

After making a splash as Lexington's glitziest restaurant, the Coba Cocina team seeks to add substance to style

An enormous jellyfish aquarium is
Coba Cocina's centerpiece
Photo by Lee Thomas



LEE THOMAS PHOTOS

Coba Cocina's exotic exterior has become a landmark on Richmond Road.

By Patti Nickell

In 2012 when an unusual building began sprouting from a parking lot in the Idle Hour Shopping Center on Richmond Road, Lexingtonians started buzzing. As tall glass cubes emerged, offering a tantalizing peek inside to what appeared to be a world of waterfalls and chandeliers, they were even more intrigued.

Just what the heck was it? Speculation ranged from the possible (a new sports arena) to the pretty much impossible (a casino) to the downright absurd (a helipad for John Calipari who lives down the street to use in recruiting).

What it was, of course, was Coba Cocina, one of Lexington's most unusual and certainly its glitziest restaurant. The owners, Phil Greer and his son Lee, publicly stated at the time that they wanted "to give Lexington something it had never seen the likes of before."

When Coba Cocina's doors opened in March 2013, awestruck customers were presented

with a concept that seemed more at home in the celebrity-fueled glitz of Las Vegas and Miami than in the quiet elegance of the Horse Capital of the World.

What, some skeptics wondered, were they thinking? For those skeptics Lee Greer had a ready answer.

"We were looking to bring a big-city approach to Lexington and to get its diners to venture outside of their culinary comfort zones," he said.

It didn't get any more big-city than Coba's design, but the food — far from getting diners out of their comfort zones — appeared much like that of any other Mexican restaurant.

That all changed late last year when one of Lexington's most well-known and innovative chefs, Jonathan Lundy, took the helm, bringing a new level of sophistication to a menu that matches the sensory experience of the decor.

"My father and I wanted a restaurant that had our own unique stamp on it," said Lee Greer. "Jonathan feels the same way about his food. Together we felt we had something very special."

Father Knows Best

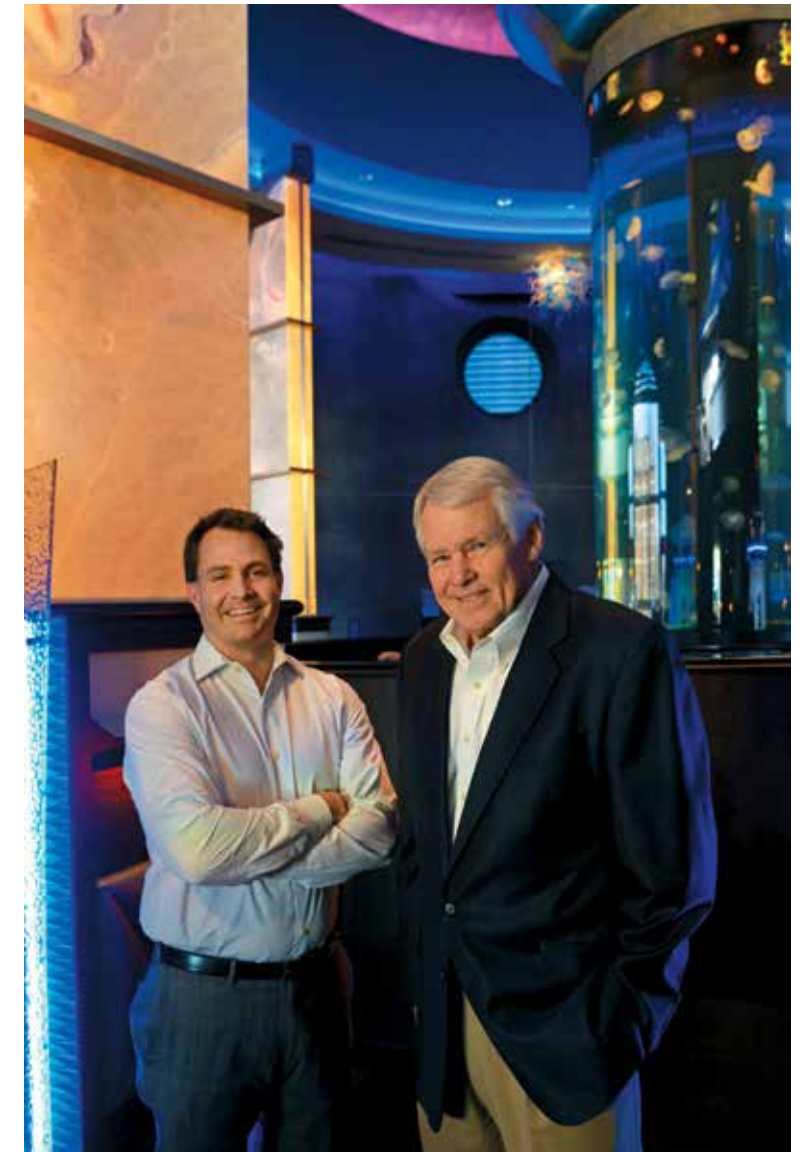
At first glance it would seem that the backgrounds of the two Greers didn't exactly prepare them to be restaurateurs. Phil Greer, who in 1964 hitchhiked from the Eastern Kentucky community of Jenkins to play football for the University of Kentucky, had spent much of his career as a teacher and coach at Bates Creek High School. Lee Greer had migrated to Manhattan to work as an investment banker.

The two were not without experience, however. Phil started Greer Companies and tapped his son to be his partner in the venture. Their real estate holdings include 42 Cheddar's restaurant franchises in seven states.

To say their business styles are different is putting it mildly, according to Lee Greer.

"I'm more conservative in my approach," he said, and then about his father, joked, "He always errs on the side of gaudy."

In the case of Coba (named for a region in Mexico that is a hotbed of Mayan culture), father



Lee and Phil Greer have an ambitious and ever-evolving vision for their restaurant.

really did know best.

Design and décor would be key to its success, Phil Greer reasoned. Eschewing the minimalist approach common in many modern eateries, he opted for all-out Hollywood glamor where the ambiance would be that of a movie set.

Architect Todd Ott and interior designer Brittney Lavens of local design firm CMW Inc. were tasked with making the dream a reality — in a manner of speaking, as Coba Cocina appears more about fantasy than reality. They pulled out all the stops to create a pleasure palace that



LEE THOMAS PHOTOS

The Greers' travels inspired the aquarium and other design elements.

while designed as a showcase for Meso-American culture, has an aura of Arabian Nights, a soupçon of South Beach, and a dollop of Disney magic. To accomplish all this, the globe-trotting Greers aided Ott and Lavens in their efforts.

"I took ideas from places we had seen and liked around the world," said Phil Greer. "I gathered a suitcase full of pictures, dumped it in Todd's lap, and told him to wow me."

What he got was a wow factor that was off the charts.

The restaurant's centerpiece, a soaring 18-foot, two-story column aquarium filled with 3,200 gallons of water and 200 undulating jellyfish, was the Greers' version of similar tanks they had seen at Miami's W Hotel and at the Seahorse Café at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas.

The backlit white onyx serpentine bar came from Phil's memory of a hotel bar he had visited in Switzerland, and the six multicolored sculptures — each with 125 pieces of hand-blown Italian glass — are described by Lee Greer with a wicked smile as "Dale Chihuly-like."

Other custom-made features include terrazzo and bamboo floors, bamboo-encased glass panels, water walls, glass staircases, hand-assembled Italian tiles, and translucent wave panels with ambient lighting causing



A backlit wall showcases the many varieties of wine Coba Cocina now offers.

the colors to change, much as the sea does. It's all very Zen.

Style and Substance

The Greers were savvy enough to know, however, that while in-your-face style might initially bring customers to their 400-seat restaurant, it would require substance to keep them returning. Substance, of course, meant great service and especially, great food. With that in mind, father and son set about assembling their dream team.

First up was locating a chef who would provide a more sophisticated take on the traditional Mexican menu than the restaurant had started with.

"As soon as you put chips and salsa on the table, you become a Mexican restaurant," said Lee Greer, "and while there is nothing wrong with that, we wanted to expand our horizons a bit more."

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Chef Jonathan Lundy is putting his stamp on Coba Cocina's menu with dishes such as quinoa and kale salad with chile-mesquite smoked salmon, right, and pork chop Cubano, below right.



LEE THOMAS PHOTOS



Fortunately the Greers found a kindred spirit in Lundy, who had presided over his namesake restaurant in the Gratz Park Inn for 15 years. He became available when his lease was not renewed.

Already a customer and fan of Coba, he had been asked in early 2014 to serve on a tasting panel to help revamp the menu. Lundy signed on first as a consultant and then, as an executive chef.

“Once I got him in here, I wasn’t about to let go of him,” Lee Greer confessed.

Thus, the king of southern grits and fried green tomatoes took his culinary style a bit farther south — south of the border, to be exact, although Lundy offers something of a disclaimer.

“I don’t see this as a Mexican restaurant,” he said, “but rather as a culinary exploration of the Americas.”

Taking a page from Dallas super chefs Dean Fearing and



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Coba Cocina's bars are showpieces themselves, some of them backlit and made from materials such as white onyx.

Stephan Pyles, who made their names by marrying traditional Southwestern cuisine with the cuisines of France and Asia, Lundy went about making Co-ba's menu as much about quinoa and kale salad with lemon vinaigrette and agave-glazed salmon on a bed of roast-ed poblano slaw as about flautas and fajitas.

"What you'll see is an amalgamation

of all the ethnic influences," said Lundy. "It's a little bit Asian, a little bit Latin, and, yes, a little bit Southern."

Still, he has been respectful in the changes, making sure that dishes din-ers have come to love are represented — albeit with a Lundy twist. Enchilada fillings now include goat cheese, spin-ach, and mushrooms; chicken tacos are paired with iceberg avocado slaw and

drizzled with ancho-honey sauce; and red chiles have been added to the Cae-sar salad.

It's a food philosophy that both Phil and Lee have enthusiastically bought into. Noting that the current menu is evenly split between dishes already on the menu when Lundy took over the kitchen and those he created, Lee Greer said, "Jonathan's creative edge has no limits. I predict that within a few months his DNA will be on every dish."

Once Lundy was on board, the chef recruited T.J. Cox, who worked with him at the Gratz Park Inn and whom he describes as "not just a sommelier par excellence but a mixologist par excel-lence as well."

In deference to Cox, the Greers add-ed a backlit wine wall, which is not only



LEE THOMAS

Coba Cocina's dramatic interior adds to the sensory experience for diners.

a design statement but a repository for vintages that range from Beringer's Knights Valley, a Cabernet Sauvignon from Califor-nia's Sonoma Valley, to Vina Maipo Vitral, a Carmenere from the Maipo Valley in Chile.

With a nod to Lexington's emerging cocktail culture, Cox has introduced his own signature creations to Coba. If you want col-or, opt for the neon pink prickly pear margarita; if you want a sweet and spicy take on a classic bourbon cocktail, order the ancho-chile old-fashioned with fresh cherries infused with an-cho-chile liqueur.

Are the Greers satisfied with what they have accomplished at Coba in just two years? Well, yes and no.

"We know we're not the French Laundry (in Napa, California) which charges \$500 for a meal," said Lee Greer. "But in terms of food quality, service, price, and atmosphere, I'll put us up there with anybody."

If that is the case, what's left, one might wonder. Again the younger Greer answered quickly.

"Plenty," he said. "We'll continually be evolving — in the menu, décor, and the experience we offer our guests."

"We will never be at the finish line. This isn't a sprint; it's a marathon." KM



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