



JONATHAN ROBERT WILLIS

# JEWEL IN HIS CROWN

Jeff Ruby's Lexington  
restaurant reflects its  
founder's larger-than-life  
persona



By Jarrett Van Meter  
Photos by Lee Thomas







From enormous chandeliers to a horseshoe-shaped bar hugging an elevated stage, the Jeff Ruby's experience starts at the lounge.





Patio dining in the “Paddock” is at a premium during fine weather.

**J**eff Ruby, at the age of 13, fired his first employee. After learning his mother was home sick from the restaurant she owned and the regular chef had failed to show up, he cut out of school and ran five miles to oversee the unattended kitchen.

Arriving at the Allenhurst, New Jersey, restaurant, the young teen got to work preparing for the afternoon rush. First, he made the soup de jour — split pea — before setting off to handle other prep duties. Upon returning to check the soup, he found it had turned an alarming chartreuse green.

“Did you put something in my soup?” Ruby asked the replacement chef, who had been hurriedly sent over by the unemployment office an hour earlier.

“I make my split pea soup with milk, so I added some milk,” said the newcomer.

“I said, ‘You’ve got to go!’ and I fired him,” Ruby recently recalled of the standoff. “He hadn’t been there an hour. The first





A charcuterie board and a wedge salad with seared pork belly can get dinner started.

thing he did was add milk to split pea soup, which nobody does. I have had a lot of chefs since then, and not one of them puts milk in split pea soup. You eat with your eyes, and it looked horrible. That was the first chef I ever fired."

Decades later, the well-known restaurateur still relies on a decisive

leadership style and an innate culinary aptitude, as well as a flair for the sensational, in overseeing his growing collection of eponymous steakhouses.

Having graduated from the famed Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, Ruby accepted a job at a hotel in Cincinnati and fell in love

with the city as he simultaneously took it by storm. In 1981, he opened his first restaurant there, The Precinct, with backing from Reds legends Johnny Bench and Pete Rose. The combination of high-dollar, dry-aged steaks and Roaring Twenties ambience was an instant hit. After opening several



Jonathan Maiden pours a cocktail for server Winston Duncan.

more locations in the Queen City, Ruby expanded the footprint of his portfolio with Jeff Ruby's Steakhouses in Louisville, Kentucky; Nashville, Tennessee; Columbus, Ohio; and, most recently, downtown Lexington, Kentucky, this past April.

"Our restaurants are in cities where the people are wonderful, kind, and caring," said Ruby. "We have chosen markets based on two main factors: No. 1, what kind of people live in the city? In Lexington, the people are just so warm and friendly and appreciative and understanding. And No. 2, will we be a cultural fit with the landlord? The folks we have dealt with are quality people we can trust and have a good relationship with."

Ruby aspired to having a location in Lexington long before the new restaurant came to fruition.

"I had been hearing it for a long time," the New Jersey



Chesapeake oysters are among the seafood choices.





Lush ruby red envelops the main dining room, which features antique chandeliers.

native said of pleas for a Lexington location. “The people of Lexington had been supporting us for years, so we started looking here years and years ago. We considered many possibilities, but none of them were going to allow me to do this restaurant the way I want to.”

Ruby and his team finally found what they believed to be the perfect Lexington location: the new City Center development in the very heart of downtown.

The initial deal for a Jeff Ruby’s



The jewel bone-in cowboy ribeye is a signature entree.

Steakhouse to anchor the CentrePoint (as it was then known) project was struck when George W. Bush was pres-

ident. Throughout the project’s well-documented ups and downs Ruby remained committed. Still, in the time it took CentrePoint (now City Center) to make serious strides toward completion, Ruby had opened the locations in Nashville and Columbus and had signed a deal for Indianapolis.

“So, then I had to decide, do I want to open a restaurant in Indianapolis, where I had a signed deal and it was already designed and ready for construction, or do I want to move





A private dining room pays tribute to bourbon. From their portraits on the walls master bourbon distillers look down on diners.

forward in Lexington?” recalled Ruby. “I couldn’t do both because our restaurants don’t come out of a can. There is a lot of design and detail, and I’m on the property constantly during construction. You can’t do two simultaneously with my kind of place.”

After so much anticipation, the choice was easy. Indianapolis would have to wait.

Lexington diners, meanwhile, could hardly wait for the new downtown restaurant and its celebrated food.

The Jeff Ruby’s Lexington chefs buy local, and the restaurant has earned the “Kentucky Proud” distinction. Local touches include the tomato and cucumber salad, which comes topped with bourbon barrel-aged feta, and dessert



A high-energy vibe characterizes Jeff Ruby's from start to finish.

## JEWEL IN HIS CROWN

items such as Woodford chocolate cake, bourbon pecan ice cream torte, and Wildcat cake, which is prepared with Kentucky blackberry jam. While the new location does boast some Kentucky flair, the signature items remain the steaks. The Hatchet, a 30-ounce, 65-day-aged tomahawk ribeye tops the menu at \$115. Other options include the New York strip (\$55), the porterhouse (\$77), and the Jeff Ruby's jewel cowboy ribeye (\$75).

While the Lexington Jeff Ruby's has many of the signature details found in his other locations, no expense was spared in making it what Ruby himself refers to as his masterpiece.

"His joke is that he had an unlimited budget and he exceeded it. That alone makes this location different," said Jeff Ruby's Lexington general manager Garrett Coates. "This was the first time that he didn't move into a pre-existing building. So, he had 10,000 square feet of brand new space to play with. When he has something that he wants to do in his mind, that is the only way it can be done and it has to be done perfectly. I think he had this place in his head from day one. I know he looked at other properties, and I guess they simply weren't good enough. He wanted this."

First, there is the Wildcat Room, a blue-and-white sea of one-of-a-kind Kentucky sports memorabilia. Then there is the art deco-style Gatsby Room, which uses many furnishings

from the 2013 movie adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel. Ruby himself called the film's director to track down the exact carpet, drapes, and wallpaper used on the movie set. The Paddock area gives al fresco diners a front-row seat for downtown action in a lush, garden setting. The Bourbon



General manager Garrett Coates

Room is an elegant shrine to bourbon distilling. Portraits of bourbon master distillers Bill Samuels, Elmer T. Lee, Jimmy Russell, Fredrick Booker Noe II, and Lincoln Henderson overlook a wooden dining room table from 1890,



and a Prohibition Era pharmacy breakfront displays some of the finest bourbons ever produced on Kentucky soil. Even the bathroom elicits feelings of nostalgia with spiraling barber poles and sinks set in repurposed barbershop bureaus.

"We designed this restaurant specifically for Lexington and Central Kentucky. We have never designed a restaurant with the attention to local detail we did on this one. Might have been because we had 10 years to plan it," Ruby said jokingly. "It's my pride and joy."

The private Breeders Room pays homage to the area's storied Thoroughbred tradition. Classic photos such as Bob Coglianese's "The Savage" and nearly 80 different jockey silks hanging from the ceiling give the room a clubhouse feel. A pair of "Jeff Ruby's Steakhouses" jockey pants, which are worn by all of the jockeys he sponsors, are mounted on the wall. The room holds special significance to Ruby, who was drawn to the sport as a boy growing up on the Jersey Shore.

"My freshman year of football in high school, I got a white sweatshirt for practice," he recalled. "On my jersey, I took a big, black magic marker and put my hero's name on the back. My hero was Kelso, the horse. It wasn't a football player.



From left, Louis and Stephen Vaughn and Bob Beatty enjoy the hospitality at the bar.



## JEFF RUBY'S STEAKHOUSE LEXINGTON

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Open daily for dinner

It wasn't Frank Gifford. It wasn't Sam Huff. It was Kelso, a freaking racehorse. There wasn't another 15-year-old in Neptune, New Jersey, who knew who Kelso was, but I did. I've always been different."

"Different" is the Jeff Ruby way. Whether it's having the self-confidence at 13 to fire a grown man or the conviction to stick with the City Center location when those close to him suggested otherwise, Ruby's larger-than-life persona has generated plenty of buzz in Lexington.

"I have been in the industry since I was 16 years old, and I know of no other leaders with the tenacity and vision he has," said Coates. "No one else I have crossed paths with in this business would have been able to see this thing through and do as great of a job as he has done." **KM**