

## Feature Article

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Town & Country

Jennie Dobbs left behind a world of high finance in London to inject the restaurant scene in her hometown with a European approach to eating and a whole lot of local flavour.

by Lindsay Cameron Wilson

Photography by Scott Munn



*It's a misty morning in Halifax and I'm standing on the sidewalk at the corner of Barrington and Morris streets shouting, Rapunzel-style, to an open apartment window upstairs. Eventually 29-year-old Jennie Dobbs lets down her hair, so to speak, and meets me downstairs in her restaurant for a chat. Morris East, which she opened in July, is slowly waking up. Line cook Lewis Wynne-Jones is downstairs making pizza dough. The wood-fired oven is heating up. The sounds of Emiliana Torrini are gently flowing from the iPod behind the bar. Torrini is an edgy yet beguiling Icelandic-Italian singer-songwriter. The duality of her style is perfectly suited for this new neighbourhood restaurant. Dobbs is funky yet hospitable, the menu is rustic yet contemporary, the space is friendly yet modern—all natural juxtapositions for a woman with a business degree who has travelled the world and marketed hedge funds in London for six years, but just can't get enough of food and hospitality. We sit in the front window overlooking Morris Street, and Dobbs tells me her story.*

"I'm obsessed with dinner parties. I love coming up with the menu, welcoming people, I even love getting everything ready, cleaning, and then just relaxing and having a good time. I guess I really wanted to open a restaurant so I could throw a dinner party every night.

While I was living in the U.K. and travelling around Europe, I was inspired not only by the European approach to eating but also by how much they enjoyed eating together. I loved all the neighbourhood restaurants that I discovered—special little gems with small menus, fresh food, and affordable prices where friends and families took the time to enjoy the meal and each other. It's a much slower approach to eating. I really wanted to create a special space like this in Halifax and I thought that, like eating tapas in Spain, pizza is a common food in North America that everyone loves. I chose gourmet pizza because it was important for me that my menu have culinary legs and because it would give me the opportunity to use artisanal products from local producers.

I moved back to Halifax from London last November and knew I would open something here. I have a support network in the city, both family and friends. All the obstacles I faced that would normally take three weeks to resolve elsewhere were dealt with in a phone call. People were so supportive. Halifax is

great for that.

I started working for Jane Wright, the owner of Jane's on the Common, the week I returned. I've known Jane since I was four. I phoned her and told her I was thinking of opening up a restaurant and asked if I could come and work for her, to give it a shot. She said, 'Absolutely.' That was a great experience on so many levels. She's been a real mentor for me.

The next step was to get some money and write my business plan. I had saved money while living in London, which made the whole process a little easier. Banks don't usually see people my age with their own equity, so they were much more forthcoming. And the Credit Union has been fantastic. They lent me some money and I raised the rest of it privately among friends and family through the Nova Scotia Tax Equity Credit Program. If you're a Nova Scotia resident and you invest, you can get a 30% equity tax credit on your provincial income tax.

The design of the place began early on. My father is an architect in town and had just hired Patrick Jardine, an architect my age. With Patrick he was able to guide me in creating this space in the most cost-effective way. The great thing about my dad is that he has the two brains: business sense and creative flair.

There were so many challenges in building this restaurant. The process was so intense, right from the beginning. This space used to be [second-hand clothing store] Second Hand Rose. The owners decided to redo the building and put an apartment above and my restaurant below. While the apartment was being built, I wanted to move quickly on the restaurant because I knew we were going to have plumbing issues in the basement. And on the first day we cracked a pipe. That's when my father told me I was on my own. I just thought, 'Oh my god, I'm going to run out of money.' It could have been a \$1,000 plumbing problem or a \$10,000 problem. There were also demolition guys down there, jack-hammering with wild abandon. It was the middle of winter; it was freezing, but I knew the job was never going to get done if I didn't go down into the basement with them. I put on a hardhat and we dug out a ton of debris.

Then there was the 2,000-pound wood-fired oven from Italy. In order to get it into the restaurant, we had to take down the wall on the side of the building. Then we had to jack it up on hydraulic rollers. We could literally only move it about five centimetres at a time, stop, readjust, push it another five centimetres, stop, then re-adjust. We finally got it in but it took all day. We basically had to build the restaurant around where it landed.

When we finally fired up the oven it leaked about 100 kg of water. It's supposed to—the water builds up in the mortar—but it was still crazy. The first day we cooked pizza it was horrible—the pizzas were basically steaming in there. I almost cried but eventually it got there.

Today we're burning apple-wood from the Valley. Last week it was maple. Both fruit- and maple-wood produce the strongest, hottest, driest heat—perfect for pizza. Using a wood-fired oven is the cleanest form of cooking—we're using a renewable resource. The idea behind the whole restaurant, from the menu to the wood in the oven, is to keep it small, fresh, and changing.

I believe the best food experiences in life are the ones that can't be replicated—they're specific to that place and time. We burn apple trees from the Valley. We serve Berkshire pancetta crisps over local organic greens, Valley pears on a pizza, and local apples in our wood-fired tarts. Nowhere else in Canada could you ever eat the same thing. I like that. I like knowing that if a couple walks in from Victoria, we're offering them a meal unique to Nova Scotia.

Brady Muller, the head chef, takes her kitchen staff to the Farmer's Market and they have a great time scouting the local products and forging relationships with the producers. But it's a balancing act trying to find local products while changing the menu to keep it exciting. The Canadian winter is going to make it hard for us to keep the menu as local as it is in the summer. But I'm sure if we all think creatively together, we'll continue to inspire each other.

This business is a lot different than the financial world. You need to micromanage a lot. You need to strive for perfection every single day, otherwise you're not going to make it. I can appreciate someone like Martha Stewart—she attracts the best cooks in the United States, the best food stylists, and comes up with the best recipes. But for me it's not about being the best, it's about bringing people together. At the end of the day, sometimes that connection is more important than the food you serve. That's the beauty of food to me. It's the experience, the conversation, the bonding with your parents, or the fight with your boyfriend. But we haven't had any fights in the restaurant yet."

*And with that Dobbs looks up and realizes she's locked herself out of her upstairs apartment. She steps outside and eyes the scaffolding lining the outside of the building. She's wearing a silk top, tight black capris, and ballet flats. But when you've excavated a basement and fork-lifted a wood-fired oven, what's a little scaffolding? She waves goodbye, scrambles up to her window, scissor-kicks the ledge, and poof, she's gone.*



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