



Restaurateur Athanasios Karamanos whetted Toronto's appetite for fine dining



Toronto restaurateur Athanasios Karamanos, known as Arthur Carman.

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Athanasios Karamanos started life in Canada as an illegal immigrant from Greece in the early 1950s, landing in Saint John as a stowaway in search of a new life.

He found a rich one in Toronto.

Within a decade of legalizing his immigration status (with the help of a lawyer whose daughter he would eventually marry), he opened Carman's Club, a steak house around the corner from Maple Leaf Gardens, and became one of the first well-known and successful restaurateurs in the city, famous for his heavy use of garlic.

"There were few good restaurants in the city then," recalls his long-time friend Mike McClew, who lived above him in a rooming house in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. "Your choice was either a hotel dining room like the Royal York or a greasy spoon."

Ontario's stuffy liquor laws struck Karamanos as too restrictive, so he established the business as a club rather than a restaurant, which allowed his guests to imbibe more freely. He bought used books by the hundredweight and created a library, required for club status. There was a jacket-and-tie dress code, an open fireplace, dark wood panelling and a sprawling collection of pewter plates, paintings and bric-a-brac that gave the place a dark homeyness.

His charcoal-grilled steaks, giant shrimp cocktails, supercharged garlic bread and wine list were an immediate hit with Toronto businessmen, politicians and their families; Carman's Dining Club was an overnight success and the menu didn't change in 50 years.

Karamanos, who was commonly known as Arthur Carman, died on Sept. 21, only weeks after being diagnosed with lung cancer. He was 84 and had been retired less than a year.

A native of Patras, a 4,000-year-old port on the north coast of the Peloponnese, Carman headed to Canada in his late 20s to join his father, Xristos, in Saint John, but the elder Karamanos died three days before his only child's arrival. After a stint as a dishwasher, Carman headed to Montreal, where he opened a short-lived restaurant before moving to Toronto.

A tall, handsome bachelor with wavy hair, tailored suits and a natural, boisterous charm, Carman had a reputation as a ladies' man who worked and partied hard. His photo albums were filled with pictures of him posing à la playboy Hugh Hefner in the company of beautiful women. McClew says, "He saw himself larger than life, and he was."

But he also had a serious side. Poorly educated but well read, he quoted Socrates and Plato easily, wrote poetry and, through the 1960s, hosted academic dinner lectures every Tuesday evening, enlisting local philosophy professors and visiting intellectuals.

"He kept it going for 10 years," recalls clothier Harry Rosen. "He was always quite philosophical."

At a time when Toronto had few high-end restaurants, Carman's oversized personality and food attracted visiting celebrities from Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. to Goldie Hawn and Phyllis Diller, as well as a string of provincial and city politicians. His crowded walls featured 250 autographed photographs of sixties-era stars.

Predictably, the bureaucrats in his life were less enchanted by his high spirits.

Long-time Toronto city councillor Tony O'Donohue, an Irish immigrant, occasionally tried to help the scrappy constituent with his plans. "He was a visionary who saw Toronto growing up," he says, remembering his friend. "He was a very progressive man in a hurry. There was no such thing as waiting and seeing."

Carman's troubles with Toronto bureaucrats began in 1959 when he tried to convert the large house at 26 Alexander St. into a restaurant despite its residential zoning. Frustrated with planning restrictions, he sought help from the head of the Law Society of Upper Canada, whose office was down the street from City Hall. The senior lawyer sloughed off the problem onto Jack Weir, a young attorney who happened to be walking down the hall.

McClew, a retired partner in Ernst & Young's marketing department, says, "Carman always found himself on the wrong side of bureaucracy. He was constantly challenged because of the way he spoke. He wore his heart on his sleeve. ... Jack helped him through the morass of everything."

Carman added Weir's name to the growing list of people to whom he always felt a debt. Every Christmas season, Carman would host a large party for his benefactors and their families to express his gratitude. "He never forgot someone who was his friend," McClew says.

Another of those clients was Liberal Senator Dan Riley, the lawyer who helped sort out Carman's immigration problems in the 1950s. Two decades later, Riley fell prey to one of Carman's pranks when he was invited to Toronto for a reunion dinner.

Riley knew nothing of his old friend's restaurant business, so Carman pretended to be a rich mobster, complete with chauffeur and limousine for the ride downtown from the airport. The hoax came to its climax when the limo purred through the darkness into the courtyard of Casa Loma, a heritage landmark. Carman pretended it was his home and dashed into "his" castle to pick up some papers before taking his worried friend to the restaurant, where he finally revealed himself as an honest businessman with an exaggerated sense of humour.

Convinced that he owed his success to Canada's acceptance of immigrants, Carman decided to give Toronto a multicultural carnival modelled on Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro. It was 1967 and his business was booming, with 120,000 customers a year, so he put up \$8,000 to organize a summer festival. It would feature music, masquerade balls, fireworks, decorations and "general gaiety," according to a Financial Times report. Predictably, Carman clashed with some of his fellow city boosters.

"Carman's idea," wrote reporter Robert Catherwood, "is somewhat different from that of a few members of the original committee. This group, since departed, thought the main events of carnival weeks should be baseball games, army parades and horseshoe pitching. "I told them Queen Victoria was dead," Carman says."

Four years later, Carman was still struggling with his grand Carnival Toronto scheme, scrambling for government seed money at a time when Quebec City was spending \$11-million on its famous winter celebration. A pamphlet he produced in 1971 illustrated his frustration with politics and committees. "Carnival Toronto is your carnival. Its success depends on you. Don't blow it."

Meanwhile, a splinter group led by the late Leon Kossar, a Toronto Telegram reporter, and his wife, Zena, launched the rival Caravan in 1969, attracting 200,000 people to 29 church basements and community halls across the city for a week of food and ethnic performances. Carman's more extravagant Carnival Toronto never got off the ground and he carried a grudge against Caravan's organizers for the rest of his life, bitterly claiming they never gave him credit for his original idea.

In 1979, to celebrate his Greek heritage, Carman donated a collection of 25 limestone statues by Elford Bradley Cox that portrayed stylized mythological figures including Hercules, Aphrodite and Orpheus. They were placed in a landscaped setting called the Garden of the Greek Gods on the Canadian National Exhibition grounds, but the garden eventually

deteriorated. Carman's relationship with the CNE became acrimonious as he demanded the board of governors rejuvenate the site.

In 1981, Dan Riley introduced his daughter Kathleen, a New Brunswick teacher, to Carman. Ten years later, after Riley's death, Carman swept her off her feet. "I went to Toronto for dinner in 1991," she recalls, "and never left."

To the surprise of his friends, the 68-year-old bachelor married his 38-year-old sweetheart in 1992.

"I couldn't keep up with him," she recalls. "I don't know where he got his energy. He was up early and would work until 1:30 a.m., then we would go to Chinatown for soup."

Maple Leafs fans flocked to the restaurant before hockey games, and 200 would return after the game for a late dinner. If Carman wasn't greeting them at the front door, he was in the charcoal-smoke-filled kitchen overseeing the pandemonium and puffing on a cigarette, part of his 50-a-day habit.

Even as Toronto's restaurant scene grew more sophisticated, Carman stuck to his original menu: big helpings of meat with potato, Caesar-like salads, huge pickles, peppers, tzatziki, filo-wrapped feta and lots of garlic on everything. Carman loved garlic and, at various times, claimed to have invented garlic bread and been the first to bring garlic to Toronto.

Aware of his friend's tendency toward overstatement, McClew quips, "Well, he certainly brought garlic to Alexander Street."

Harry Rosen agrees: "You could smell it a few hundred yards away."

The smell was so strong that in 1974 Carman's neighbours petitioned the province to resolve the garlic pollution problem.

Carman's business weakened in early 1999, when the Maple Leafs and Toronto Raptors moved to the Air Canada Centre. While hundreds of families continued to frequent Carman's for special occasions, business gradually slipped away and a new generation of restaurant reviewers failed to recommend the 50-year-old menu. Instead of changing, Carman went on the attack, spending thousands of dollars on advertising to refute bad reviews and accuse publishers of panning restaurants that didn't buy advertising.

One Toronto Star reviewer in 2008 compared the old-style decor to Disney World's Haunted Mansion and complained that his meal was "an unappetizing mass of beef and capers."

When Carman's closed in November, 2009, Toronto Life magazine ran the headline "Dining Club Steak House Finally Put Out of Its Misery," but writer Karon Liu took the sting out of the story by concluding that "... 50 years is many lifetimes in the restaurant industry - especially in Toronto. We hope that Carman's will be remembered as the joyful, high-end steak house with the perpetual aroma of garlic, rather than the relic that was left behind."

McClew echoes the sentiments of Carman's old friends when he points out, "Toronto deserved the title Hogtown in the fifties ... Carman helped the city mature."

Carman leaves his wife and cousins.

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