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The rumors and grumbings started almost from the moment Delaney's Irish Pub opened its doors in July 2010. A sprawling restaurant-bar with a wide-ranging food and beer menu, it was expected by many to be one of the most popular tenants to join the bustling West Seventh Street development in Fort Worth.

The owners, Melissa and Stephen "Blue" Tate, had a proven track record with their first Delaney's, in McKinney. Many assumed that once it joined the marquee development, in an increasingly trendy section of a rapidly expanding city, it would be like planting the proverbial money tree.

But Delaney's flamed out. Fast. Some blamed it on the cavernous size of the space, close to 9,000 square feet -- even when it was crowded, it felt sparse, even cold. Some blamed it on the menu, a dizzying array of choices from Tex-Mex staples and Cajun food, to pub grub, at widely varying price points.

"People don't go to an Irish pub to order \$16 worth of possibly pretentious food," said one former general manager, Beau Greene. (The Tates did not respond to requests for comment.)

On May 22, [Delaney's shuttered its doors](#), a couple months shy of its first birthday. It's hardly the only high-profile restaurant casualty in recent months: In July, Mac's on 7th, in Montgomery Plaza, also closed down. Just east a few blocks on Seventh from Delaney's, [So7 Bistro opened, closed, reopened with an altered concept](#) and then closed again -- all in 12 months. In south Fort Worth, [Hottub's Back Porch Grotto closed July 25](#), only seven months after it opened.

Margherita, an ambitious Italian restaurant with a foodie vibe on the north side, lasted less than six months.

It has been a brutal reminder of the blood sport of opening a new restaurant: Even in a growing metropolitan area like Fort Worth, even when you have secured a platinum location, and even if you have a carefully refined concept, it can still be a life-savings gamble that never pays off.

Yet at the same time, a parallel narrative has emerged: While Delaney's struggled to pay the rent, a number of restaurants in the same West Seventh development -- [Fireside Pies](#) and [Patrizio](#) among them -- have flourished, with the kind of weekend-night waits that prompt nightclubs to put out the velvet ropes.

Right next to So7 Bistro, [Chuy's](#), the Austin-based Mexican food chain, opened its doors and proved an instantaneous blockbuster. According to some estimates, it's pulling in upward of \$100,000 per week.

Just a few steps away from the now defunct Mac's on 7th, [Gloria's](#), the Dallas-based Salvadoran restaurant, is typically overflowing with happy, paying customers.

So what separates the runaway successes from the heartbreaking failures? Why does a place like Delaney's go belly up when, just down the street, a similar restaurant-bar concept like [The Pour House](#) is booming?

There is no fool-proof formula, especially in Fort Worth. You have to start with high volume, top quality food and a great location -- one where the rent doesn't swallow your profits. A distinctive chef and food philosophy help, too. And impeccable service and affordable prices could earn you repeat business -- and a fighting chance.

"The restaurant that gets a diner who comes in once a month to make it there twice a month is the one that will last," says Russell Kirkpatrick, president of the Tarrant County Restaurant Association and assistant general manager at [Reata](#).

The bottom line is that only about 50 percent of new restaurants survive past 18 months, and despite those odds, more and more people seem willing to take the risk.

"There will always be that maverick restaurant that is willing to roll the dice and come [to Fort Worth]," says Kirkpatrick. And in Cowtown, you have to play by the house rules.

"Don't be pretentious and do not assume for one minute that these people are hillbillies and not well-traveled," says Jeffrey Yarbrough, CEO of Big Ink, a restaurant consulting firm that works with [Sushi Axiom](#), the Pour House and [Lambert's Steaks, Seafood and Whiskey](#).

"They have an impeccable palate for art, music and want to experience new things. There is a real humility in Fort Worth, and you can't come in to Fort Worth beating your chest, saying how cool you are.

"You'll just look like a chump," he says.

A Fort Worth attitude

In the last three years, a cluster of swashbuckling restaurateurs, many riding in from Dallas, have set up a western Metroplex outpost in Fort Worth. And who can blame them, given the whopping

population increase in Fort Worth (and Tarrant County in general) over the last decade, even if much of that growth has been in suburban areas.

But the challenges to opening a successful restaurant here start with paying for a prized location, and then determining an affordable price point for food.

"I feel that in Fort Worth anyway, a \$21 lobster mac-and-cheese starter is just going to alienate a lot of diners," says restaurant consultant Shawn Horne. Appetizers in the \$6-\$9 range and \$9-\$20 entrees seem to be what the market will bear, he says.

For any new restaurant, the most pivotal financial consideration is often the cost for a prime location. And no stretch has been more of a hotbed of restaurant growth than the Seventh Street corridor -- extending from just west of the Trinity River bridge through the So7 and Montgomery Plaza complexes, into the development on West Seventh Street.

The estimated \$40 per square foot in the West 7th development is \$6-\$8 higher than what one might pay in Sundance Square. And the nearby Montgomery Plaza and So7 development reportedly charge as much as \$10-\$15 less per square foot.

Contrast those prices with the relatively affordable \$15-\$25 per square foot that, according to Richard King, co-owner of Ellerbe Fine Foods, is the average cost along the Magnolia Avenue restaurant corridor, or the \$13 per square foot that Jon Bonnell, executive chef-owner of [Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine](#) pays in southwest Fort Worth.

"I can be as busy as some of the restaurants in the West Seventh development," says Bonnell. "And still remain a highly profitable destination location because, among other things, I'm not staring at a big, ugly rent check every month." Some of the heftier leases in West 7th can cost an estimated \$15,000-\$30,000 a month.

For many restaurants, what's more difficult to calculate than lease numbers, however, is what the average Fort Worth restaurant customer wants.

"I do feel that the Fort Worth guest can get a little turned off by any restaurant that places a certain emphasis on glitz, glamour and flash," Kirkpatrick says.

"While Fort Worth folks are very approachable and friendly, they fully expect the same out of the service from their restaurant," adds Horne, the developer and consultant who is looking into a project in the Montgomery Plaza complex. "What they don't tolerate -- and this

is where some of the newcomers to the scene may have made a mistake -- is a lot of big-city swagger."

The slippery slope

But even if a restaurant answers the requisite startup questions of location and service, it can still fail.

"I truly had a really good lunch and brunch business, and I had some great regulars, but I could never develop the dinner business I needed," says Mike McMahan, owner and managing partner of Mac's on 7th. "At dinner, it became more of a bar area and all those bars over here take up so much parking that I couldn't develop the easy dinner business I needed."

The downturn in the economy, in McMahan's mind, didn't help either. His price point -- an average of \$10-\$30 for dinner entrees -- may have been a bit too steep for these recessionary times. And the Montgomery Plaza complex never attracted the high-end retail that he had hoped would bring more deep-pocketed customers to [Mac's](#), which still has locations in Colleyville and Arlington.

"The area simply didn't develop like I thought it would," laments McMahan. "Even with the landlord helping me out, I could never develop enough sales to make a profit.... Actually sales had been increasing during my first two years and then, in the last six months, they started dropping by 10 percent. It was just going in the wrong direction and I couldn't afford to put any more money into it."

On the heels of the Mac's on 7th demise, many Fort Worth restaurant proprietors have engaged in a parlor game of speculating why several new arrivals, like Mac's, may be wobbling financially.

"I actually think there may be more restaurant casualties down the road," says Eric Tschetter, owner of the Pour House, "because Fort Worth is actually not growing quite as fast as can accommodate all the new restaurants and bars that want to come here.

"Fewer people are going out with less disposable income to spend, and none of us is doing the business we all thought we would do," he adds. "Honestly, I would probably try to talk someone out of trying to open up a restaurant in Fort Worth right now."

There are suspicions that [Brownstone](#), which opened in June 2010, has become a nagging disappointment, because its celebrity executive chef, Casey Thompson, has been a persistent no-show. Many customers, expecting to catch at least a glimpse of the popular *Top Chef* contestant, have left the restaurant feeling let down.

"Even if Casey is out of town traveling," says Sam Sameni, one of Brownstone's primary owners, "her touch is on every single aspect of the restaurant's menu." But Brownstone is looking to address other customer complaints about its interior and noise level by launching a significant re-design that will cost between \$50,000-\$100,000 and try to increase the restaurant's sense of intimacy.

"At the beginning, there was a noise-level issue," says Sameni. "And now we're trying to address our guests' comments."

[Tillman's Roadhouse](#), one of the first Dallas-based restaurants to set up shop in the West Seventh development in December 2009, has seen its number of nightly customers dip by 60 percent since its boffo beginning. It has cleaned house of its executive chef, sous chef and general manager.

"Part of Tillman's problem is that it feels Western, yet in Fort Worth that might be a bit overdone," says longtime Fort Worth restaurateur Vance Martin, who owns [Lili's Bistro](#) on Magnolia. "After all, chefs like Tim Love, Grady Spears and Jon Bonnell have that market pretty well cornered, and they are local favorites to boot. This is a harder market to break into from Dallas than they realized."

Success stories

And yet, nearby West Seventh Street eateries such as [Terra Mediterranean Grill](#), Fireside Pies and Patrizio -- all with roots in Dallas -- have been thriving here.

Terra's affordable lunch buffet attracts a steady crowd, and Fireside Pies' creative pizzas, along with eye-catching cocktails, inject a subtle urban sophistication into West Seventh's restaurant row. And Patrizio has carved out a successful niche by offering reasonably priced Italian food in an elegant setting.

"In a nutshell, Patrizio's philosophy," says Gary Van Gundy, president of Edward C. Bailey Enterprises, which runs Patrizio and Bailey's Prime Plus, "is to give the customer greater value than they would expect from the price point. That means we are constantly trying to surpass a lot of people's expectations."

Fireside Pies and Patrizio's early success in Fort Worth can also be partially traced to their having plenty of experience opening new branches of their original restaurants.

"Those restaurants, or a place like [Eddie V's](#)," says restaurant consultant Yarbrough, "already have everything in place such as inventory procedures, service and hospitality controls. They already

have so much experience in how to count the beans, treat the guests and how to account for staff turnover. They know very well not to buy 300 heads of lettuce for their opening week because they know they won't sell 1,200 house salads in three days.

"They're not some lawyer in love with his mom's lasagna recipe who wants to open up a first-time place in Fort Worth."

[Buttons](#), one of Fort Worth's more sustained success stories, has built its following because of a distinctive ambiance -- one part smooth jazz club, two parts soulful comfort food -- and its irrepressible chef, Keith Hicks. The restaurant attracts one of the most ethnically diverse customer bases of any Fort Worth restaurant. "We set out to do that," says Herbert Hughes, president of Buttons Management. "To develop a place where people of all stripes could enjoy those universal things of upscale comfort food and good live music. That's our niche." (Buttons has added locations in Addison and DeSoto in the last year.)

And in Hicks, Buttons possesses a wild-card advantage: He is the masterful hand behind Buttons' upscale Southern comfort food, supervising every pork chop and garlic clove sauteed in his kitchen. But he will often circulate among the restaurant's guests, and even get up on stage to dance to the band's rhythms.

Such is the trickiness of the Fort Worth market -- even these successful restaurants haven't followed a foolproof blueprint. And that's because Fort Worth resists easy stereotyping.

The minute one spouts the old saw of Fort Worth as a bastion of barbecue and burgers, versus Dallas' more cosmopolitan leanings, Fort Worth produces a restaurant like [Ellerbe Fine Foods](#), which has received national acclaim for its highly sophisticated, farm-to-table menu offerings such as a roasted beet salad made with local arugula, honey, bee pollen and topped with lemon ricotta cheese that is, naturally, made in house.

But Ellerbe Fine Foods' gold-plated reputation is not rooted solely in its accomplished kitchen.

"Ellerbe's has a great cadre of really good waiters, all of whom take the time to know their customers," says Michael Bennett, a prominent local architect, who frequently dines there. "They will remember what I ordered the last time. Owner Richard King will come right up to me when I enter. That kind of service will always get people to come back."

Ellerbe's King agrees that the root of the restaurant's undeniable early success -- it has averaged a 20 percent annual revenue growth since opening in June 2009 -- is that "we are very appreciative of everyone who walks through our door," King says. "Whether you are a local customer, someone driving in from Dallas or flying in from somewhere else, we're really humble about this: It's an honor to serve everyone."

Kirkpatrick of the restaurant association says customer care can make all the difference:

"When you are opening that hopefully successful restaurant in Fort Worth, that is the time when you must shake the hands and kiss the babies in terms of getting close to your new patrons. Getting to know the family of the customer who walks in the door is the way a restaurant will wow them and keep them coming back."

Reality, not romance

Kirk Williams is certainly banking on more new restaurants mining the hot Fort Worth market. As senior vice president of development with Cypress Equities -- which is finishing the second phase of the West Seventh development to include 25,000 square feet of retail along with 96 more residential units -- Williams is anticipating bringing in the fast-casual eatery Sweet Tomatoes in mid-October as the latest addition to the booming West Seventh Street strip.

Another category of restaurant Williams and Cypress are looking to add would be one offering a "great coffee, a solid breakfast, a cool lunch, and then, in the evening has this late night, almost bohemian hip vibe," says Williams. "Now that would complete the mix of restaurants we currently have."

Others are quick to echo Williams' upbeat, expansion-minded outlook for more restaurants riding into Fort Worth, hazards and all. And many attribute that to an almost blinding allure of being the next big-buzz restaurateur.

"There will always be people like a retired lawyer or doctor with that romantic idea that owning a restaurant is like being the host of your own personal dinner party seven nights a week," says Kirkpatrick. "It's usually the dream of that guy who loves to host backyard parties, or the one who thinks he makes the best fajitas in the neighborhood, or the lady who is told that her cupcakes are so good she should open up a bakery. Unfortunately, few of them really come to grips

with the hard-core business aspect of it. Making one great item isn't the same as writing an entire menu."

"Yeah," adds Ellerbe's King. "With such a big restaurant failure rate, a smart businessperson would have to be a bit stupid to try it. But, at the end of the day, the daring and the adventuresome will always be tempted to give it a go."