

*Throughout his career, John Tunney has relied on practical and efficient business strategies to make his restaurants a reality, but it is his intuitive ability to stay in touch with his customers that keeps his establishments, like HONU shown here, on everyone's list of favorite dinner reservations.*



# TUNNEY VISION

John Tunney serves up culinary gold.

MELISSA C. NAVIA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES LEVIN

Change happens. Success, creativity, inspiration—they all depend on it at one point or another.

When it comes to the restaurant business, the same rules apply. It's all a matter of timing and execution, knowing when to do it and how to get it done, and perhaps few know this better than enterprising restaurateur John J. Tunney III. Passionate about his ventures and dedicated to his work, he is credited with some of Long Island's most delectable culinary experiences, not to mention *renovations*.

"It comes down to understanding people, staying fresh and exceeding expectations," says Tunney.

And as designer and owner of HONU Kitchen and Cocktails and Besito Mexican Kitchen and Agave Lounge, two of only six restaurants last year that garnered the prestigious *New York Times* rating of excellence, as well as American Burger Company and, most recently, American Roadside Burgers, he has a knack for knowing what diners want and how to deliver it.

Back in June of last year, when Tunney announced that his popular, award-winning restaurant, Blue Honu, in Huntington would be undergoing a complete overhaul, people were skeptical. Fortunately for us, he knew exactly what he was doing.

"We were packed the night before we closed," he says. "There is risk in changing something that isn't broken, and that was the public's concern, but we knew it was time for something new."

Less than two and a half weeks later, after a full redesign, the doors opened to HONU, and diners have been thrilled ever since. With its innovative approach to dining and chic, relaxing appeal, HONU exudes a dynamic energy all its own. From the moment you step in, the space envelops you and entices the senses. The luxury of rich, red velvet, floor-to-ceiling drapes, plush carpeting and crystal chandeliers, combined with the

warmth of barn wood and stone, creates a unique atmosphere of comfortable elegance.

"I build things because there is a need for it," says Tunney, "and HONU brings a sophistication that people were looking for and an eclectic menu that people were craving."

Developed by Tunney alongside his brother David Tunney and John Rieger and executed by Corporate Executive Chef Matthew Lake and Executive Chef Paul Miranda, the concept behind HONU revolves around the "small plate" menu. The answer to every indecisive diner's prayers, it offers dishes that are more filling than appetizers, but not as large as entrées. Now, instead of banking on one choice for the evening, you have options—intensely flavorful, deliciously substantial options, like the short ribs, spatzle and root vegetables, lobster with fire roasted corn or spicy hamachi with kumquat and scallion. Whether you want to share the house favorites or call dibs on your own plates, you can be assured that the same attention that was paid to creating HONU's dishes has also been extended to the way in which they are actually served. A knowledgeable and—just as important—likeable staff ensures that each plate comes out precisely when it's supposed to, flavor following flavor, in a brilliantly timed cascade of combinations that will surely be a first for any palate.

"With this new menu, we wanted to offer more freedom and more food," says Tunney. "It gives diners the chance to tour the best ingredients and most robust flavors in a logical manner, all of which adhere to our philosophy of expert minimal preparation. The less you touch the food, the more it stays true to form."

It is, really, quite simple. Take great food, in a comfortable atmosphere, delivered by genuinely friendly service, and people can't help but want to come back.

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By far, HONU's success is no surprise, as Tunney has a history of creating some unique ventures and making sure that people feel right at home.

Starting out in the restaurant business at a young age on the North Shore, Tunney launched his first independent venture, Carlton and Co. at Oheka Castle, in 1993, and two years later, he expanded the brand with the top Zagat-rated Carlton on the Park in East Meadow. For a while, he set his sights on the casino industry and opened the eye-catching creations known as Atlantic City's Temple Bar and Grill, in Caesar's Palace, and Olio! in the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, in Las Vegas.

Now back home, Tunney continues to make waves and generate excitement, and as he showed with HONU, he's never afraid to try something different if he thinks the atmosphere is right.

"A lot of change evolves from complete boredom," he candidly admits, "and I've found that just as I've gotten bored with something, people are getting there, too. You need that to stay ahead of the trend."

In fact, the idea behind Besito, first opened in Huntington in 2006, came from Tunney's own desire for real, authentic Mexican food nearby. When he found such a place just didn't exist, he went out and created it. The result was an upscale Mexican restaurant where nothing is smothered and everything comes cliché-free. True to Tunney's style, the design is an effortless blend of soft lighting, dark wood floors and a eucalyptus reed ceiling that complements the food so wonderfully you almost can't imagine eating tacos and enchiladas anywhere else. With a second Besito already in Roslyn, there are two more scheduled to arrive in Connecticut and Park City, Utah.

But not to worry about watered-down versions of the original popping up on corners everywhere. Tunney believes, "The busier you are, the nicer you should be," and the more restaurants you open, the better each one should get. When he expands, he looks to equal his previous successes, even to top them.

Tunney's newest venture, American Roadside Burgers in Smithtown, is actually an updated spin-off of the popular Huntington- and Hicksville-based American Burger Company. Burger lovers who know ABC for its sleek appeal, flat-screen televisions, iPod docks and clean surfaces will find a more rugged, open-road approach at Roadside with motorcycles, original barn siding, exposed ceilings and distressed black leather booths.

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While the look might have changed, the commitment to freshness and quality service has remained the same. Local produce toppings, roasted jalapeños, toasted buns and the juiciest burgers all ensure that everything you loved about ABC, and then some, is served at Roadside. An expanded menu gives you plenty to salivate over, including grilled hot dogs, hot wings, sweet potato fries, veggie burgers and a southwestern Roadside salad.

"This is more on target for what people are looking for now," says Tunney about the new launch. For that reason, he's looking to convert both ABC locations into Roadsides before the summer.

And in addition to getting their name on the Roadside Wall of Fame, diners who eat a Roadside Famous Road Star Burger will be eligible to win the Yamaha Road Star motorcycle, parked in the dining area, on May 28, 2008, National Hamburger Day.

Now that's customer appreciation.

Perhaps Tunney's affinity for restaurant success is in large part due to how he approaches every project, with business savvy and a sensible dose of creativity. Through Tunneyvision—a full-service hospitality design, consulting and coaching enterprise—he sees ideas through from concept to completion. It's not just about the food or just about the space; to be a truly enjoyable dining experience, it needs to be about both.

As for the future, the possibilities are endless, and while we wait to find out what Tunney has in store for us next, we have several of his most ambitious establishments to enjoy right here in our own backyards.

"Really, all that matters is that the customers are happy. If they leave a place and tell their friends, that's what we look for. People want to enjoy eating out, and we want to provide them with that experience."

Nothing fancy. No strings attached.

Oh, and remember the "small plate" idea that Tunney introduced with HONU last summer? A survey of more than 1,000 American Culinary Federation member chefs recently named it one of the year's hottest national trends.

But no need to tell him that—you can be sure, he's well aware. •