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Tin Mill eatery a labour of love for its owners

Historic mill gets new lease on life — with some key original touches — as Uxbridge restaurant

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It's not your run-of-the-mill eatery. "Wow, and we are only in the foyer," said one admiring patron entering the restored Tin Mill Restaurant, one of the local historic sites listed for Doors Open Uxbridge last month.

Twice ravaged by fire during its almost 150-year history, the former flour mill has risen from the ashes to put Uxbridge, an hour's drive from Toronto, on the culinary map.

The 85-seat eatery on Toronto St. opened last December after seven months of back-breaking, soot-under-the-fingernails labour.

Everyone said it couldn't be done, recalls Don Andrews, for whom the renovation and restoration became an "obsession."

"They expected us to go broke. But I had a vision and I felt strongly that I could bring it back into the community," Andrews says. "I thought I

could bring the building back from the dead." When he and partner Conrad Lepine started work on the old building, it was in "brutally bad shape."

Built as a flour mill in 1860, it was rebuilt after a 1920 fire, then converted to a tannery 25 years later. Another fire in 1961 left major damage and blackened timber, most of which was covered over.

The tannery had been closed for about 15 years and the proprietor was just making belts and moccasins. "All the machines were still there, and stacks of hides and fur," says Lepine.

Andrews, who loves old buildings, wanted to keep as much of the original as possible.

The entrepreneurs, who ran a café and catering business on Uxbridge's Main St., also wanted to save money, so they did some of the work themselves.

They spent long weeks pulling

nails, scrubbing charred posts and beams, sanding and coating everything with Varathane.

"It was a real mess," Andrews says. "It was really rewarding to see how it came back."

Some of the boards and beams were left where they were; other wood was relocated for new uses in partitions, picture frames and the fireplace mantel in a back dining room — an addition from the '60s. The old tin panels that give the restaurant its name were reclaimed, cleaned and reused inside and out. In several places, blackened beams

and floorboards remain — a salute to the building's history.

Two months ago, the partners built a deck around two sides of the building to add outdoor seating for 40.

Supported by 8-by-8 hemlock posts, the terrace puts diners within reach of the trees and the stream that runs along the back of the property.

A food shop is at the front, and an art gallery, jewellery store and wool shop occupy the refurbished second floor and basement. A spa is in the works.

The unique ambience and menu of

fresh, locally produced food seems to have won instant recognition from diners.

"We're just swamped," says Andrews. "We're getting people from far and wide — Newmarket, Peterborough, Lindsay, Ottawa ..."

Before the Tin Mill opened, "most people were going outside town for their dining experiences," he says. "The time is right in Uxbridge. It has a lot to offer in the way of unique tourist-type things and it just needs to be pulled together."



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Tin Mill owners Don Andrews, left, and Conrad Lepine used some of the Uxbridge building's original fixtures.

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