

VEX MEX

Struggling to get a table at Playa Cabana’s new outpost? **Chris Nuttall-Smith** tells you why you shouldn’t bother **PAGE 4**



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SECTION M

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EDITOR: SARAH LILLEYMAN

DEVELOPMENT

Midtown makeover

Rich with transit, office space and a crowd of young buyers, the area known as ‘Young and Eligible’ is the new hot spot of Toronto’s condo boom. **Tara Perkins** talks to five developers who are betting – big – on a taller, denser future for Yonge and Eg



Where five developers intersect: **Maurice Wager** from **Shiplake Management Company**, **Chris Sherriff-Scott** from **Minto Communities**, **James Ritchie** from **Tridel Corp.**, **Jared Menkes** from **Menkes Developments Ltd.**, and **Todd Cowan** from **CD Capital** at **Yonge St. near Eglinton Ave.**

FERNANDO MORALES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Looking out the window of his office in the Yonge Eglinton Centre, Ed Sonshine sees a lot of construction going on. “This is a happening place,” says the 66-year-old chief executive of RioCan Real Estate Investment Trust. In many ways, it’s the perfect vantage point for the future of big development in Toronto.

Yonge and Eglinton is seeing a surge of office and condo construction. The number of active new condo units in North Toronto rose 166 per cent in the last three years, significantly outpacing the growth rate of the western part of downtown, where cranes are ubiquitous. A big part of the appeal?

“Transportation,” Mr. Sonshine says. When RioCan bought the Yonge Eglinton Centre six years ago, Mr. Sonshine became so convinced that the area was set for a resurgence that he moved the company’s own offices into the building, from their previous location in a King Street tower in the financial district. **Eglinton, Page 4**

POLITICS

Listen, folks: The Fords broadcast their views

With their radio show, Mayor Ford and Councillor Ford present an unfiltered message – and it may continue until election time

SIMON HOUP

Rudy is on line 3 with a complaint. “Metrolinx is bloated,” he says sourly. “They got guys promoting stuff that’s not even sustainable.” This is radio, but you can practically hear Doug Ford, the Etob-

icoke city councillor and sworn arch-enemy of governmental bloat, nodding angrily at the waste of taxpayer funds. “Was that Presto card \$700-million?” Doug asks rhetorically. “Oh,” his brother Rob interjects, “it’s close to a billion dollars.”

Now Elizabeth is on line 1, upset about a “beautiful, expensive structure” for bikes that was recently installed next to the High Park subway station. “The thing must have cost a bundle,” she says. Rob listens intensely, then makes a promise: “If you wanna

call my office, I’d be more than happy to come out, see where these bikes are situated,” he says. “I’ll get you answers on who made that decision and how much it cost – the whole nine yards.” For the past 15 months, the brothers Ford have spent two

hours on Sunday afternoons moonlighting as comically pugnacious AM radio talk jocks, jawing about key issues – fiscal restraint, lazy politicians, the primacy of subways – and shining a light on important community causes. **Radio, Page 2**

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This is Taco Bell for blue bloods

Despite promises of fresh, local sourcing, Playa Cabana’s Junction location produces mediocre Mexican

CHRIS NUTTALL-SMITH
THE DISH
cnuttallsmith@globeandmail.com

Restaurants’ promises matter. At Playa Cabana, the soon to be three-location Mexican chain that began last year with a single, impossibly popular squidge of a spot on a high-end stretch of Dupont Street near Davenport Road, the promises are extravagant.

Playa Cabana’s menu is built on “artisan-made, organic ingredients,” the company pledges.

In a letter to customers posted on Playa Cabana’s website and inside the doorway of that original location, executive chef and owner Dave Sidhu vows, “In spring, summer and fall, all of our produce is local except for avocados.”

“You will find nothing in a bottle or in a can in our kitchen,” he writes. “Everything is made entirely from scratch.”

When I spoke with him on the phone this week, Mr. Sidhu said that all of Playa Cabana’s meat, save the chorizo, comes from Grandview Farms, a family-run organic ranch near Thornbury. Impressive.

“The first Playa Cabana, we’re in a neighbourhood, Rosedale, Forest Hill, where people will pay for that kind of stuff, right?” he said.

Yes, they will. Playa Cabana opened a second location last December on Dundas Street West, in the Junction. It is booming. A third spot, on Avenue Road, is scheduled to open this month.

And Playa Cabana’s original address on Dupont Street generally books out of prime, 7 p.m. tables three weeks to a month in advance; the best you can do with less than a few weeks’ notice is lunchtime, 5 p.m. or 9 p.m.

Yet after four recent visits to the company’s restaurants, two to the Dupont location and two to Dundas West, I am mystified by their popularity, and deeply skeptical of all those sourcing claims.

The original location is fine. The cooking is generally competent. The flautas, in particular – fried tortilla tubes stuffed with braised beef and sauced with bright salsa roja and zippy tomatillo – were irresistible. I’d happily eat those with a couple of beers and call it a night. The room is fun and filled with the sort of people who have



Playa Cabana on Dundas Street West is loud and fun, but the kitchen has issues. FERNANDO MORALES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

THE DISH

PLAYA CABANA CANTINA (NO STARS)

2883 Dundas St. W. (at Mavety Street), 647-352-7767
playacabana.ca

Atmosphere: The à-la-carte option at an all-inclusive resort on the Yucatan, decorated to look like a tequila bar in Tijuana.

Wine And Drinks: Margaritas by the glass and pitcher, a short list of easy-drinking beers, more than 50 tequilas.

Best bets: Flautas, tortillas and salsa.

Prices: Appetizers, \$4 to \$19; Mains, \$14 to \$24.

No stars: Not recommended
★ Good, but won’t blow a lot of minds
★★ Very good, with some standout qualities
★★★ Excellent, well above average with few caveats, if any
★★★★: Extraordinary, memorable, original, with near-perfect execution

expensive dogs. The music isn’t too loud, the house-made tortilla chips and salsa are tasty. The burritos were also good, and the tequilas list, with more than 50 selections, is encyclopedic. One of the tequilas, an añejo called the Gran Patrón Burdeos, sells for \$90 per 1-oz shot.

The tacos are sloppy, unbalanced, with no real freshness or texture for the most part, save iceberg lettuce. They are fine, if you’ve never eaten great tacos. They sell for between \$10 and \$14 for three of them.

The tacos at La Carnita are better-made and tastier, and cost about the same; they’re even cheaper at Rebozos and the eternally delicious Tacos el Asador.

The new location in the Junction, decorated with old U.S. highway markers and vintage neon signs, is nowhere near that solid. The room itself is loud and fun; one evening recently the young, attractive staff snaked through the narrow space with an enormous white sombrero, which they placed on the head of a bemused older man as they sang him “Happy Birthday, Señor!”

But the kitchen in that Junction location is a disaster – the food was mediocre at best, awful in many cases. The mole, which is supposedly made from “27 chiles and nuts,” was dry and cakey

when I had it. It tasted a lot like Nestle Quik mixed with off-brand hot sauce. The overcooked rice on the same plate bore the metallic tang of bouillon cubes.

One night, I ordered the tacos al pastor: “The famous tacos of Mexico!” The menu promised pork marinated with adobo seasoning, roasted slowly on a trompo rotisserie, served with pineapple. Picture your mother frying full-fat ground beef after school and dumping in a packet of Old El Paso spice mix, never bothering to drain the runoff. Now you know exactly how those tacos al pastor looked and tasted.

The lobster tacos were waterlogged, slack-tasting, as Mexican as Mike Duffy doing the Macarena. They came with juiceless wedges of lime whose pulp had developed a leathery skin from sitting out too long.

The “100% Ontario Grandview Farms organic, grass-fed, fruit-finished Wagyu beef” hamburguesa that my tablemate ordered one night was promised medium rare but arrived gray to its core, nearly flavourless, notably dry – an impressive feat of cooking. The fries tasted as though they’d been steamed.

Are the pitchers of margaritas at the Junction spot really made with freshly-squeezed lime juice? The pitcher I ordered one night

tasted remarkably similar to powdered bar mix.

And those sourcing promises – they are a liability. One evening I watched a man in a Sysco uniform push two hand trucks of boxed oxtail, frozen octopus and other groceries through Playa Cabana’s Junction dining room. Sysco is a Houston-based foodservice distributor, the world’s largest. It is the restaurant-supply equivalent to Walmart, approximately, the last place a principled kitchen goes for local, sustainable, organic, artisanal groceries.

“If Grandview doesn’t have oxtail, then our chef will probably ask the guys from Sysco for it,” Mr. Sidhu said when I challenged him on his purchasing.

That wasn’t mentioned in his manifesto.

When you park the hype, and the organic and local claims (not to mention all of the company’s you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me health claims; check out that manifesto), it’s not hard to see Playa Cabana for what it really is. It’s mediocre Mexican for starched-collar white folks – it is safety in the guise of virtue and authenticity, an all-inclusive Sandals in the Yucatán, ringed with a chain link fence. Playa Cabana is Taco Bell for blue bloods, except that Taco Bell doesn’t try to pretend it’s better than it is.

If all of Playa Cabana’s produce save the avocados is sourced locally from spring through fall, as Mr. Sidhu’s manifesto pledges, where’s he getting that cob corn that’s on the menu lately, three months before Ontario corn season? “It’s more like after the spring, going into the summer, when our produce season starts here in Ontario,” Mr. Sidhu said.

If local and organic are priorities, why was the “daily catch” this week farmed, imported tilapia, and not Ontario pickerel or yellow perch or wild shrimp from Quebec, all of them in season?

Words are cheap.

For dessert there are churros that, the night I had them, looked and tasted the way churros might look and taste like if the person making the churros had never seen or eaten a churro before. They were bland and dry, roundish like Timbits, deformed-looking, like maybe they’d grown up too close to a nuclear power plant.

I had the churros at Taco Bell once. They were really good.

FROM PAGE 1

Eglinton: New transit line has kickstarted cycle of growth and development

“We didn’t know for sure about the Eglinton transit route, but they’ve been talking about it for 100 years, so I figured sooner or later it was going to happen,” he says.

And he was right. The province has since committed \$8.4-billion to the creation of four light rail transit lines, including the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, which will run from Black Creek Drive to Kennedy Station and is scheduled to be complete by 2020.

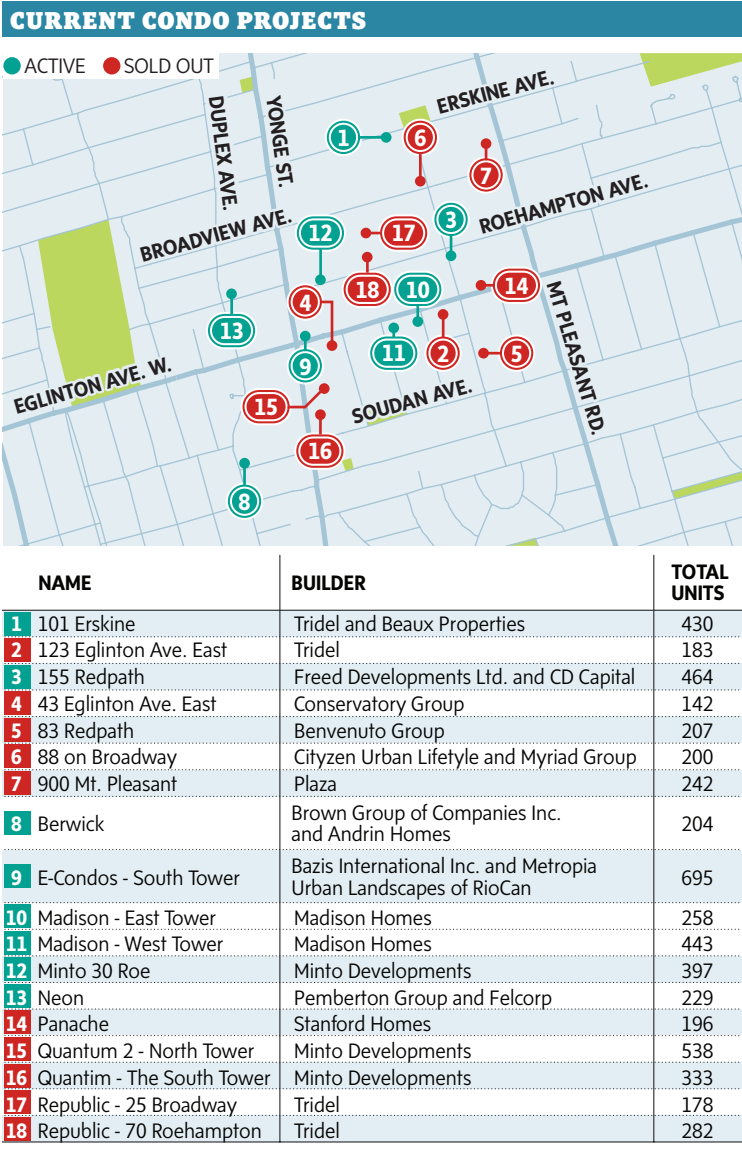
Yonge and Eglinton, which not so long ago was facing decline, is experiencing a massive growth spurt that is just in its infancy. Following in the footsteps of its southern siblings, it is going to get much taller, as 30-storey-plus condo buildings become more commonplace. And while density is being encouraged, the congestion that it can cause is likely to stir up more controversy around Yonge and Eg (or as Mr. Sonshine notes it’s sometimes called, Young and Eligible) than it has in some parts of the core that are more accustomed to hustle and bustle.

But this is a train that’s already out of the station. The average price per square foot for new condos in North Toronto has risen 18 per cent in the last three years, to \$636, according to data from RealNet Canada Inc. While there are more cranes and higher prices on downtown’s west side, its growth rate doesn’t touch that at Yonge and Eg.

A cycle is occurring: Yonge and Eg became more attractive to residents, which attracted condo developers, who – with the added amenity of the new LRT line – are attracting more residents.

As the growth feeds on itself, new office space is being built for companies that want to tap into the growing pool of nearby residents. And condo builders are looking for ways to appeal to the area’s vast population of renters.

The impact of these changes will be substantial, say developers who are becoming increasingly active in the area. Five of them gathered recently at Grano, a restaurant on Yonge Street that’s a local mainstay. Over coffees and



cakes, they discussed the neighbourhood’s transformation and why they are collectively betting billions of dollars on the area.

“We feel that this is the beginning for Yonge and Eglinton,” says Todd Cowan, a partner at CD Capital, which has teamed up with Freed Developments for a big condo development push there.

“Yonge and Eglinton needed something to give it a kickstart, and we think that this commitment for the LRT line is what really created the impetus,” Mr. Cowan says.

CD Capital and Freed Developments will be making a billion-dollar commitment to the neighbourhood over the next five to ten years. “We’re big believers that, if you look back ten years from now, it’s going to be one of those moments where if you’re not in, you’re going to say ‘Geez, I wish I had invested there,’” Mr. Cowan says.

Chris Sherriff-Scott, senior vice-president at Minto, remembers when the area was losing its mojo during the ‘90s. “It was actually in decline,” he says. “When do peo-

ple know that a neighbourhood is in decline? When they wake up one day and stores are shuttered. That’s what was happening here gradually.”

“It was a sleeper for a very long time, but it was stable,” says Maurice Wager of Shiplake Management Company, which has been active in the neighbourhood for decades.

The developers suggested that density is inevitable, and should be welcomed as a sign of a neighbourhood on the rise. “The fact is that the opportunities for newly built housing in this area, and in most parts of the 416, are a higher form of density,” says Jim Ritchie, a senior vice-president at Tridel.

“We traditionally produce 25,000 homes in the Greater Toronto Area, and it used to be 17,000 or 18,000 of those were low-rise,” says Jared Menkes, a development manager at Menkes.

“Now it’s switching to 17,000 to 18,000 high-rise, and 12,000 or 13,000 low-rise homes. And that low-rise number is still coming down because we’re finding it harder and harder every day to find land to build those.”

In addition to attracting new residents to the neighbourhood, the condo developers who are pushing into Yonge and Eg are hoping to coax some of the renters in the many apartment buildings that have long dominated the area into buying units. “This community has the highest percentage of renters in the city,” says Mr. Ritchie.

Of condo buyers, about one-third are single females, a much higher proportion than average, he adds. “And you also have a very high percentage ... of the people in this community who are either single or couples that don’t have kids.”

Investors are also snapping up many of the new condo units. And that’s pushing apartment landlords to improve their offerings, even though the rental market is tight right now. Mr. Wager says that Shiplake’s 1965 apartment building at 45 Dunfield Ave. is turning over units in two to three days when they become vacant. Nonetheless, “now we’re

starting to test the market by introducing what we feel is a suite that’s more competitive with the newer stock,” he adds. The company will keep apartments off the market for about a month after they’re vacated and do extensive upgrades.

“A typical one-bedroom that would go for \$1,450 a month is now going for \$1,650 or \$1,700 a month. We’re starting to hit those condo rents in apartment buildings,” Mr. Wager says.

The province legislates maximum rent increases for existing apartment tenants, one of the reasons why relatively few apartment buildings are being constructed. So it’s somewhat surprising when Mr. Wager says that the momentum at Yonge and Eg is strong enough that “we’re looking at doing new purpose-built rental buildings in the area.”

The neighbourhood’s offices are undergoing a revitalization in step with the housing stock, says Mr. Menkes. He points to firms like LinkedIn and Facebook, which have offices in the area. With a growing base of eager young workers moving in, many companies are taking notice.

“The condominium buildings that we bring in are bringing in the workforce,” says Mr. Ritchie.

Back at his office in the Yonge and Eglinton Centre, Mr. Sonshine is thinking of adding 250,000 square feet of office space on top of the existing towers.

“When we bought this building the office [space] was only about 80 per cent occupied. Today it’s 100 per cent,” he says. Four or five years ago, the company studied the idea of building more offices, but the costs of construction weren’t economical. Now, rents are increasing and tenants are hungry for more space.

This, the developers say, is the new reality here. “There are a number of projects that are high-profile – they look large unto themselves,” says Mr. Sherriff-Scott. “But if you look at them in terms of the community as a whole, there wasn’t anything happening here for close to 25 years. Its time has come.”