

# Calgary restaurateur revives historic ranch

BY JOHN GILCHRIST, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 26, 2009



Witold Twardowski

**Photograph by:** Lorraine Hjalte, Calgary Herald

It was 123 years ago that Scottish homesteader J. A. Turner built his first house near what is now known as Millarville. During the next 16 years, he raised

Clydesdale horses on his property, enjoyed the view and, with growing success, built a bigger house and acquired more land.

In 1902, Turner sold his homestead to the Wright family, who in turn sold it to the McKays in 1916. The McKay family held on to the land and buildings until a few months ago when they sold a parcel of two hectares, with the historic buildings, to Calgary restaurateur Witold Twardowski.

Known for helping convert old buildings into hot new restaurants such as Mescalero, Teatro and The Ranche, Twardowski saw the same potential for the McKay Place--especially because it had been run as a restaurant by McKay family member Jackie Chalmers in the late 1980s. Twardowski spruced it up, did as little as possible to the historic tone, and started serving lunch and dinner just before Christmas.

The 1895 house--Turner's second, larger home--looks much as it has since it was built: a series of small rooms with wood floors, walls and ceilings. Some of the original furniture still fills the rooms, and south-and east-facing windows pour sunlight into the house.

The windows also allow a sweeping view across what will be a summer patio to the foothills. It's reminiscent of Annie's, the small ranch foreman's house near The Ranche restaurant in Fish Creek, another project in which Twardowski was involved.

Behind the scenes, the kitchen houses a restaurant-sized stove and a southern barbecue smoker.

Twardowski's vision for the new McKay Place (403-931-3105) is that of a "regional ranch roadhouse." He sees it as offering good food and a casual setting for longtime ranching locals, recent arrivals and visitors from the city alike.

Situated on Secondary Route 549 about four kilometres west of Highway 22, the McKay Place is prime territory for cyclists, motorcycle cruisers and horse riders. He's even had a request from some of the locals to add a hitching rail for the horses.

The original regional ranch roadhouse menu was designed by chefs Barbara Lippuner and Mark Klautd (Klautd is also the chef and co-owner of Route 40 Soup Co. in Turner Valley). They've now turned the kitchen over to chef Sandra Watson, who previously cooked at Twardowski's two other current local restaurants--Lougheed House and Reader's Garden Cafe.

Watson's freshly tweaked menu includes items such as bison meat loaf, braised lamb shanks, a roast vegetable lasagna and a house-smoked pulled pork sandwich. The McKay Place is open for lunch (or brunch) and dinner Wednesday through Sunday

And Turner himself? He turned his Clydesdale profits into larger land acquisitions, including some in a picturesque valley a few kilometres south of Millarville. In 1914, the Dingman #1 oil well blew in on one of his pieces of land. They don't call it Turner Valley for nothing.

The McKay Place is reachable from the southern end of Calgary in about half an hour. Go west on 22X, south on Highway 22 past the Millarville racetrack and Farmers' Market turnoff, and west on Secondary 549.

If you're unfamiliar with the area, and you're coming from the north, you can pop into the High Country Cafe on Highway 22 at the racetrack turnoff for directions. You might even have a piece of pie and a cup of coffee. The folks who run the 20-seat cafe make a fine breakfast and a good pie --if the raisin pie is available, have a slab. There are no lattes or booze here, but there is a warm country welcome. And pie.

If you're coming from the south, you can stop into Route 40 at 146 Main Street in Turner Valley (403-933-7676). Owners Mark and Lanny Klautd are doing some kitchen and dining room renovations right now, so it's slated to reopen in a few days. The Klautds are also reworking both the food and

the wine menus, with an eye to increasing value for the dollar. (I expect we'll be seeing a lot more value focus on menus in coming months.)

One more south-of-Calgary note: Siraia, the restaurant at Sirocco Golf Course (403-256-8591) about four kilometres south of Spruce Meadows, has reopened after a post-Christmas break. It's yet another fine place for a weekend brunch.

John Gilchrist reviews restaurants for CBC radio one. his cheap eats Guide to Calgary and area restaurants is available in Book stores and specialty food shops.

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