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DINING - DINING LEAD

April 21, 2010

Alphabet Scoop

The man who revived the gritty ABC Tavern has an XYZ in store

by **Douglas Trattner**

On pace to open five new eateries in just 18 months, Alan Glazen is the most ambitious restaurateur you've never heard of. In contrast to chefs like Zack Bruell and Michael Symon, who slowly and deliberately expand their culinary portfolios, Glazen seems bent on opening as many new joints as possible.

After unveiling Erie Island Coffee on East 4th Street last year, Glazen provided the start-up cash for Bonbon Bake Shop in the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood. Next up was ABC Tavern on West 25th Street, where he united with Randy Kelley and Linda Syrek, who also run the West Side Market Café. Before the end of the year, Glazen will open a Rocky River outpost of Erie Island and a Detroit-Shoreway restaurant called XYZ Tavern, also with Kelley and Syrek as his partners (see Bites).

"I never worked a day in my life outside downtown Cleveland," offers Glazen as motivation. "I want to be part of bringing this city back."

At an age when many retired businessmen hoard their cash and hit the links, Glazen, 61, is negotiating leases and writing fat checks. He scours Cleveland's urban neighborhoods — Ohio City, Detroit-Shoreway, Collinwood — for overlooked diamonds that he can buff back to life. He doesn't know the first thing about running a restaurant, so he partners with operators who do.

"We take great old-school places, clean them up, and bring them back to their former glory," says Glazen. To judge the success of the formula in action, simply visit ABC Tavern. For decades, ABC was the "old-man bar" that urban hipsters dodged during Ohio City pub crawls. Sure, folks occasionally dropped in for an ironic PBR, but reliably, the joint was Lamesville. These days it's tough to buy a stool there. Popular with service-industry pros and the people who love them, ABC rocks hard and long until the wee hours of the night.

So, how does a busy tavern save Cleveland? When you elevate one place, says Glazen, you elevate the entire block. A thriving block becomes a destination — an entertainment district, for lack of a better phrase. The higher concentration of destinations, the broader the geographic reach. "People think the suburbs are the competition. You simply can't recreate these cool urban settings in Westlake," says Glazen.

"Cleveland can chip away at the suburbs; they can't chip away at us."

"I had a lot of fame in my career," says Glazen matter-of-factly between sips of a cappuccino at Erie Island Coffee. One of Cleveland's own Mad Men, Glazen is enshrined in the Advertising Hall of Fame. His upstart Glazen Creative was, as he so eloquently puts it, "the ad agency that beat the shit out of everybody else." His success with producing commercials encouraged him to try his hand in film. "The

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longest film I ever directed was 60 seconds," he says. "I wondered if I could extend that length." He could, and did. Glazen's documentary work for PBS — a series of ethnographies — earned him a Telly Award.

In order to retire from the thriving agency he started in 1972, Glazen had to find people smart enough to replace him. "That proved to be my big grown-up moment," he says. "I came to the realization that I had a knack for surrounding myself with great people, motivating them, and elevating their game." He does not take credit for turning around ABC Tavern; he takes — and deserves — credit for finding the right folks in whom to place his trust, cash, and civic aspirations. "I'm just an ad guy who discovered a pair of exceptional people whose time has come," he likes to say.

"It's practically impossible to get conventional funding to open a small restaurant," says Randy Kelley. "Alan is willing to take the risk. Taking on partners has its own set of problems. Some want too much involvement, and others don't have anything to offer the partnership. Alan makes us better businesspeople." Two months into ABC's run, Glazen called Kelley into a private room. Instead of the tongue-lashing that Kelley expected, Glazen told him that it was time to find their next location.

Glazen's reputation for deep pockets is creeping through the restaurant industry. Like a studio head, he finds himself on the receiving end of a lot of pitches. And while he hopes to seed his beloved city with upward of 20 new small businesses, he is no fool. "I don't invest in other people's pipe dreams," he says. "If there is a good location and you are a good operator, I want to be the guy you come to."

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