

Good evening, everyone! I am Deek Labelle – the Assistant General Manager at the Chateau Lafayette. Some of you might know it as “that dive bar in the Market”, well the Laff is Ottawa’s original dive bar – the term was basically coined to define the Laff. IMO, the best definition of a dive bar was defined by Playboy magazine in 2010: “A church for down-and-outers and those who romanticize them, a rare place where high and low rub elbows—bums and poets, thieves and slumming celebrities. It’s a place that wears its history proudly”. The only thing missing from that definition is seedy politicians!!

This business is very near and dear to my heart. Not only is it my work; my life and my passion, it’s also my family’s business. Every day, I get to work alongside my mom Jill, my brother Francois, and my uncle Todd; working to preserve our heritage and to ensure its history is never forgotten. It came to be part of our family, the sixth sibling we’ll call it, in the sixties. My grandfather, who was a Chartered Accountant, decided he wanted some fun investments and bought into the Chateau Lafayette. After several shareholders, managers, and staff came and went, in the 80’s my mom began doing the books and my Dad became the Manager. After my grandfather passed away, my mom and her brother Todd became majority owners, with their uncle John.

I’ve been a part of it my whole life, but for the last 10 years it’s been my job to make sure that the Laff stays on everyone’s radar. We’ve rebuilt and renovated several times, and are in the process of doing so yet again. The thing about the Laff though is it doesn’t belong to our family per se – it belongs to the people of Ottawa. Anyone who has ever walked through our doors carries a small piece of the Laff with them. They stop me in the bar to tell me how they met their partners here, or how they couldn’t have survived university without quarts of O’Keefe. The personal stories I hear only feed my love for this place. One of my favorite stories to tell is that of Yvette. You may have seen her sitting alone drinking a quart of Canadian. You may have seen her cleaning up the ladies’ room. You may have seen too much of her on the dance floor, too! Yvette told me just last week that that day marked 41 years to the day she drank her first beer at the Laff. This woman of 81 years of age never ceases to amaze me. She has outlived two husbands and 4 of her children, all the while living life to the fullest. She still takes the bus from Bank Street to the Laff, but only after she pays her rent and her telephone (she shows me her bills to prove it!). She’ll pray for you one moment, and in the next tell a story that would make a priest blush!! Madame Gaudreau defines our demographic –

strong, independent people unafraid to be themselves, with unwavering dedication to good times and a powerful connection to their favourite bar.

The thing about a bar like the Laff is that its history is always a little foggy. Everyone remembers it their way and records are often lost due to “spirits”. Things that oft get forgotten are the finer details – color of the walls, types of beers sold, food served, etc. History can only tell us so much! A few years back a tenant, who occupies what would have been known as a parlour room in the 20th century, decided to open up a bricked up fireplace. Out fell some artifacts that helped us identify some name changes in history! A post card, addressed to the Dominion House, dated 1912 was found. After looking at old maps of the market, we discovered that it was given the name the Dominion House due to it being adjacent to the Dominion Bank. Loose property lines showed us something interesting: the back end of the bank appeared to be where our washrooms are currently located, and we inferred that it was likely where the bank vault was situated. So, despite the staggering number of heads bumped on the doorway to the men’s room, there’s no way we can bust through those 12-inch thick walls!

History buffs will tell you about the Stony Monday Riots that took place on York Street in 1849. It was that riot that put the Laff in the books. While sticks and stones were being thrown, people sought shelter inside the Laff, known then as Grant’s Hotel. What I want you to take away from that brief but significant moment in history is that we’ll always be a safe house – a place free from sticks and stones, name-calling, and prejudice. It speaks to the religious comparisons that are always made: the sermons sung by Lucky Ron, the cult following of our regular patrons, and the shelter provided to many. It will remain as it began: an asylum from the battles taking place on the outside.

Today, we’re dedicated to maintaining the Laff as a bar for the people. The city of Ottawa grew up around us and we owe the citizens a place that is drenched in history, beer, and music. We are committed to promoting the neighborhood. We work to keep not only the Laff in people’s minds, but to make sure that the ByWard Market and our neighbors are top of mind. Without our neighbors, their staff, and their patrons, the Laff wouldn’t still be here nor could it have become the place it is today. The Laff is a slave to the public, and we will always work to keep the Laff as the free-spirited, laid-back dive bar it has always been.