

A Balanced Kitchen

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Foodie panel with Dufflet, Zane Caplansky, Chef Ezra and David Sax Monday Oct 25, 2010

Posted by Mindy | Under [Caplanskys](#), [Dufflet](#), [Ezra Title](#), [Save the Deli](#), [Toronto](#), [foodie events](#)

I wasn't going to miss this UJA Federation of Greater Toronto event (a BIG thank you to my colleagues Fern and Leanne for inviting me and for all the work everyone put into it). A chance to be up close and personal with Dufflet, Zane, Ezra and David? These are giants in their own right, savvy entrepreneurs, and leaders of the Toronto foodie scene (David now lives in New York, but anyone who wants to save delis is ok in my book). I'll be honest- I was a little starstruck when Dufflet walked in. It took my friend and I two tries before we worked up the courage to say hello and tell her what big fans we are. He's a doctor and I jump out of airplanes for fun- we're pretty nervy individuals!- but I still dream of the Dufflet cake brought to my home for a casual potluck: ribbons of raspberry swirled through decadent fudgy chocolate brownie-cake. If my guests hadn't seen it, I would have hidden it for a midnight snack (and breakfast the next day, and lunch, and, well, you get the idea). Even with them having seen it, I still plotted our escape.

Dufflet Rosenberg is a talented pastry chef with three retail locations, one of which happens to be right near my house. From her website: "In addition to.. retail.. Dufflet Pastries supplies over 500 restaurants and cafes, specialty food shops, upscale supermarkets, hotels, and caterers.."

Smoked meat makes for a proper midnight snack itself. As a former Montrealer, deli runs in my blood, so I knew I'd like what Zane Caplansky and David Sax had to say. Zane is the owner of Caplansky's Delicatessen, and David is a journalist who wrote *Save the Deli*, a book about the history and culture of the Delicatessen movement.

The Healthy Gourmet, which Ezra Title co-hosts, plays on Air Canada's in-flight entertainment, so I've seen my share of episodes. Ezra also runs ChezVous Dining, which caters everything from "intimate dinners and cooking classes to cocktail parties and small plate tastings" in home kitchens and venues.

David moderated, and in true journalist fashion, jumped right in. Each of the panelists started working out of their homes and grew their business from there.

"There were five of us in the basement baking," Dufflet said, "and then the zoning department showed up."

"[Working from home] removed a big risk for me," Ezra explained, "I just needed ingredients and customers. This was the easiest way to get going. [My wife and I] bought a house and I was able to design the kitchen how I wanted. I knew I had to leave when I had two staff, my wife, kid, nanny, and myself all crammed in there. I also knew I had to leave because my wife said, 'you have to leave.'"

Zane fell into the deli business by craving a smoked meat sandwich. "I was tired of all the Montrealers bragging about their smoked meat and I thought, I can do this. So I bought a smoker and figured out how." Necessity is the mother of invention after all.

Everyone agreed that working from home is not sustainable long-term. Dufflet sits on the board of the Toronto Food Business Incubator, where chefs, entrepreneurs and foodies can rent kitchen space by the hour. As the business grows, David wondered, how do you maintain the consistency and quality of your work when you can't be everywhere at once?

Ezra emphasized the importance of being present. "I tell my clients I'm at everything we do. The only thing I have to go on is the quality of the food we offer." He further stressed that if a client doesn't see the chef's face, they may feel that the chef isn't prioritizing their event.

Zane's move to his new (and current) location "almost killed me. It still might. I went from eight staff to 45 and now I have to worry about all the details as well as overwhelming expectations. It's easy to serve the fries with the sandwich when you've only got two people to serve."

Of course, as a business grows, complaints are inevitable, legitimate and otherwise. "I'm a very sensitive person," Zane confided. "I really take criticism to heart. One customer told me to go take lessons from [another deli]. I've had to learn how to have a thick skin." A shame, really- legitimate critiquing is fine and restaurateurs should hear about issues, but Caplansky's enjoys a well-deserved reputation as one of the best delis in town.

Conversation shifted to the impact of social media and the internet. "Your blog is like your psychiatrist's couch!" David exclaimed to Zane, who shared a few stories about how revealing too much info had reached his clients.

"I once wrote that I was feeling depressed. Customers came in and asked 'how are you?' When I responded fine, they looked me in the eye and said 'no, really, how are you?' " Zane recalled.

Dufflet feels the advantages of Twitter, Facebook and the like are more about being accessible than promoting product. "On Twitter, the second you post something, it's gone," she mused, "Facebook has a little more longevity."

Ezra commented that on-line review sites such as Chowhound keeps him on his toes. He knows that feedback can be posted instantly and read by a large number of people.

Zane noted that his blog helps people see him as a real person. "Yes," David observed, "You use the word f*** a lot." "If I could afford a therapist I probably wouldn't blog!" Zane joked.

Dufflet reflected on her longevity in the business. Customers have reported that she made their wedding cake, their children's wedding cake, and now their grandchildren's wedding cake during Dufflet's 35- year reign. Now, I did the math. Someone's marrying their children off awfully young in order for Dufflet to have made both their wedding cake and that of their grandchild's, but hey, I might push my children to get married early too if I knew there was a Dufflet cake waiting in the wings.

Zane spoke about how when you go on vacation, it's all about the food. "You're at breakfast and you're planning lunch; at lunch you're planning dinner; it's all about where you're going to eat."

Zane- vacation? That's the story of my life.

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Caplansky's Deli- 356 College Street

Chezvous Dining- 416-347-3609

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