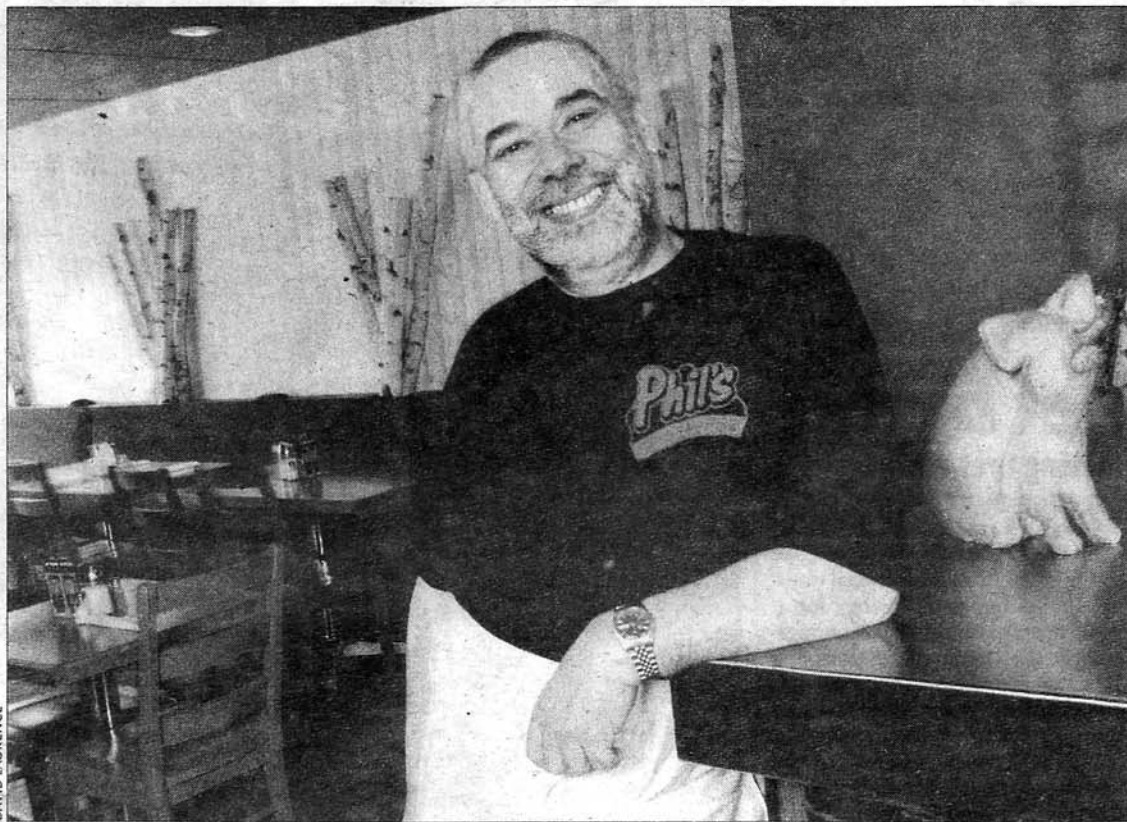


food & drink



Phil Nyman didn't take all the Restaurant Makeover advice but says the experience was worth it.

Makeover survivor

Phil's BBQ's TV Restaurant Makeover didn't change much, fortunately **By STEVEN DAVEY**

PHIL'S ORIGINAL BBQ (838 College, at Ossington, 416-532-8161) Complete dinners for \$35 per person (lunches \$20), including all taxes, tip and a domestic beer. Average main \$15/\$7. Open for lunch Monday to Saturday noon to 3 pm, for dinner Monday to Thursday 5 to 9 pm, Friday and Saturday 5 to 10 pm. Closed Sunday, holidays. Licensed. Access: one step at door, washrooms in basement. Rating: **NNN**

PRODUCED BY TORONTO'S TRICON Films, Restaurant Makeover has gone from a TV gourmand's guilty pleasure to one of the Food Network's most popular programs, so much so that the foodie reality show is now scheduled Monday to Friday nights at 8 pm, with repeats at midnight.

Like the similar so-called reality ser-

ies it mimics (Trading Spaces, Sell This House, How Not To Decorate), Restaurant Makeover sticks to the script; if you've seen one episode, you've seen 'em all. Owners of a floundering restaurant hand over \$15,000 to the show's producers, who match the money and bring in a hip designer and a bold-type chef to overhaul the old room's decor and menu. All in a week!

After the boîte has been gutted by the obligatory hunky carpenters, the designers bitch to the camera, the owners get cold feet and the chef inevitably clashes with a short-order cook whose culinary knowledge extends no further than a deep-fryer.

An hour of shit-fits later, a fabulous new resto and an improved carte are revealed. Seeing the results for the first time, the delighted owners repeatedly

shout "Omigod!" until a final voice-over announces that Larry's Tackle Room & Grill – or whatever it is – is doing better business than ever. Cue mariachi theme music and roll credits.

Restaurant Makeover makes for compulsive viewing, if only to watch Igor smash stuff with a crowbar. But how much of the makeover is for real and how much is staged? And, yes, it's difficult – not to mention expensive – to undo the remodelling, but how much of the celebrity chef's input remains on the menu once he's left the building?

To find out, we return to Phil's Original BBQ, a local eatery recently refurbished by the RM crew. NOW first profiled this west-side rib joint, then named DiPamo's, back in November 98. Of the decor, we remarked snarkily, "Think early Golden Griddle: a plain wooden bar, brass ceiling fans and fake brick walls hung with Blue Note-era jazz musicians." The 'cue? Unequivocally the best in town.

Phil Nyman's been packing them in for nearly 10 years, but here's how Restaurant Makeover described the situation.

"Even with his cult-like following, Phil's still struggling," begins the spin. "The decor and lack of non-meat choices is keeping Phil's from doing the numbers it deserves. Restaurant

Makeover is sending in top designer Meredith Heron and executive chef David Adje to turn the heat up and transform Phil's from a foodie secret into an unqualified hit!"

Arriving early last Saturday, we have Phil's all to ourselves, though it's soon a full house.

At first glance, the new place looks good. But on further inspection the dramatic feature wall that seems so impressive on TV turns out to be cheap wallpaper and a few sticks.

Designer Heron also uses dark wooden flooring on another wall – how wacky! – but couples it with navy blue accents that only render an already dingy space even gloomier. She makes a big deal on the show about the new ceiling tiles and chairs she's installed, but both could use a second coat of paint.

The card appears almost exactly the same as when we first visited back in 98. On the show, an unusually positive Adje – RM's resident Simon Cowell – thumbs-ups Phil's dry-rubbed brisket (\$14.50) and contributes complicated recipes for crab-stuffed shrimp and Cajun-style dirty ricè. Neither is currently listed, though Nyman hopes to add the rice dish once he finds a supplier.

It's barbecue as usual. Sweet, lightly charred pulled pork (\$13.75) still comes with sides of sugary baked beans and house-made slaw. Adje deems the latter "perfect," but they're unnecessarily saccharine. Some tart contrast, please.

Ribs (\$21.50 rack/\$14.50 half) and chicken (\$10.99 half/\$7.99 quarter) fall tenderly from the bone, but their monochromatic rub and swamp of house hot sauce seem over-reliant on salt and refined sugar, making them all taste the same. Fries are prefab and previously frozen, but who cares? They get inhaled all the same.

But a starter of deep-fried cornmeal hush puppies (\$1.75 for four) arrive hard as rocks, this after our affable server deems the kitchen's first attempt at them too small.

A few days later I ask Nyman if the experience was worth it.

"I can't even get the place painted for \$15,000, let alone a makeover in a week," says Phil's original Phil. "And you can't buy that kind of publicity. But going in, I knew they wouldn't be able to finish everything. C'mon, these people build movie sets!"

During the episode, Heron makes a point of throwing out Phil's posters of Miles Davis, but I notice they're still prominently displayed.

"They have a lot of meaning for me," explains Nyman. "It might make for good TV, but the minute Restaurant Makeover left, those old posters were the first thing that went back up."

For a schedule of upcoming Restaurant Makeover episodes, go to: <http://www.foodtv.ca/ontv/titledetails.aspx?titleid=86270>.

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