

Chestnut Hill Local

Vol. L, No. 54

Thursday, December 10, 2009

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Who says kids can't run around in a restaurant? Innovative concept on Hill may spread throughout U.S.



Rachael Williams, founder of the Little Treehouse Play Café, checks out the new space with her three adopted daughters (left to right) Eva, 4; Rosa Bianca, 3; and Lydia, 5. The Little Treehouse Play Café at 10 W. Gravers Lane provides a fun and stimulating place for both parents and children. (Photo by Adam Nettleton)

Everyone who eats out at restaurants has at one time or another witnessed this nightmarish scene: a family whose small child screams like his/her hair is on fire, has a temper tantrum, throws food on the floor or maybe even runs around the restaurant like a cheetah sprinting after a rabbit.

These outlaw outbursts, of course, cause other customers to look at these children and their parents as if they had two heads. Some would no doubt like to see the offenders carried out in handcuffs. The unwanted attention usually (but not always) causes extreme em-

barrassment on the part of the parents, who may wish they had entered a monastery when they had a chance.

This dilemma for both the parents and other customers, not to mention restaurant employees, is part of the genesis behind the Little Treehouse Play Café, which opened in April of this year at 10 W. Gravers Lane, a site previously occupied by John Alexander Antiques (and before that, the aborted Napoleon restaurant and a U.S. Post Office branch). The place has more hooks (to lure kids in) than a fishing boat. But the café also just

began serving dinner to area families, many with small children who normally mix with restaurants like beans mix with acid reflux.

The Little Treehouse Play Café is the lengthened shadow of one person, Rachael Williams. She is an oak, not a willow, whose concept definitely has the potential to eventually become a national franchise operation. It could be gold in any upscale community in the country where there are young couples with small children. As Tim Furlong, TV10 reporter who did a piece on the Treehouse Café, said earlier this

year on camera, "This is one of those (seemingly simple) ideas that makes you think, 'Why didn't I think of that?'"

"As a mother of three small children myself," explained Rachael, who declined to state her age ("I started a family late, so I keep my age to myself"), "I realized there was no place you could go to eat with kids who can't sit still at the table. Waiters look at you funny. On the other hand, so many husbands and wives both work outside the home, so after work they want to spend time with their children, not leave them with babysitters. This is the solution for those families. You don't have to worry about the kids running around here. We want them to run around. Here kids are actually encouraged to leave the table and play in the supervised area that's filled with a selection of hand-crafted wooden structures and toys."

Paula Riley, a freelance writer who lives two blocks from The Treehouse, is also the mother of four small children — Kelly, 7, Kevin, 5, Kyle, 2, and Casey, 6 months. "The Treehouse serves many purposes for our family," she explained last week. "My younger kids love the

chance to play in a different play space than what we have at home. I can also work on my laptop as they enjoy the general play area. It also serves as a great meeting place to hook up with old friends and meet new ones. My book club has even had a (child-free) meeting there as the evening hours are quiet, and the food is great."

Williams, a British national

who came to live in Philadelphia in 2002, is a former television executive, real estate investor, entrepreneur, classically trained cellist and mother of three girls aged 3, 4 and 5 whom she adopted as a single parent. Before leaving the corporate world to pursue other interests, Rachael held a number of positions with blue-chip international media companies including the British Broadcasting Corporation, the William Morris Agency and HarperCollins Publishers.

After concluding that there was no dining-out facility which satisfied the needs of both parents and small children, she started developing a business plan for The Little Treehouse in 2006. In 2008 she opened a pilot location at 8524 Germantown Ave. and moved the business to its current home at 10 W. Gravers Lane in the spring of this year.

Williams bought the impressive 6,500 square foot, 1920s' stone building and hired architect Alan Metcalfe and his team, which includes Aaron Goldblatt, former chief designer of the Please Touch Museum, to transform the space into her vision of what a play café should look like. The goal was to create a visually stimulating open space for children to express themselves and learn through imaginative play, as well as incorporate a sophisticated color palette that would also appeal to adults. She chose only environmentally-friendly wooden play structures and high-quality toys which parents can also purchase. "The Little Treehouse is a plastic-free zone," said Williams, who's as cool as a smooth jazz improvisation.



The dining room is usually filled with parents while their children play in the play area. (Photo by Len Lear)



Kids love the little wooden house with a ramp that they slide down or push toy cars down. (Photo by Len Lear)

In addition to the large play space, The Little Treehouse has a designated area where parents can enjoy fresh, healthy food and talk with their peers while the children are busy playing. (There is also free WiFi for adults.) "So many times when you take your kids out to play, you can't relax yourself, get to know other parents and share your ideas and concerns," said Williams. "It was very important for me to bring people together. Over time we will add even more activities for parents such as workshops, lectures and social networking opportunities. For the kids, we are looking to add a range of activities including music, art and tum-

bling classes. We will also have magic shows and children's theater workshops performed by the Enchantment Theatre Company." The Café menu consists of sandwiches, salads, pastries, and a range of healthy kids' food and snacks. There is also a full fast-casual restaurant menu featuring high-end gourmet pizzas, pasta, some simple 'comfort food' and a large range of salads. During a dinner visit last week, we thoroughly enjoyed the baby greens salad with gorgonzola cheese, pine nuts and sherry vinaigrette (\$7) and the homemade pepperoni pizza (\$11), as well as the spectacularly decadent "billionaire chocolate" ice cream (\$3) made by the Uncle Dave's Company in Bucks County. There is also a children's menu — entrée, side dish and drink for \$8. And you could not ask for two more delightful managers than Beth Miranda and Therese Tiger, who (including Rachael) have seven daughters and no sons among the three of them. "We just don't know how to shop for boys," Beth explained.

"I really hope that a lot of local families will try out The Little Treehouse for dinner,"



Chef Robert Silcox has worked in kitchens in everything from delis to pricey steakhouses like Capital Grille. (Photo by Len Lear)

said Williams last week. "And once the basement space is finished in January, we will have entertainment options for older kids too. I'm hoping working couples will think about picking up their kids from daycare and dropping into The Little Treehouse during the week from time to time instead of cooking at home. A lot of people think of us just as a play space. I want to convert people to thinking about us as a sophisticated pizza

restaurant with a place for kids to play — a whole new concept in family dining — much cheaper and more fun than hiring a babysitter. And in the Spring, we'll have a wonderful large outdoor dining area."

The chef at The Little Treehouse, Robert Silcox, is not exactly a guy who gets his recipes from the backs of Campbell's Soup cans. A graduate of the Cordon Bleu culinary school, he has cooked since he was a child. The dough for the pizzas he bakes at The Little Treehouse is part of a recipe passed down to him by his Italian grandmother. He has worked in a large range of settings, from delis to fine dining. In addition to his job on the Hill, he still works at Capital Grille in center city, a very expensive steak house.

The Little Treehouse is open 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. during the week and 9 to 9 on Fridays and Saturdays. On Monday through Friday, lunch is served from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.; dinner is served from 5 to 8 p.m. On Saturday and Sunday food is served all day from 11 a.m. through closing. There are 60 seats at two-top tables, and adults may BYOB.

During the day a fee is charged for children who wish to use the play area. After 5 p.m. the play fee is waived for families who visit The Little Treehouse for dinner. For more information, call 215-247-3637 or visit www.treehouse-playcafe.com