

# Mountain Business Journal

Volume 4, Issue 8

June 25-July 1, 2008

WEEKLY

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## LOCAL

### Wild Fig, Lulu Wilson owners add to Aspen empire

By Damien Williamson  
MOUNTAIN BUSINESS JOURNAL WRITER

In 1994 when Craig Cordts-Pearce arrived in Aspen from South Africa, he had just \$40 in his pockets. Now, 14 years later, Craig and his wife, Samantha, have plans to open their fourth restaurant in one of America's richest towns.

And, as if their story needed more fairytale quality, the latest restaurant is slated to open on the site of Craig's first job, The Aspen Manor Lodge.

When the Dancing Bear — a collection of 20 luxury fractional residences and two restaurants located near the base of Aspen Mountain and across from Wagner Park — makes its debut this fall, the Cordts-Pearces will add to their mini restaurant empire with an upscale as-yet-unnamed French brasserie. The couple already owns popular Aspen eateries Wild Fig and Lulu Wilson, and opened and sold D-19 restaurant (and the associated Popcorn Wagon) two years ago.

"We've been pretty busy," says Craig. "When the Dancing Bear opens, we will have opened four restaurants and had two kids in five years."

The couple will co-own the park-side restaurant with silent investing partner Tom DiVenere, founder of Dancing Bear.

"Tom basically came to us and said he wanted something in the space that was local," says Craig. "He didn't want to put

some out-of-town restaurateur in there that no one knew. He wanted someone there with a reputation, has opened restaurants in town and has a good following. And, at the same time he was supporting two locals who love to do what they do."

But by the time the Dancing Bear project is completed, DiVenere will have supported more than just the Cordts-Pearces. Mark Fischer, best known as the chef and owner of Carbondale's critically acclaimed 689 and Phat Thai restaurants, will co-own Dancing Bear's mountainside restaurant to be opened sometime in 2009.

"It took a long time to choose the right operators for these restaurants," DiVenere says. "I wanted successful, local operators known for their presentation, vibrant experience, great food and value. Vitality in these spaces is important."

Gaining the skills and experience necessary to be a successful restaurateur in Aspen hasn't come easily, Craig says, otherwise, "everyone would be doing it." But he credits his and his wife's current success to a great start in the industry. Craig began as a busboy at Campo de Fiori in Aspen, graduated to waiter and eventually became a manager.

"I owe a lot to (Campo owners) Elizabeth and Luigi (Giordani)," he says. "They are the people that gave me all my training, and that kind of training is hard to come by

these days. What I realized then and what I want people to realize now is that the restaurant industry is a great industry to be in, and people can live in this town and work for or own a great business, ski every day, and not live in a city."

The Cordts-Pearce Dancing Bear restaurant is projected to open in November (barring construction woes), but Craig is already looking into the future. And with role models like world-renown restaurateurs Danny Meyer, Keith McNally and Drew Nieporent — who collectively have opened more than 30 restaurants — it's easy to see why.

"I love the way they do business and the way they operate and open restaurants," he says. "I always use them as building blocks for everything I do. And so far, it seems to be working."

Unsurprisingly, owning three restaurants in Aspen comes with no small amount of challenges, the most prevalent of which is staffing.

"The No. 1 thing we really concentrate on is getting the right people with the right attitudes," Craig says. "We don't have to have the most experienced manager or the most qualified person right off, but they have to be someone who wants to be there and will take the time and effort to do the job right. That's how we got here."

damien@aspendedailynews.com



Zach Ornitz/MBJ

(From top to bottom) A restaurant at the new Dancing Bear, LuLu Wilson and the Wild Fig, all owned by the Cordts-Pearces.