

Photo by Peter Tym / The Globe and Mail



*The coffee-shop chain Second Cup, intent on giving its branches distinctive, neighbourhood touches, is commissioning colourful murals and faux scenic vignettes from Toronto artist Ian Leventhal*

# Café con Leventhal

**By David Lasker**

A few years ago, at the height of the recession, restaurant “down-scalings” were all the rage. Temples to haute cuisine, often with dark, dramatic and monochrome interiors, were made over into eateries which were cheap, cheerful and colourful.

For instance, Chrysalis Restaurant Enterprises converted its high-end, tastefully understated Nekah, at 32 Wellington St. E., and the dark and gloomy Gotham Bar & Grill, at 81 Bloor St. E., to budget-priced Maccheroni restaurants, with electric-hued, jazzy murals — here a faux wisteria garden, there a whimsical depiction of villas on Lake Como.

“You give the patrons a lot of colour, you transport them to another, happier time and place like the south of France or Italy, you serve them interesting food and don’t hit them with a heavy bill on their way out the door, and everybody’s happy,” said Toronto’s Ian Leventhal, one of the artists who worked on Maccheroni, in a 1991 interview. “That’s the formula that works now.”

Three years later, with the recession officially over, the formula is finding success in another type of eatery, the coffee shop. Second Cup has embarked on a campaign to make many of its branches more cheerful, if not cheaper, by commissioning witty murals and faux vignettes from Leventhal that reflect the spirit of a particular shop’s neighbourhood in a humorous, upbeat way.

“We’re not a rubber stamp catapulted across the country,” says Karen Skobel of Designum Planning and Design Consultants, a firm serving chain retail and restaurant clients, such as McDonald’s and The Body Shop, as well as the Second Cup. “While other companies are scrambling for product identity, the Second Cup is in the enviable position of not having to slam everyone with repetition.”

Skobel met Leventhal several years ago when the two of them were making displays for Musterring’s, the defunct furniture store. Recently, she commissioned him to embellish three Second Cups in a way that epitomizes the company’s retailing philosophy.

The interior of the 630 Mount Pleasant Rd. branch reflects its North Toronto neighbourhood

