



Takin' It to the Streets

by Jeff Maisey | Jun 16, 2019 | Featured, News, News & Views



(LUCE owner/chef Antonio Caruana is all smiles thanks to outdoor seating)

By Jeff Maisey

On an early June evening my girlfriend and I were seated at a table for two within a detached outdoor cafe section on the corner of Tazewell and Granby Street in downtown Norfolk.

It's dusk and a slight breeze cools the air. The freshly sprouted leaves from urban-planted trees gently waver above. The canopy of green is comforting.

Pedestrians from seemingly all walks of life — some escorted by leashed dogs — pass between the outdoor seating and the building; most turn their head ever so inconspicuously and glimpse at the irresistible sight of contemporary Italian delicacies such as our Wild Boar Ragu and Pollo E Salsicca Con Pepperoncini, a bottle of red vino and a visually inviting martini.

Getting a seat at LUCE on a Saturday night can be a challenge

without reservations. It has a cosmopolitan vibe like you're in Tribeca and Robert DiNero could be popping in at any moment.

LUCE, which occupies the former Empire space, is snug, making the most of its limited seating — accommodating 20 diners at three four-person hightop tables, one hightop for two, and a booth for six.

The bar is lively with an enticing selection of beer, wine and spirits. The bar forms a backward L-shaped seating option with another set of high-backed stools positioned around the front windows. Combined seating is about 40 persons.

What LUCE and many downtown Norfolk restaurants have long wanted was a workable solution to adding outdoor seating, especially on Granby Street where the sidewalks are narrow compared to other cities.

“Outdoor dining is one of the many things that contribute to a vibrant downtown,” said Kevin Murphy, a local businessman and downtown resident who serves on the board of directors of the Downtown Norfolk Council (DNC). “It softens the edges of buildings and connects people with their surroundings.”

The DNC essentially manages the corridor under the 48-block Downtown Improvement District. It was created in 1979 to connect the interests of the city with the needs of the private sector. Among other things, the DNC facilitates improvement initiatives and incentive programs.

Two such efforts are the Complete Streets and Vibrant Spaces programs.

“The DNC has a Complete Streets and a Vibrant Spaces committee. I chair the Complete Streets Committee and Drew Ungvarsky chairs the Vibrant Spaces Committee,” said Murphy. “Outdoor dining is an issue that’s important to both committees because of its impact on the walkability and the vibrancy of downtown. Restaurants that follow the guidelines have the opportunity to earn DNC-funded vibrancy grants.”

One of the downtown restaurants to partner with the DNC and city leaders is LUCE. Owner/chef Antonio Caruana applied for a Vibrant Spaces grant to help pay for its new outdoor dining.

“This is one of several qualifying improvements that businesses and

property owners downtown can seek grant funding for,” said Ungvarsky, CEO and Chief Creative Officer of GROW, an internationally recognized branding company headquartered in downtown Norfolk. “The Vibrant Spaces grant is for up to \$10,000 in matching funds for qualified improvements to street-level businesses.”

LUCE doubled its tabletop seating capacity by adding four tables for two on Granby Street and another quartet next to the building on Tazewell. An iron fence-like barrier clearly establishes the boundaries of the outdoor seating. The LUCE cafe section on Granby is like an island, and both diners and passers-by enjoy it.

According to Caruana, the cafe-style dining is a great promotion for the food.

“As a chef, it is very important for us to be able to put our product out,” he said. “The more people that get to sit and enjoy the vibe the more initiative I have to cook. When people are walking down the street and they’re looking at the tables and seeing radiant dishes of local fare, seafood and scallops it is an advertisement not only for me and the restaurant, but for the whole area and what we’re offering.”

Caruana has had his issues in the past with the city, but he said things are finally changing for the better. That has turned him from a municipal critic to a downtown cheerleader.

“The outdoor seating was about a three-and-a-half year process,” said Caruana. “I got a lot of ‘noes’ from certain individuals that work for the city of Norfolk.”

Caruana credits Kevin Murphy, DNC executive director Mary Miller, architect Robyn Thomas, the Downtown Restaurant Coalition and others for helping facilitate positive change.

Murphy said streamlining the entire process was necessary and is now showing results.

“Most of the restaurants are independently owned and operated,” Murphy said. “Thus, they’re learning the rules on the fly. The Health Department has rules, ABC has rules, the City has rules, etc., so it’s not an easy process to navigate. The Downtown Norfolk Council stepped in and worked with the City to create guidelines for outdoor dining that are user-friendly and take all of the rules into account.”

Caruana is encouraging other restaurants to learn from LUCE's experience and use the lessons learned as a blueprint for the future.

"Now, we have a model," said Caruana. "I hope that in five years from now I'm going to look at my little thing and say, 'Shit, mine is outdated.' That is perfect. I need to progress with the street and the vibe."

Finally, if you really want to get pedestrians to look at you plate be sure to order dessert at LUCE.

