

# RestaurantNews

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## Lettieri expanding business with burgers

TORONTO—The Lettieri family has been selling coffee, juice, Italian food and pastries in southern Ontario since opening the first Lettieri Espresso Bar Café in Toronto's Yorkville district in 1991.

The café chain now has about a dozen locations and around \$5 million in sales.

However, recently they decided this was not enough, John Lettieri, president of Lettieri Bars Ltd., told *ORN* last month. "We needed to expand our business," he said.

When he got to thinking about a way to expand, he decided on hamburgers.

He looked around and saw no quick service concept serving all-meat burgers with no preservatives.

To fill this gap, the Hero Certified Burger restaurant was born.

Lettieri actually franchised the concept to two Toronto men, one of whom was already a Lettieri café franchisee. The pair opened for business in November of 2003 in Hazelton Lanes, in Toronto's Yorkville district, taking over the facilities of a previous quick service restaurant.

The operation was actually quite simple. It was basically grilling and frying, explained Lettieri.

The focus was on quality ingredients and reasonable prices.

What really sets the Hero concept from others is Hero's ability to customize burgers to customers' appetites and tastes. There are three different sizes of the all-Angus beef burger—four, six and eight ounces—and a variety of toppings and sides.

The formula has brought favourable reviews from food writers, and its success with consumers is encouraging expansion.

Now the chain is growing three different ways: 400-square foot food court kiosks, stores



A large illuminated sign is the focal point of Hero Certified Burger units.

of around 1,400 to 1,500 square feet with about 30 to 50 seats, and combo operations which pair a Lettierie café with a Hero Burger.

In the spring this year, on Commerce Valley Drive east of Leslie, in Markham, the first combo store opened. In August a second combo store opened on St. Clair Avenue near Yonge Street.

A 1,400-square-foot, 32-seat location also opened in Aurora.

Plans for next year call for the opening of three more Hero units in Toronto: a food court kiosk in Toronto General Hospital where there is already a Lettieri café, another in the Toronto-Dominion Centre, and a 1,500-square foot, 45-seat restaurant on Queen Street West, near Bathurst.

When Lettieri was planning the menu, he took everything that was typical in a burger place and gave it his own twist.

Thus, the hamburger is pure Angus beef, and the cheese real cheddar. The buns come fresh from the Whole Food Market in Hazelton Lanes. And the restaurant also offers custom toppings such as avocado spread, zucchini with eggplant, and provolone, boursin or

bric cheese, priced from 55 to 95 cents.

The hotdogs (\$3.95) are also all beef—no filler or MSG, and free of additives, preservatives and gluten.

Soul Burgers (\$4.95) are totally vegan, the meat in chicken breast sandwiches (\$5.65) is tenderized in soy sauce, and buns come fresh from the Whole Food Market.

The Hero Burger, served with sliced red onion and tomato, costs \$4.95 for the four-ounce, \$5.65 for the six-ounce and \$6.25 for the eight-ounce.

The Hero Signature Burgers with cheddar cheese, Hero Certified Sauce, sliced red onion, tomato and relish, runs \$5.75, \$6.35 and \$6.95.

The Hero Peameal Bacon Burger, garnished with cheddar cheese, sauce, onion, tomato and relish, costs \$6.30, \$6.95 and \$7.55.

Add fresh-cut fries and a fountain drink with unlimited refills, and the plate costs anywhere from a dollar to \$2.15 more, depending on the type and size of burger.

On its own, a side of fries is \$2.25.

There is no extra charge for condiments such as maple chipotle barbecue sauce, roasted red pepper sauce, Creole sauce and corn relish.

Right now plans are being made to introduce seasoned fries next year, with flavours such as barbecue, garlic, Cajun and sea salt.

An average check is about eight dollars.

Lettieri worked with a Toronto designer on the look of the store, with the large illuminated menu board being the main element.

The restaurants that are not in combo also have communal tables.

According to Lettieri, the lack of such tables in the combo restaurants doesn't mean espresso sippers are less sociable—the long tables just don't look right in those stores.