

POSTED AT 3:40 PM EDT ON 26/04/06

How I got this far . . .

MICHAEL SIMPSON
GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

One Thursday night in January, my girlfriend, Lori Kiefer, and I were walking around our neighbourhood. We stopped in to a trendy-looking new restaurant called Pop, near the corner of Queen Street East and Broadview in Toronto. Not to eat, just to chat with the owners about their business and the changes in our neighbourhood. During our conversation, Lori identified the need for a cheese shop—not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of hot new retail prospects, right? But the restaurateurs loved it; they wished there was a place where they could buy good cheese that was closer than the St. Lawrence Market.

We walked farther and started to take note of storefronts on Queen East from a retail perspective. Lori was right about a cheese shop—and the neighbourhood. Many key blocks have had more than 50% of available space taken up with clean, desirable, new retail storefronts.

That weekend, we were walking in the St. Lawrence Market. I asked all the cheese shops for a job. One guy said yes. So for one week, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., I worked on the front lines at one of the busiest cheese shops in Toronto—a **crash course** in cheese merchandising and retailing. After cutting and wrapping hundreds of blocks of cheese over the first few days, I started to get the hang of wrapping it smoothly and evenly. Blocks could not prepare me for wedges, however. The odd shape makes it difficult, but hours of practice makes perfect.

I kept a diary for each day at work, writing during my half-hour lunch breaks and after work. There was always a pen and paper in my pocket. I recorded every cheese I sampled. The total? 86! Money cannot buy this kind of experience.

After my grueling week at the shop, I wrote a **business plan** and started figuring out the financials. Lori chipped in on this effort as well. I knew someone who might be interested in investing—very necessary, since I'm already mortgaged to the hilt. After a few weeks, I showed the plan to my potential investor—a former stockbroker who was looking for a new project—and gave him a tour of the neighborhood. He said yes \$50,000 providing I could find \$20,000 to contribute, just to make sure my heart was in it. I happened to be switching my mortgage over to CIBC the same week. I called my banker and asked if I could squeeze 20 grand out of the deal. He was happy to oblige.

Meanwhile, my dad had been following this whole process closely. I hadn't asked him for any investment dollars, but he was starting to feel a bit guilty because I was about to give up 35.7% of the business to make it happen. He called me over to his place one day and offered to supplant my investor's money without taking any ownership in the company. It was a very generous offer, and one I couldn't refuse.

I spent weeks trying to get a lease on an empty doctor's office on the southeast corner

of Queen and Logan. I finally got it (after getting my lawyer to read the lease and convincing my landlord to remove a clause that says he could kick me out if he decides to remodel or demolish the building), and I'm in the middle of ripping it apart and turning it into a cheese shop. It means moving a few walls and putting in plenty of refrigeration (\$\$\$).

I'm aiming to open the Leslieville Cheese Market & Fine Foods in mid-June, selling cheese and other items to complement cheese—antipasto, olives, olive oils, vinegars, crackers and a few baked goods. Maybe I'll even throw wine-and-cheese parties and cheese appreciation nights.

I have a million things to do by then. **Check out these photos to see what I've been up to.**

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