


[Back to Article](#)

## Restaurateurs rise to economic downturn challenge

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When Toronto chef Marc Thuet heard the news that U.S. investment bank Lehman Brothers had filed for bankruptcy protection in September, he introduced a "Gastro-Recession Menu."

In a sign of the times, Thuet is offering patrons at his restaurant, Bite Me, a budget-minded four-course menu for \$48.

Leaner times are pushing chefs to "buy smarter and to get smarter," says Thuet, who recently rebranded his eponymous King St. W. restaurant and introduced new prices – all mains under \$30, no appetizers over \$18.

"In the old days, a four-course tasting went for \$90," he says. "Now, you do it for \$48 and you have to make a living out of it."

Diners used to quaff \$120 or \$130 wines. Now, they might go for an \$80 bottle, he says.

Thuet is cutting costs by making everything in house, including cheese and sausages, and taking advantage of lower gas prices by driving to purchase his whey-fed piglets from Mennonite farmers in St. Jacobs.

When the economy takes a turn for the worse, consumers exercise restraint. Lipstick sales take off but sales of \$450 stilettos crash. Diners are no exception.

As a result, cautious high-end restaurateurs are crossing costly nibbles such as foie gras off their menus.

"People are definitely changing their habits. They are going out less frequently and they are very cautious as to where they do spend their dollars," says Mark McEwan, the top chef behind high-end Toronto dining establishments Bymark, North 44 and One. "Toronto is definitely down from where we were last year."

Chefs feeling the pinch are likely to trim the fat by buying fewer pricey ingredients, like truffles, or forgoing them completely, McEwan says. "I certainly have removed a lot of foie gras from the menu to bring prices down, and things like squab that are incredibly expensive."

When times are good, chefs can be more adventurous and keep organ meats such as kidneys and brains on their menus, says restaurant industry consultant David Adje, one of the chefs in the TV show *Restaurant Makeover*. But when restaurateurs are coping with leaner times, they'll drop extravagant tableside presentations in favour of dishes such as roast chicken and meat loaf.

Still, McEwan won't erase the \$40 burger from his Bymark menu. "It has become sort of legendary down on Bay Street," McEwan says. "I think there's an affluent market that always has money, even in bad times."

However, that market is increasingly careful not to attract attention to its spending. Conspicuous consumption is out, discretionary dining is in. Well-heeled diners who can still afford the \$40 burger don't want to see "glares across the room," Adje says.

In the latest casualty of the economic downturn, Yorkville's Boba, on Avenue Rd., closed its doors at the end of November after 14 years of business.

The acclaimed restaurant, in a turn-of-the-century brick house, was frequented by celebrities and stargazers alike during the Toronto International Film Festival. It was run by owners and co-chefs Barbara Gordon and Bob Bermann.

"We just had to keep putting money into it because the business was losing money," Bermann says.



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"We had to borrow against our home....I suppose it was affected by the times."

But here's some news diners can chew on: Those who might be otherwise intimidated to sample the wares at fancy valet-service establishments should take advantage of the extra elbow room.

"Don't feel intimidated to walk in, share an appetizer, split a main, have two glasses of wine, drink tap water," McEwan says. "No one is going to look funny at them. I guarantee that. I would try to extract value from the high-end market."

Though restaurateurs are scaling back, the consensus is that many will survive.

"We have a joke among chefs," Adjei says.

"As soon as Mark McEwan puts a prix fixe on his menu at One, we know the world is over. He's the last holdout.

"His restaurants do well no matter what is going on."