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COUNTY STAR

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MAJOR TAKEDOWN: Jacket, Viking wrestlers battle through hectic first week. PAGE 17



‘Where’s Rudolph when you need him?’

BILL STICKELS III | COUNTY STAR

The weather during the annual North Branch “Light up the Night” parade and tree lighting looked to be custom-made for Santa as a steady, wind-driven snow fell on the annual Christmas celebration on Saturday, Dec. 1. See page 10 for more photos from the event.

Not so fast

State lawmakers hesitant to endorse Cambridge sales tax increase

BY BILL STICKELS III
EDITOR@COUNTYSTAR.COM

It turns out that the recent approval of a local option sales tax by the city of Cambridge voters is only half the battle to be won by supporters of a new library and the funding of street improvements and parks and recreation projects. There is still one major hurdle to be overcome in the process before the sales tax becomes a reality. The size of this hurdle – the approval of the sales tax increase by the state legislature – was brought to light during the Dec. 3 city council meeting as the council made a pitch to Senator Mark Koran and Representative Brian Johnson for their introduc-

‘When we look at these types of issues, we want to be as fiscally conservative as possible.’

Mark Koran
Minnesota Senate - District 32

tion of a bill to approve the increase. “When we look at these types of issues, we want to be as fiscally conservative as possible,” Koran said. “These have broad-range impacts. In this case, 100 percent of our residents will see a cost of living increase, which is always a

concern. This impacts my entire district. Cambridge is a major retail hub. It’s either here or Forest Lake. And it may not impact the larger businesses, but you will have an impact on many of your businesses within the city.” Representative Johnson foreshadowed his concerns earlier in the meeting as he spoke about his general style of representing his constituents. “No matter what happens, we want to work with the city,” Johnson said. “But we need to consider the vested interest of all of our constituents. If something is good for one city, but it hurts another group of constituents, I’m not

SEE SALES TAX, PAGE 9

Miracle on Main Street: Chance meeting leads to collaboration, highly anticipated new eatery

BY LORI ZABEL
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“You’ve heard of the movie ‘Miracle on 34th Street?’ This is the ‘Miracle on Main Street.’” According to Neil Johnson, longtime owner of The Leader store on Main Street in Cambridge, there might have been divine intervention in the random meeting that prompted nationally known chef Erick Harcey to set up his newest restaurant in Cambridge. Willards (no apostrophe), a full-service restaurant, bar and bakery/coffee shop, is set to open Dec. 11 in the renovated space at 133-135 Main Street South it shares with The Leader. To get to the miracle, though, it’s worth looking back at Harcey’s journey from small-town boy to big-city chef and back again.

EARLY LOVE OF FOOD

Harcey, 37, was born and raised in Cambridge. He says he grew up going to First Baptist Church and knew everyone there. He and his younger brother and sister loved the outdoors and grew up eating venison and fish. His grandpa Willard Ramberg, who’d moved from Sweden as a boy, offered Harcey an early introduction to Swedish cooking. Willard and his wife Bonnie opened the Lighthouse Restaurant in Cambridge and the Kaffe Stuga in Harris in the late 1950s. Harcey never worked at either place, but spent lots of time watching Grandpa and Grandma prepare food at home. “I remember mashing potatoes with him or rolling meatballs,” he said. “Just that experience of eating something super delicious, but

also watching everyone else get really excited about it – I thought, ‘This is kinda cool. I like this.’” His other grandparents were farmers in St. Charles, Minn., and visiting there, helping grow and harvest fresh produce or seeing where milk came from added another layer to Harcey’s love of all things culinary. After wrestling or football at Cambridge-Isanti High School, Harcey said he’d come home and cook. “I’d practice my inventions,” he said. “I can remember dishes I would make, and my mom and dad would love them and ask me to make it again.” Although he says he thought about becoming a race car driver or mechanic when he was younger,

SEE WILLARDS, PAGE 8



LORI ZABEL | COUNTY STAR

Award-winning chef and Cambridge native Erick Harcey will open Willards on Main Street in Cambridge on Dec. 11.

Featured Listings at CENTURY 21 Moline Realty

OPEN HOUSE

Sunday December 9th 11-1p.m.
739 Park Brook Rd. N.W., Isanti
3BR/3BA Townhome. Ample Counter, Cabinet & Storage Space. Fireplace, Private Master Suite w/Walk In Closet. Huge LL Family Room.

\$234,900

NEW LISTING

701 Village Green Place, Mora
2BR/3BA Townhouse on corner lot. MF: Master & Laundry. Walk thru Bath in Master, His & Hers Closets. Full Basement w/2nd Laundry & Bath. Att. 2 Car Garage.

\$139,900

NEW LISTING

1494 34th Ave. S. W., Cambridge
Quality Built 2BR/1BA home on ½ Acre Lot. Large Deck, Fenced Backyard, 3 Car insulated/htd Garage w/Bonus storage above. Finish the lower level to double your space.

\$209,900

NEW LISTING

19845 Gilbertsons Hill, Mora
3BR/2BA custom Lake Home w/100' of Knife Lake frontage. Main Floor: Master, Laundry, & Bath. Stone Fireplace, 3 Season Porch, SS Appliances. LL Family Room w/Wet Bar.

\$232,000

NEW LISTING

389xx Variolite St NW, Dalbo
52.2 fantastic acres. Features perfect habitat for pheasants, turkey & deer, mature oak grove, approx 20 acres are tillable, great road frontage and easy access.

\$124,000

CENTURY 21

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WILLARDS: Swedish-inspired and Minnesota-sourced dishes on the menu

FROM PAGE I

Harcey said his undeniable love of food and cooking kept pushing him toward a restaurant career.

“When I kind of put it together like, ‘You can do this for a job,’ then I was just off and running,” he said.

A TOUGH EDUCATION

After high school, Harcey attended the Le Cordon Bleu school in Mendota Heights. His teachers told him he definitely had talent but needed exposure to some of the better kitchens in the Twin Cities. He took an unpaid internship under a crazy French chef at the Hotel Sofitel in Bloomington.

“He was a beast,” Harcey said. “Big forearms – he would roll a croissant in one smooth motion. It was the most intimidating thing ever.”

Harcey was 19 or 20, working at his uncle’s machine shop, going to school and enduring the abuse of the French chef.

“I’m a young punk kid right out of high school,” Harcey said, “so I’m like, ‘You’re not going to tell me what to do.’ But that stopped super fast. I listened and worked. I ended up working up the ranks there.”

That led to stints in the kitchen at Interlachen Country Club and Nicollet Island Inn as a pastry chef. When the head chef moved on, Harcey moved into that role.

He also sought out the hottest eateries in the area during the early 2000s to hang out in the kitchens to lend a hand and learn.

“I’d say, ‘Can I come hang out in your kitchen? You don’t have to pay me,’” Harcey said. He’d come off a 12-hour shift at his own workplace and put in four more hours in a competitor’s kitchen.

“I probably learned more in those little doses than I did in all my culinary education,” Harcey revealed.

Along the way he learned the business side of running a restaurant and kept his nose to the grindstone.

“I got to fly under the radar and hone my skills,” Harcey said. “I worked and earned my stripes. I got some of my first press, some recognition. I got a fair amount of awards pretty young. From there, I just spun off to do my own thing.”

THE VICTORY AND UPTON

Harcey made the unfortunate decision to open his first restaurant right at the cusp of the Great Recession in 2007. He had been working with a bank to get his initial loan.

“The bank called me up



CONTRIBUTED

The restaurant’s namesake, Willard Ramberg, opened The Lighthouse Restaurant in Cambridge and Kaffe Stuga in Harris. As chef Erick Harcey’s grandfather, he offered a role model for Harcey’s culinary journey.

a week before my closing,” Harcey recalled, “and said, ‘Something’s changed in the government regulations – we can’t give you the money.’ Holy crap, I thought. I’ve got staff hired. We have to get this thing going.”

Harcey consulted Craigslist and found an empty restaurant in North Minneapolis’ Victory neighborhood. He cut a deal, pulled together enough money to buy food to open and pay some staff.

“We cleaned it, flipped it, scraped together a restaurant in 12 days and opened it,” he said.

The restaurant was Victory 44. After about two months, a positive review was published and Harcey said, “It blew up. We had lines down the street. It was just crazy.”

In 2015 Harcey opened Upton 43 in Linden Hills, to much success. The *Star Tribune* voted Upton 43 its Restaurant of the Year in 2016.

“We were in the *New York Times*, James Beard,” he said. “We were in Top 10 Best New Restaurants in the country. We won every award possible, but it just wasn’t me. It wasn’t what I cared about. I didn’t like

having to fill the story someone told about me.”

DOOR CLOSES, WINDOW OPENS

After 10 years of operating Victory 44 and two years with Upton 43, Harcey began to feel the pressure of commuting from his home in Cambridge and living up to expectations.

“I wanted to fish more, wanted to be with my kids more,” he said. “I was just done. I wanted to take a break.”

In late 2016 and early 2017 he closed both restaurants.

“I just laid low,” he said. “I didn’t know what I was going to do. I even thought of not cooking anymore.”

He got his four boys off to school in the mornings, coached their sports teams and hung out with them, happy to not put in the 16-hour days he’d been used to.

“I’m fine just being home,” he said. “I didn’t have anything to prove in the culinary world anymore.”

Then he got a little itch and started checking out properties in the North Loop.

He came to his senses when his wife said, “Why don’t you open something in Cambridge?”

Willards

133-135 Main St. S, Cambridge
763-689-5600
willardsmn.com
Facebook: Willards
Email: info@willardsmn.com
68 total seats
Closed Sunday, Monday in December
Parlor open 7 a.m. - 10 p.m.
Willards open 9 a.m. - 10 p.m.
Brunch 9 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

“I was like, ‘Why don’t I?’” he said.

MIRACLE ON MAIN STREET

And thus begins the story of the “Miracle on Main Street” as told by Leader owner Neil Johnson.

Harcey had attended a Feed My Starving Children fundraising gala in spring 2017 in the Twin Cities after he’d closed down Victory and Upton. He talked with a couple random guys, finding out one was Bradley Day, chef at Hewing Hotel’s Tullibee restaurant in Minneapolis. The other introduced himself as Grant Johnson, who’d been hired by Hewing Hotel to revamp its menu.

When Johnson asked Harcey where he was from, Harcey said, “You’ve never heard of it. It’s a little town up the road.”

Johnson persisted and asked again.

Harcey said, “A little town called Cambridge.”

“I was born in Cambridge!” Johnson said. “My uncle still runs a store in Cambridge called The Leader.”

To which Harcey said, “Neil Johnson? I used to work for him in high school!”

The two couldn’t believe the serendipity of their meeting, but went their separate ways. When Harcey approached Neil Johnson in fall 2017 about selling the Leader building, he brought up the time he’d met Neil’s nephew at the fundraiser.

Neil contacted Grant and said, “I ran into someone you met last spring and he’s interested in doing something up here in Cambridge. I wonder if you two might want to meet?”

Harcey and Grant met in January 2018 and, according to Neil, “it was like these two long-lost brothers that got together.”

Grant had experience in restaurant management in Colorado and California, and had told his uncle he wanted to move the kids back to Minnesota schools while they were still young. So the family moved to Cambridge for the

Willards project. Bradley Day has also come on board as chef de cuisine.

“I just had no idea what they had in mind,” Neil said about the three. “But it was just fascinating to see what they’ve done and their goal to tie in to the history of the building and downtown.”

Neil said he’s sure the restaurant will bring more foot traffic into the downtown and encourage other entrepreneurs to take a chance setting up a business there.

A UNIQUE OFFERING

The 27,000-square foot building still houses the Leader store, but Harcey said he’s added new clothing lines and more non-clothing items. Customers might buy a ceramic bowl from Leader then fill it with Christmas cookies at The Parlor at Willards, which offers artisan coffee, Swedish pastries, grab-and-go sandwiches and salads. Ice cream will be added in 2019.

Willards will offer full bar service and a full-service menu five days a week to start.

“The cuisine will be driven by what we like to eat, based off indigenous Minnesota stuff,” Harcey said. “You’ll see beef, pork and chicken, potatoes and root vegetables – all the stuff people know and grew up eating. We’re just going to blow your mind at how we prepare it.”

He said he’ll add Swedish elements with warming spices, pickling and fermentation.

He’ll also roll out some of his signature dishes like The Perfect Burger, Swedish meatballs and Devils on Horseback – “bacon-wrapped dates with blue cheese, an old bar snack that people have just gone nuts for,” according to Harcey.

There will be plenty of new tastes to try, and he doesn’t want people to be afraid to come in.

“There are a lot of preconceived notions,” Harcey said. “People think it’s really fancy. I don’t have a fancy bone in my body. It’s a place to come as you are, but try something a little different.”

Reservations are recommended during meal times, and some dates are already filling up (see info box for contact information).

Harcey is looking forward to seeing the smiles on faces as people discover Willards for the first time.

“Give us the chance to do what we do best,” he said. “Come in and experience it before you judge or make a decision. It’s going to look different and smell different, but it’s going to be done right.”

North Branch levy to increase by 2.88 percent

BY BILL STICKELS III

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Residents of the city of North Branch will continue to see an increase in the city’s portion of their property taxes; however, the amount of the increase is not solely based on the city’s levy. That is the message that city financial director Richard Hill conveyed during the annual Truth in Taxation meeting held on Tuesday, Nov. 27.

The city’s final levy, which will be voted on during the council’s Dec. 11 meeting, is set to increase from last

year’s by 2.88 percent, which is the exact same amount as approved in the preliminary levy back in September. However, the amount that taxpayers will see their taxes go up will likely be much higher than that percentage.

According to Hill, while the city’s tax base went up by approximately 11 percent, the county’s assessed values also went up by roughly 7-10 percent or more. At the same time, the values of industrial and commercial properties stayed relatively the same.

Hill repeated the same message he presented to the council during the pre-

liminary levy discussion, noting that the increase was part of a long-term, 12-year plan to reduce the city’s general debt service. According to Hill, just over \$1.3 million dollars will be paid to the debt, a decrease of \$200,000 from the previous year, but a major increase from the \$734,000 paid in 2009.

“This is all part of the plan to ramp it up, and then ramp it back down again,” Hill said, noting that in 2015, the city paid just over \$2 million for its debt. “We are currently in the ninth year of that 12-year plan.”

At the same time, Hill noted that this

year will be the first time the city’s general fund will eclipse the \$3 million mark. In 2009, the general fund was just \$600 short of \$3 million, meaning the city’s general fund has only increased by an average of .86 percent in that time.

Mayor Kirsten Hagen-Kennedy reminded those in attendance that the city does not control the values of properties. However, if anyone wanted to dispute their valuations, they could do so during a board of equalization meeting, which will be held sometime in the spring.