"It took me a year from the time that I walked in to close the deal. It almost didn't happen because the deal was dead. The landlord had said forget it. He was going to put it back on the market, and I'm thinking, 'Oh no you're not, not if I have anything to do with it!'"

By KEVIN CHILL HEARD

Managing Editor

Phil the Fire!

A restaurant, landmark and ultimately a redemption story.

In its new Beachwood location at 3750 Orange Place, it looks and feels comfortable.

A welcomed sight indeed for the multitudes that waited with baited breath for its return. Amid rumors, speculation and innuendo, the place that had teased us with "Comfort food for the soul" was back. Appearing like an apparition almost out of nowhere, the sign was up even before the word had fully spread, but spread it did, Phil the Fire was soon open for business – again!

We know the brand and we know the name, but do we really know Phil Davis?

The brand that simply came to be known as Phil the Fire had become synonymous with who he was. By the time we initially celebrated him, cheered and toasted the guy who brought a new swagger to our collective sweet tooth, whoever Phil had been before all of that had happened was now mixed, poured, griddled, buttered and sweetened. Phil the Fire was him and he was Phil the Fire.

Not only did we love to roll up to his spot and feel really special ordering the signature dish, but we wanted to be the first to bring somebody else to experience Cleveland's newest sensation!

Chicken and waffles -- what a novel idea! Well, it was a novel idea for Cleveland.

Yeah, a few of us had ventured out to Cali and did the "chicken and waffle thing" at Roscoe's. But who the hell was Roscoe? Was Roscoe pissed off when Jordan dropped the game winning shot on Craig Eloh? Was he all bummed-out when Elway drove 98 yards on us? Did Roscoe know how to do the Errol Flynn? … Nope! But Phil did.

Phil was one of us. Phil was a Clevelander with a place that we could rally behind.

When Phil the Fire opened at its Shaker Square location it was a cause célèbre. It was the place to be. Yeah, it may have taken a while for your food to show up, but when it did there was nothing else like it that had gotten there faster or slower at any other place. Phil made us cool again. We were trendy, soulful and happy.

But then a second, ill-fated, Phil the Fire opened downtown and the bottom dropped out.

As fast as it had appeared, Phil the Fire at the square and downtown was gone. And not only was it gone, it fell hard. It evaporated under the most dubious of circumstances and accusations. And the names of the complicit players in its dubious demise were lost on most Clevelanders, well, that is except one.

So there he sat at his new Beachwood location, his familiar smiling face is unmistakably Phil. With a chance to pull up a seat, turn on the tape recorder and talk to the man whose middle name is “The” and last name is “Fire,” the question right out the box was simple – “Is being ‘Phil the Fire’ a gift or a curse?”

His famous gap toothed smile implies that this is a question that he has pondered prior to just now. “That’s a great question,” he said. “It’s a gift because that name has stuck with me 33 years, since my sophomore year at Stanford. It was only a curse for a short amount of time. It was a curse in 2004 and 2005 when nobody knew about that guy out of Atlanta (Kirk Wright, who was involved in the collapse of PTF as we first knew it). When Phil the Fire closed down the only person people knew was Phil. I was being called all kinds of names that weren’t on my birth certificate. They had me in jail, selling crack, on drugs, I mean was doing everything that anybody could conjure up. I heard it all. It took a psychological toll on me. I couldn’t walk outside without people looking at me differently. I went from being the toast of the town to being the talk of the town, and not in a good way.”

“My fall from grace was public. It wasn’t as if I could just ease out of the spotlight. When the first Phil the Fire closed, the Plain Dealer blasted it, channel 19 was stalking me, and before the second one closed it was inescapable. My name was mud.”

In the ensuing years following the PTF debacle, Phil was in a sort of hibernation. He was financially wiped out April 26, 2004 and by November the only job he could get was loading boxes for UPS making eight dollars and fifty cents an hour.

Somewhere between freezing his butt off at the loading dock and getting bossed around by dudes half his age, he made a decision to reinvent himself. "I could not allow myself to be defined only as Phil the Fire."

"I said to myself that Phil the Fire was what I did, not who I was. I had to separate myself from the brand. And that same day I came up with the idea for the iWavecube."

He took the phrase "reinvention" literally and went mad scientist on us. Who knew that Phil Davis was an inventor? The next thing we know he had conjured up a cute little gizmo that was all the rage worldwide. The invention of a tiny microwave that could hardly heat-up a cup of coffee had picked him up and dusted him off.

"At that point by freeing myself I opened myself back up to that whole creative process," said Phil. "I threw myself into the microwave idea. I went to China five times, did business with major companies, Skymall and Sharper Image. The product has been on the View and USA Today. I got lots of great publicity, but that only happened because I chose to separate myself from the Phil the Fire brand."

With his creative juices once again flowing (and his UPS gear in the dumpster) he again heard the calling. Call it unfinished business. Phil was back and "the fire" wasn't far behind. "Last June, my investor tapped me on my shoulder," he said smiling, "and said, 'Phil I think its time to reopen.'"

An idea just crazy enough to work!

I started a question to Phil that was more of a statement. "From the day you closed" – Phil interrupts me reciting, "April 26, 2004," like it was a date burned into his brain.

I continue … “From the day you closed, I can’t even count how many people asked me ‘When is Phil gonna open back up?’ I can’t imagine how many people had asked you.”

“I got it all the time, Chill,” he retorts. “No matter where I was, people I knew and people I did not know, Black, White old, young, asked me the same thing, over and over and over again.”

And once again the fire was burning.

“I walked into the place that was the old Houlihan's, it was like the skies opened up and sang. It was just that kind of feeling. This was it!”

“It took me a year from the time that I walked in to close the deal. It almost didn’t happen because the deal was dead. The landlord had said forget it. He was going to put it back on the market, and I’m thinking, ‘Oh no you’re not, not if I have anything to do with it!’”

And so it was, Phil the Fire was back. The right thing at the right place and Phil insists that this is the best decision that he has ever made. The Phil the Fire fervor has returned, maybe even stronger than before.

**** In Part Two of “Being Phil the Fire” CP2 will explore new lessons learned, critiques and criticisms, new recipes and more in-depth information concerning all things “Phil the Fire.”***