

# Western Wheel

## Local businesses preparing for 'more mellow' TIFF as Hollywood strikes continue

Tara Deschamps, The Canadian Press

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TORONTO — When the Toronto International Film Festival rolls around each year, few people are as busy as Charles Khabouth.

The nightlife impresario owns the Bisha Hotel and more than a dozen restaurants and clubs where the likes of Margot Robbie, George Clooney, Matt Damon and Javier Bardem have reportedly sipped wine, rubbed elbows or partied in recent years.

Khabouth is still expecting a buzz around his venues this year but knows this TIFF will be "more mellow" than those in the past.



Many expect a good turnout from foreign and Canadian stars falling outside the strike rules but are bracing for smaller crowds as Hollywood hitmakers stay home.

"We still have to be ready (even though) we're still unsure to this date the amount of A-listers coming," said Khabouth.

The federal government said last year that the festival typically brings more than 700,000 visitors to Toronto and accounts for more than \$114 million in economic activity in the region.

Local businesses, including Milagro, routinely consider it their craziest period all year.

"We book our restaurant and staff and do all of our preparations...as if it were a Saturday night for two whole weeks," said Arturo Anhalt, founder of the Mexican joint located just off the King Street West strip. TIFF plans to close down for community organization groups and performances from Canadian rockers Nickelback, among others.

"We even post memos inside the restaurant saying please don't take time off. These are the two busiest weeks of the year."

Anhalt is already seeing signs that attendance will be down because reservations and party bookings haven't flooded in at their usual pace.

"We do have some events happening, but the emails were not as intense as in past years," he said.

"A lot of people will not be pulled to these types of events just because (the actors) are not there."

Katherine Johannson, the director of events, sales and partnerships at Forthspace Hospitality Group, is similarly predicting "it is going to be a little bit of a different TIFF this year."

The company's two restaurants, Coffee Oysters Champagne across from Roy Thomson Hall and Marked by the Scotiabank Theatre, already have reservations for parties celebrating German and Canadian films, intimate directors' dinners and a return visit from a large Australian group.

"But obviously amid the strike, we lost a lot of the American big groups coming in," she said.

The hospitality business's largest booking this TIFF is for 230 guests, down from the 500-person parties it hosted last year.

"There's still a lot in the books, which I'm happy to see, but maybe not on the biggest scale," Johannson said.

Around the corner from Marked, Petros82 was preparing to be booked solid for the first six days of TIFF and then host a heavy rotation of parties linked to foreign films over the remainder of the event.

Erin Breckbill, vice-president of sales and marketing for Peter & Paul's Hospitality Group, attributed the Greek restaurant's forthcoming busyness to her company being one of TIFF's official hospitality partners and the host of RBC House, a top party spot the festival's lead sponsor hosts annually.

The bank's plan for the space includes a DJ set from basketball star Shaquille O'Neal, an L.A. Times photo and video studio and a conversation with "Rustin" film director George C. Wolfe.

While Breckbill acknowledged not every restaurant will be as busy as they were in a non-strike year, she said TIFF had recently shared with hospitality partners some names of A-listers headed to town that had her business feeling "very good."

"Last week, it was very touch and go and we were concerned but the organization's really rallied behind the local restaurants and vendors and the hospitality partners and they really are doing an excellent job," she said.

"The last few days, we've seen tremendous pickup, so we're very hopeful that TIFF will be as exciting as last year."

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