



this pub's for you

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**FRANCO FALCONE RUNS
A DIFFERENT KIND
OF GREEN BUSINESS:
BUILDING "AUTHENTIC"
IRISH PUBS OUT OF A
WAREHOUSE IN CALGARY**

In a proper Irish pub, the bar ought to be no more than 10 steps from the front entrance. It should be large and ornately carved, made of solid, heavily lacquered hardwood that will withstand years of propping up beer-sipping patrons. The pub should be

dimly lit with old-fashioned light fixtures, the walls covered with vintage family photos and prints, and shelves lined with whisky bottles, well-worn books and jugs—in all, hundreds of pieces of bric-a-brac. Genuine Irish servers (the heavier the accent, the better) should be pouring the Guinness.

And then there are the snugs. Here at the Kilkenny in Calgary, these glassed-in booths are everywhere, set back from the bar and tucked around corners. Back in Ireland, the snug was the only place a priest could sneak a pint, or a man could have a drink with his mistress. In Cowtown, even on a Saturday afternoon, the snugs are jammed—not with priests or sneaky spouses, but with students and families. Franco Falcone, the man who designed and built the Kilkenny in 2000—just one of the 50 “authentic” Irish pubs he has created in the past nine years—sits at the bar, nursing a Guinness. “This is what you do,” Falcone says. “You build snugs.”

If it seems a tad formulaic, it is. Falcone—a carpenter who grew up in British Columbia, the son of Italian immigrants—has taken the notion of the cozy Irish pub and turned it into a science. His company, Prairie Pacific Pubs Ltd., creates four or five pubs each year out of a shop in Calgary—from the bar and lights to the sign that will hang over the door. Falcone’s workers even scour antique shops and estate sales for just the right knick-knacks. Then they seal each piece in a crate and



A bar bound for Madison Square Garden sits in the shop (right); the team scours estate sales and antique shops for vintage bric-a-brac (below)



ship it to its destination for assembly. “We call it pub-in-a-box,” says Falcone. Prairie Pacific’s handiwork has made its way into towns across Alberta and B.C., to Florida, California, even Kansas. Falcone’s most recent project was a \$40,000 (U.S.) mini-pub for Madison Square Garden. (The place will be called Francis O’Falcon’s. “I put my Irish name on the plan to see if they’d go for it,” says Falcone, “and they did.”) Next up, he’s building several pubs bound for U.S. naval bases worldwide, including Japan. A client in California has ordered an Irish pub with a Caribbean twist. “I’m trying to talk them out of it,” says Falcone—he’s partial to the classic look.

Inside Prairie Pacific’s 7,500-square-foot building, a fine layer of sawdust blankets every surface, including Falcone’s desk, which is littered with plans for the Navy pubs. The smell of fresh-cut wood wafts from the shop, where the company’s

nine employees are putting the finishing touches on the Madison Square Garden job. Sheets of plywood line the walls, and a gleaming 13-metre-long bar sits in the middle of the room, waiting to be sent to New York. Same goes for the whisky-barrel tables and stools, and the gold-lettered Francis O’Falcon’s sign that hangs on one wall. He’s just waiting for his cheque to arrive; then he’ll ship it out.

Falcone and two partners started Prairie Pacific in 1998. He’d left Kimberly, B.C., at 18. His father was a carpenter and cabinetmaker, and Falcone—a former junior hockey player who spent much of his time in the penalty box—took a job with PCL in Calgary to apprentice in the same trade. During the economic downturn of the 1980s, however, his job disappeared, and he spent the next few years doing home renos. Eventually he hooked up with Doug Milton, and they started building retail stores together. A few years later, they worked on an Irish pub in Banff. “I thought I could do better,” says Falcone. “I knew what they’d paid for it, and what I could have done with the same amount of money.” John Marshall was a subcontractor on the job—he specialized in supplying bric-a-brac to places like the Spaghetti Factory and the Keg. The three of them realized that Irish pubs presented a potentially lucrative niche, with little competition. In a sort of geographic truce, they called their new company Prairie Pacific, since Marshall lived in B.C., and Falcone and Milton in Calgary.

Early on, the partners realized that the key to expanding into

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the U.S. was to hook up with Diageo-Guinness USA, maker of the quintessentially Irish stout. Guinness is a minor brand in North America. But by the brewer's reckoning, "authentically Irish-themed pubs" pour 33 times more Guinness than regular ones. So in 1992, Guinness created a European division dedicated to promoting "the Irish pub concept"; it expanded to the U.S. four years later. Since then, Sean Fadden, the company's Boston-based pub-development manager, says his division has helped open 400 Irish pubs across the States. "Guinness is all about selling the beer," says Fadden, "and increasing any point of distribution."

Fadden provides free start-up advice to anyone looking to open an Irish pub (the company mostly deals with independents) and sells a package containing a business plan and operation manual for \$1,000 (U.S.). He also sets them up with Guinness-approved suppliers. That's where his input ends—he offers no design specs and charges no licensing fees. Pub owners aren't even obligated to order Guinness beer.

Prairie Pacific wanted to get on the brewer's list of preferred builders. Step one: Falcone and Marshall embarked on a "study tour" in Ireland, hosted by Guinness. For six days, a brewery rep took them on a countrywide pub hop. "We did drink a lot," says Falcone. "We visited 100 pubs on that trip—a whole bunch of places that a lot of tourists don't see." Falcone snapped hundreds of photos along the way, which he still refers to for inspiration. (He and his team have taken 10 trips to Ireland since.)

When they returned to Calgary, Prairie Pacific landed three pub-building jobs. Then they got a real break, courtesy of one of Marshall's restaurant-industry contacts: Bart Hull, son of hockey legend Bobbv. wanted to open a pub in Boise, Idaho.

Prairie Pacific developed Dublin Up—so named because it was on the second floor, above a retail store. Guinness's people liked the company's work, and in 2000 they approached Falcone about developing a pub at



McAfee Coliseum in Oakland, California, home of the Athletics and Raiders. A few years later, Prairie Pacific landed on Guinness's list of recommended vendors—one of just two in Canada (the other, Bar None Designs, in Arnprior, Ontario, built the upscale EMC Club at Fenway Park in Boston).

As Prairie Pacific's front man, Falcone travels across North America, meeting with potential clients and sizing up the space they want to fill with one of the company's pubs-in-a-box. Back in Calgary, he and designer Ron Scott sit down for a brainstorm session, aided by all the photos Falcone has collected over the years. After 50 pubs, coming up with original designs is problematic. "That's my biggest challenge—making each pub unique," says Scott.

When they've come up with a concept, Prairie Pacific orders in fine hardwoods like alder and beech, and the company's full-time millwork team gears up. A local craftsman works on a lathe in his garage, doing wood turnings for beer-tap handles and other fine details. The entire pub, from the bar to the tables, is built at the Calgary shop. Then it's assembled as if in a dress rehearsal—to ensure it'll fit the allotted space—knocked down, crated and shipped via truck to its new home. Falcone flies to each destination to oversee installation, which can take anywhere from one to five days.

Business is good—Falcone has 12 Irish-pub projects in various stages. And like just about every business in Alberta, he's dealing with his very own labour shortage. On the day we meet, one of his carpenters has defected to another builder who could offer more money. Falcone could use one or two more.

Of course, there's always the chance that pub-goers' appetite for all things Irish—the food, the beer, the kitschy prints, even those lilting accents—will fade. But Falcone bets that Prairie Pacific Pubs will survive any shift in taste. "We're able to move in any direction market trends move to," he says. He's been hearing for a while that Belgian-style beer houses are going to be the next big thing. "If it comes to fruition, we'll go to Belgium to scope out designs and the local culture, and we'd move in that direction."

For now, though, Falcone's business is all Irish, and so we've embarked on a pub crawl of our own—across town from the Kilkenny to the Coach & Horses Ale Room, another of Prairie Pacific's creations. The place is packed—even busier than usual, the waitress says, because it's fight night *and* Flames night. Indeed, most eyes in the place are glued to the many TVs suspended from the walls. On half the screens, two ultimate fighters are pounding it out in the ring; on the other half, the Flames are beating the Canucks. A red light suspended from the intricate wood ceiling spins and lights up each time they score.

This doesn't exactly scream "authentic Irish pub." Nor do the mussels and Thai chicken wraps listed on the menu alongside the classic Irish stew. And perhaps the most glaring deviation: There are no snugs. The owner, Falcone says, wanted to go open-concept, and hey, the customer's always right. But everything else at the Coach & Horses sticks to the formula: the shiny bar, the whisky jugs, the black-and-white photos. The crowd is laughing, drinking and eating. "It's a lot of fun making happy places," says Falcone as he downs the last gulp of his Guinness. "People are always in a good mood when the pub opens and the cash register is ringing."

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