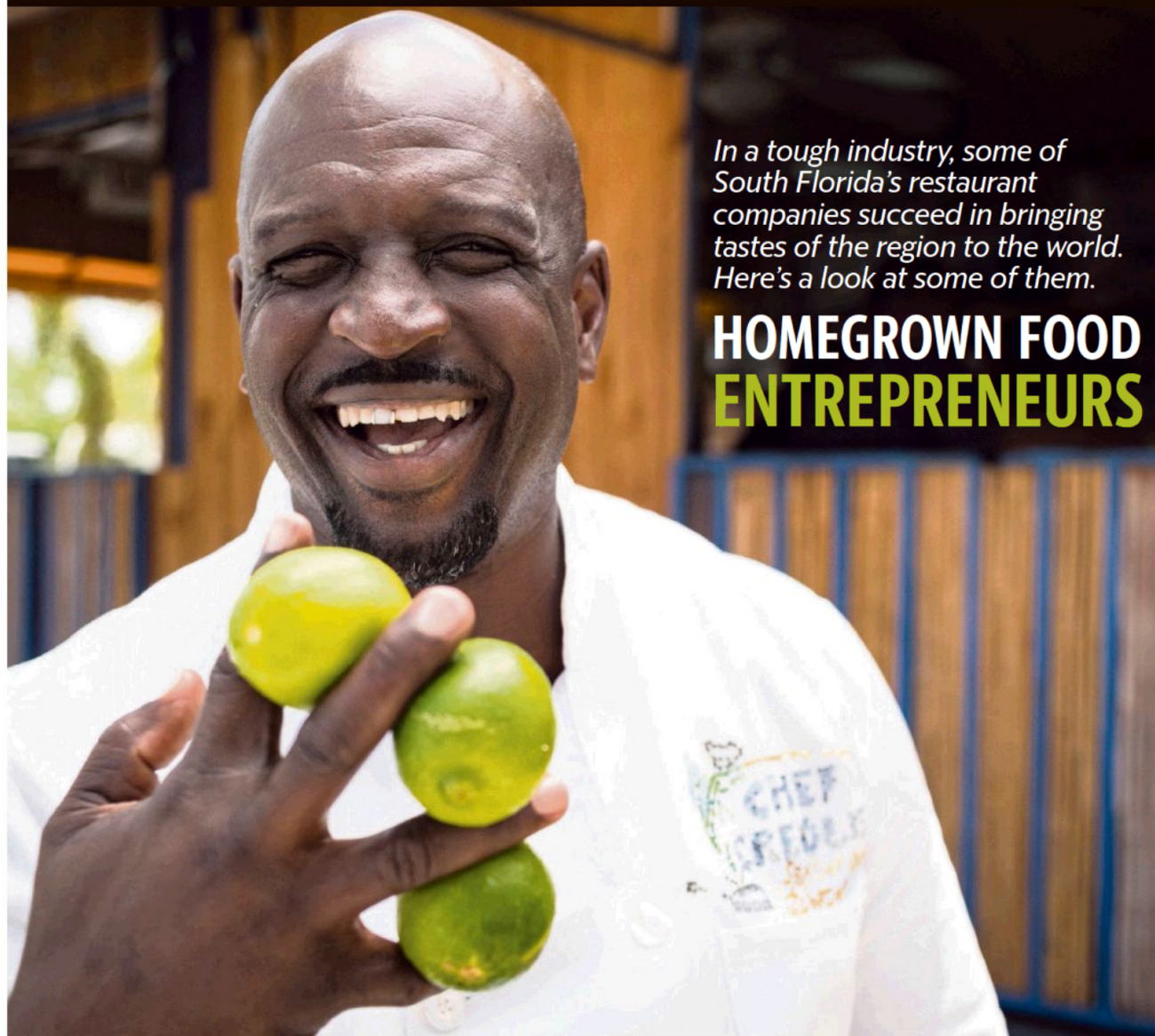


Miami Herald

MONDAY JUNE 11 2018

BUSINESS MONDAY



In a tough industry, some of South Florida's restaurant companies succeed in bringing tastes of the region to the world. Here's a look at some of them.

HOMEGROWN FOOD ENTREPRENEURS

WEEK OF JUNE 11, 2018 • MIAMI HERALD

MIAMIHERALD.COM/BUSINESS



C.M. GUERRERO cmguerrero@miamiherald.com

Eddie Acevedo, Ignacio Garcia-Menocal and Francesco Balli, partners of Grove Bay Hospitality Group, at Glass and Vine, one of their restaurants in Coconut Grove.

THE ODDS ARE STACKED AGAINST SUCCESS STORIES LIKE THESE

Homegrown food entrepreneurs aim to bring tastes of South Florida to the world.

BY NANCY DAHLBERG
Special to the Miami Herald

Mix together long and erratic hours, increasing rents, high employee turnover, products that expire and revenues subject to finicky consumer tastes and what do you get?

The restaurant business, of course.

In tourism-centric South Florida, it seems like everyone is opening a restaurant, and today's hot sensation can be gone tomorrow. Indeed, this year's list of abrupt restaurant closings includes Miami Beach's Talde and Sakura 736, Miami's Federal Donuts and Proof, Fort Lauderdale's Hot & Soul and Tarpon Bend's flagship Broadward location.

Yet in recent years, a number of South Florida restaurant companies have created thriving local groups or chains, defying the odds in this notoriously tough industry. Some are big names such as John Kunkel's 50 Eggs, Michael Schwartz' Genuine Hospitality Group and the Asian-inspired gastropub empire Pubbelly. Then there's Dr Smood, My Ceviche and Pinecrest Bakery riding the fast-casual wave. Some, like Tarpon Bend, were credited with reviving neighborhoods.

These homegrown chains are expanding, too. SuViche Hospitality Group, for example, recently bought the U.S.-based



JGAUGER Artist's rendering

The story of Grove Bay really starts in 2013, the year Grove Bay won the contract to develop The Harbour, a seven-acre site along Coconut Grove's waterfront that once housed Pan Am's Sikorsky S-42s and, more recently, Scotty's Landing.

Novecento brand and announced Novecento's fourth location, set to open in Doral later this year with an updated look and menu. The group has opened four SuViche locations in the past seven years, no easy feat for a homegrown concept that began its story with a single 10-seat restaurant.

Pincho Factory, named for the kebobs, or pinchos, on its menu, is another Miami success story. Starting with one location in 2010, Pincho Factory blossomed into a fast-growing fast-casual chain with 10 eateries, more than 150 employees and millions of

dollars in revenue. In April, the company announced it had secured funding to open 10 more franchises in the Washington area, the first of which could open by the end of this year.

Of course, some chains date back decades. Flanagan's roots extend back to 1959 in Hialeah, and the chain now has 23 restaurants stretching from South Miami-Dade to Stuart, all owned by family members or family friends. In 1954, James McLamore and David Edgerton purchased a fledgling burger concept and recast it as Burger King, paving the way for the global fast-food em-

pire.

To be sure, the odds are stacked against success stories like these.

While the U.S. restaurant market is a \$500 billion industry, it has experienced little or no growth for the past several years. For the year ending in March, total industry visits were flat and consumer spending rose just 2 percent primarily because menu prices increased, according to the NPD Group, which has been tracking the restaurant industry since 1976.

Fast-casual restaurants, part of the quick-service segment, are one of the few bright spots in the U.S.

industry. Visits to these type of restaurants increased by 6 percent in the year ending in March compared to a year ago, according to The NPD Group's CREST report. Still, in the quick-service segment as a whole, visits were up just 2 percent.

Warren Solocheck, senior vice president of industry relations for NPD Group, said that nationally, the successful players in the full-service category have added some of the features that their fast-casual brethren have adopted, such as online ordering for speeding up the restaurant process and for home delivery.

Some chains have also been slimming down their menus, dumping items that aren't hot sellers and focusing on their strengths, he said.

Even fast-casual chains are beginning to see a slowdown and are taking steps to reverse that by ramping up technology, such as kiosk-ordering at Panera. They are also going global, finding success in economies where the middle class is expanding. It's why Starbucks announced it is doubling its stores in China to 6,000 over the next few years, Solocheck said.

In the U.S., "there is not as much demand as there used to be because people can't afford to go out as much as they used to," Solocheck said. "So the question becomes are there too many units for the demand? There's a feeling we have hit that point in the restaurant industry as a whole."

In South Florida, sometimes these homegrown chains aren't built to succeed. They try to expand too soon and lack the team expertise to get to that next level, said Jesse Vazquez, president of J.A.N. Consulting Group in Miami, which specializes in the food service industry.

"They have a product that is successful in one location or maybe two locations. But they have a product that is inconsistent

SEE RESTAURANTS, 12G

H1



SAM NAVARRO snavarro@miamiherald.com

From left: Andrew Balick, culinary director; Douglas Rudolph, president; Alex Rudolph, vice president of development; Andy Yeager, chief operating officer, and Blaise McMackin, vice-president of design, are five of the six partners of Tapco, the restaurant chain behind Tap 42 Craft Kitchen and Bar.

FROM PAGE 11G

RESTAURANTS

and they have to create systems in order to grow, so they can copy that from new restaurant to new restaurant," Vazquez said. "It's easier to manage one restaurant, but once you have three, you are out of it — and you have to depend on strong management, marketing and branding."

The recent wave of food halls opening in South Florida presents another challenge. Food halls, with their mixes

of local artisan concepts, can be beneficial to emerging restaurateurs because it is expensive to open a stand-alone restaurant. But food halls are also competition for existing restaurants in the neighborhood. "They are taking a big chunk of the pie away," Vazquez said.

Then there's the foreign money, he said. "There is a lot of money flowing into South Florida, and everyone

thinks the easiest way to stay in South Florida is opening up a restaurant. And they do, but then they realize it isn't so easy."

One ingredient restaurateurs need to get right is location, location, location: It can make or break a project. Vazquez said they need to know their criteria based on their projected customer base and stick to that, rather than falling in love with a location that won't work.

"You have to have a foundation in place, a good concept and menu, and then find the perfect location and then you bring in the right people that will help you maintain consistency, grow

the brand and expand," said Vazquez, who has owned and run restaurants and has been involved with the programming at the Miami Dade College's Miami Culinary Institute. "There is a lot of work to this."

Millennials are driving a healthy living trend, but sometimes that is not enough. Food entrepreneur Matthew Sherman, who transformed JugoFresh from a juice company to a beloved destination for healthy eaters with multiple locations, admits he grew too fast and made other mistakes that led to losses, forcing him to close his six-year-old South Florida business in



SAM NAVARRO snavarro@miamiherald.com

A bartender at tap 42 Craft Kitchen & Bar's newest location in Aventura Mall prepares the seal cocktail Peachy Lychee.

March. "My inexperience and the rapid expansion that ultimately lead us to close said when announcing the slown. On his last day, he urged owners to support local food business "or risk a world of national chain

Still, some entrepreneurs in South Florida are succeeding in bringing their taste of Florida to the world, or at least parts of the Sunshine State. take a look at four homegrown restaurant groups and chains that are just that.

With 9 thriving restaurant groups, Grove Bay set to make its mark on Coconut Grove waterfront

Name: Grove Restaurant Group
Restaurants: & Vine with chef/partner Giorgio Cavoli; Big Easy Winebar & Grill winemaker/golfing great Eril; American Harvest, a farm-to-fast casual concept with two locations; Stiltsville Fish Bar and Stubbobed by Jeremy Ford, both in Miami Beach; Shula's 347 Grill in Coral Gables; Grove Bay Grill in Coconut Grove; Corona Beach House at Miami International Airport. Year founded: Incorporated in 2010 but operations started in 2014

Management: Ignacio Garcia-

Menocal, Francesco Balli, Eddie Acevedo

No. of locations: 9
Employees: About 500

Ignacio Garcia-Menocal and Francesco Balli are numbers guys. Both CPAs formerly with Big Four accounting firms, they have served some of South Florida's most prominent clients and have held CFO roles for restaurant groups. But about seven years ago, they decided to strike out on their own and incorporated a restaurant management company, Grove Bay Hospitality Group. Operations got going in 2014.

"We realized we like eating and drinking much more than doing numbers," Balli quipped.

But there's nothing lighthearted about their local restaurant company's growth and proven ability to bring order and business processes to an industry often feeling a little like the Wild Wild West. As restaurants come and go all the time, Grove Bay Hospitality Group has opened nine restaurants that together employ about 500 people and are expected to generate about \$30 million in revenues this year.

Among them: American Harvest, a fast-casual farm-fresh concept already with two locations that the co-CEOs hope to eventually take national. Grove



JOSE A. IGLESIAS jgilesias@miamiherald.com

Uber Mantovani, left, and Levin de Grazia are partners in Bocas Food Group, which contains Bocas House and Bocas Grill and a new concept called Francisca.

Bay has also teamed up with celebrity chefs on independent restaurants, including Glass & Vine, a Coconut Grove take on Tavern on the Green, and Stubbobed by Jeremy Ford.

"There is no other group in South Florida with the collection of chefs that we have. They do what they are best at, which is cooking, and let us take care of everything else," said Garcia-Menocal, who previously worked at Deloitte and was an executive with Shula Steak Houses and CFO of 50 Eggs Group during the expansion and sale of the Lime Fresh chain.

Yet Grove Bay is just getting started. Projects in development could double the size of the company in a couple of years, the executives said in an interview last month.

The story of Grove Bay really starts in 2013, the year Grove Bay won the contract to develop The Harbour, a seven-acre site along Coconut Grove's waterfront that once housed Pan Am's Sikorsky S-42s and, more recently, Scotty's Landing.

"That served as a defining moment for our company. That project was very personal for us. We were born and raised here, we have families here and the Grove is very close to our hearts," said Balli, former manager at EY and CFO of Area USA, an airport and turnpike concessionaire.

Although plans for the \$50 million development have suffered delays and legal wrangling, they are taking shape. The Harbour will include a casual restaurant, fine-dining steakhouse and fine-dining seafood restaurant plus an event space, according to the plans. The restaurants will open in stages with the first one potentially opening by the end of next year. The project will also include a public marina, retail and a parking garage. The architect will be Miami-based Arquitectonica.

"When you think of the Grove, you don't think of the water," Balli said. "We're going to change that."

The property will include park space and viewing corridors allowing the general public access to the water, said Eddie Acevedo, chief operating officer of Grove Bay who has held management and executive roles at numerous hospitality companies. He said The Harbour's restaurants will be among the few in Miami where boaters can pull up and dock.

Another high-profile project on Grove Bay's plate: Teaming up on a new restaurant with celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson in Overtown. The two groups are still in conversation, and restaurant hasn't been named yet. But according to the partners, it could open by 2020.

"He reached out to us; it was such an

honor and thrill," Garcia-Menocal said this year, the restaurant will be in the former Clyde Killens Pool Hall, where the country's biggest black artists would perform in Overtown for black audiences after playing in Miami Beach, where they could not stay because of segregation laws. Samuelsson aims to set up a Southern-inspired restaurant and supper club in the two-story, 7,000-square-foot building, according to media reports.

"The Overtown project gives us a chance to highlight the history of the area — there are a lot of stories to tell — and it will serve to bridge the cultures in the community," Balli said. Of the company's already-operating concepts, American Harvest is Grove Bay's growth brand. The fast-casual chain serves "American fare" inspired by the world. Now with two locations, Brickell City Centre and a larger location that opened in January in South Miami, Grove Bay is "in discussions" for other South Florida locations and ultimately hopes to take American Harvest nationwide.

"It's part of a new wave of restaurants where people are a lot more conscious of what they are eating. At American Harvest everything is cooked from scratch," Acevedo said. As American Harvest expands, the locations will take on the personalities of their particular neighborhoods. Indeed, the Cubana Bowl is a best-selling dish at its Miami-area locations. There, you'll also find local Peruvian coffee, baked goods from Butter Cream in Coral Gables, and beer on tap from Miami's Nightlife Brewery.

Grove Bay's other restaurants are mainly independent chef-driven concepts. Stubbobed's chef is Ford, of "Top Chef" fame. Opened in 2017 in Miami Beach, Stubbobed also recently received a rare four-star review by the Miami Herald. Also last year in Miami Beach, Grove Bay partnered with chef duo Jeff McInnis and Janine Booth to open Stiltsville Fish Bar, inspired by McInnis' boating and fishing childhood in the Florida panhandle. As part of a city effort to revitalize Coconut Grove's Peacock Park, Grove Bay teamed up with Miami-born chef Giorgio Rapicavoli, who also starred in

SEE RESTAURANTS, 14G



JOSE A. IGLESIAS jgilesias@elnuevoherald.com

The Coral Gables location of Bocas House, 2 Aragon, features a huge bar, which the other locations of the Bocas Food Group don't have.

FROM PAGE 12G

RESTAURANTS

the Food Network's "Chopped," to open the indoor-outdoor 200-seat Glass & Vine, with sweet-savory dishes such as local fish tiradito, watermelon salad and croquetas. On weekends, Glass & Vine is popular with families who can brunch and watch their kids on the adjacent playground.

Including all nine Grove Bay restaurants, "we served 750,000 people last year, and this year we are projecting to do \$30 million in sales. We are projecting we will double by the end of 2020," Garcia-Menocal said.

The team has invested heavily in training and development, such as a

yearlong management program. It also offers benefits not usually offered in the hospitality industry like reimbursing tuition, picking up half of health-care costs and offering its seven-year sabbatical (after seven years, a month of paid time off). It's all about attracting and retaining good employees.

Although Grove Bay's turnover rate is about half the industry average, at 50 percent it is still too large, Acevedo said. "The only way to be a leader, make an impact and stay in the game is to provide the education and the development."

Tap 42 finds recipe for success and builds popular brand

Name: Tapco Restaurant Group

Restaurants: Tap 42 Craft Kitchen and Bar, an upscale gastropub

Year founded: 2012 (first restaurant opens); Tapco Restaurant Group formed in 2015

Management team: Doug Rudolph, Alex Rudolph, Sean and Blaise McMackin, Andy Yeager, Andrew Balick

No. of locations: 5
Employees: 450

A vibrant bar area, reclaimed wood walls and beamed ceilings highlighted with interesting lighting, comfortable booths with tufted leather seating

in the dining room and on the large patio overlooking the city: This is not your typical mall restaurant.

The recently opened Aventura location, which seats nearly 300 people, is the fifth and newest Tap 42 Craft Kitchen + Bar, a gastropub best known for "The Prohibition" burger. Expect a wait during peak times as the restaurant (on the second level of the mall's newest expansion area -- take a left at the Tesla store) continues a rapid run of expansion since 2015 for the emerging brand. Tap 42 also has locations in Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton, Coral Gables and Midtown Miami.

The original Tap 42 location opened in Fort Lauderdale in 2012 by Sean and Blaise McMackin. The brothers didn't have

restaurant experience, and just "jumped in and figured it out," Sean said. A couple of years later, Tap 42 caught the interest of Doug Rudolph, an early franchise owner of Wendy's in Miami-Dade who also started one of the original South Florida gourmet burger places called Rudy's Sirloin Steakhouses (the restaurant group went public and later was sold to Benihana, another chain with roots in South Florida).

Rudolph helped form the partnership that is running the high-volume chain today: the McMackins; Andy Yeager, a former general manager of Houston's; Tap 42's Chief of Culinary Andrew Balick; Rudolph and his son Alex, who graduated from Babson with a degree in entrepreneurship before coming aboard to oversee de-

velopment. The six partners formed a holding company, Tapco Restaurant Group, to expand upon what the brothers had developed.

"Our vision was to make them great casual restaurants with really, really good food," said Doug Rudolph, in an interview in May. "We want to surprise people when they come in. At the same time, we wanted to keep it affordable, casual, social -- a good dining experience for people, the best of all worlds."

The Tap 42 team is in discussions about a number of other locations in South Florida and is also looking in Orlando and Tampa, Rudolph said.

The original Lauderdale location has grown every year without any real advertising beyond social media, Rudolph said. "It tells me that customers like what we are doing. They tell you with their pocketbook -- they either come back or they don't."

What they are buying: spicy salmon tostadas, spicy tuna tartare, simply grilled snapper, steak filets, short rib sliders, and, Rudolph says, world-class salads.

These stores are big undertakings. They cost \$3 million to \$5 million to develop, not including real estate costs. The challenge is securing those locations that warrant the investment, and finding the quality people to execute.

"I think it is really the wave of the future to have casual and affordable restaurants in really comfortable and yet cool settings," Rudolph said, pointing out the expansive patio at the Aventura location overlooking the mall's 93-foot slide. "We are looking to build a brand. We want to be the Houston's of the casual restaurant/bar business."

Now with 450 employees, Tapco's locations are each drawing \$5 million to \$8 million annually in sales, Rudolph said.

While the chain is riding the boom times for craft beer (Tap 42 was named after the 42 beers on tap), Rudolph thinks Tap 42's tasty menu items and full bars with craft cocktails (try this season's Peachy Lychee) offer sustainability.

"This business would scare me if it was built on a fad but it is not. People will always eat and always drink and they will always want to have great service and be treated right."

Arepas, ceviches, milkshakes and more: Bocas sizzles with Latin fusion

Name: Bocas Food Group

Restaurants: Bocas Grill, Bocas House, Bocas Grill and Bar, Francisca, all specializing in Latin American fusion.

Year founded: 2015

Management: Levin de Grazia, Uber Mantovani and Jesus Pita

No. of locations: 9

Employees: 386

For Levin de Grazia, being a restaurateur is all in the family.

As a teenager growing up in Venezuela, de Grazia worked at his parent's restaurant. They have owned La Fontana, a group of Italian-style restaurants, for 50 years (family members now run a Doral location, too). After managing a restaurant in another Venezuelan city for two years, de Grazia moved to Miami in 2011.

Once in the Magic City, de Grazia jumped back in to the restaurant scene. "I've always been involved in the restaurant business.

It is the only thing I know."

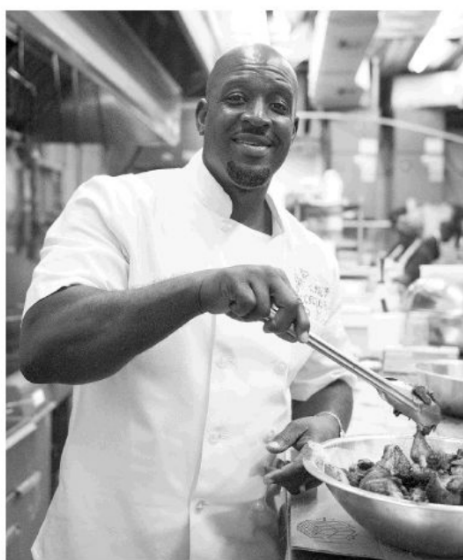
In 2013, de Grazia opened and co-owned Ciao, an Italian small-plate concept, for about a year, but the lease couldn't be renewed, he said. Then, in 2015, an opportunity to buy a small restaurant, then called Bocas Grill Coffee and Restaurant in Miami, presented itself.

He and his small team shortened the name, updated the decor and changed the menu, specializing in homemade-style recipes with a strong Venezuelan influence. But the location had kitchen space limitations and de Grazia yearned to offer Peruvian specialties too, such as ceviches. "So we created the concept of Bocas House."

Bocas House, located in Doral, Weston and Coral Gables, is more exclusive, with prime, aged meats. The Tomahawk steak and crazy milkshake desserts (try the Nutella) are the biggest sellers, de Grazia said. "It is fine dining and casual — a mix between the two. We focus on the quality of the products. Ceviches are made with corvina and they are delicious."

In 2017, an expansion of the fast-casual Bocas Grill was also put on the front burner. Now there are five locations, including eateries with bars that opened in Orlando last fall and most recently the Brickell area. Guests are most likely to order the arepa llanera and chicha drink, although de Grazia's favorite is the plantains with lomo saltado.

De Grazia said the quick acceptance in Orlando surprised him: "At the start I thought we would be liked by the Venezuelans but didn't know it would be loved by Americans. Our food can appeal to any culture. I believe we can



BRYAN CEREJO For the Miami Herald

Wilkinson "Ken" Sejour in front of his restaurant on Northwest 54th Street in Miami. Today his popular Chef Creole restaurant is now in five locations, with a sixth opening soon at Miami International Airport. Chef Creole is a Haitian restaurant at its roots.

grow nationwide."

But for the next two years, the focus will be on Florida.

One challenge along the way was the Coral Gables Boca House, its largest restaurant with 200 seats. "We had to adapt the concept we had to the population of Coral Gables," de Grazia said.

The Coral Gables location featured a huge bar, which the other locations didn't have, requiring the team to come up with signature cocktails. The Coral Gables customers wanted different foods than the Boca Houses in Weston and Doral, which led the Gables' Bocas House chefs to run friendly internal competitions to create new dishes, many of which have been hits. Marketing needed a new strategy, too.

"It has been a challenge

but I am certain that we have quickly pivoted to meet it with strategy and intelligence," de Grazia said.

Bocas Group opened six restaurants last year alone. "The group grew by 500 percent in 2017, reaching an average of 16,000 people weekly," de Grazia said.

Now with a corporate team of 12 and 386 employees, Bocas Group is adding another concept to its menu: Francisca Restaurant. The first location opened in Doral in May.

De Grazia describes the concept this way: "Francisca travels around Latin America. Every dish she serves in Miami is about an experience she had traveling. I am in love with this concept because every dish that we serve has a story. For example, Francisca

serves mofongo; the recipe is inspired by the oldest restaurant in Puerto Rico. Francisco is like the new woman, traveling and getting all the flavors of the places that she went to."

Next up is opening Bocas House in Orlando and a Bocas Grill in Doral.

About his journey as a restaurateur, de Grazia said, "I wouldn't change a thing."

For 25 years and counting, Chef Creole provides tastes of the Caribbean

Name: Chef Creole Restaurants: Chef Creole, fresh Haitian Creole with Bahamian twists.

Year founded: 1992

Management: Wilkinson "Ken" Sejour

No. of locations: 5, with 6th opening soon

Employees: 52

Wilkinson "Ken" Sejour agreed to help his brother open a restaurant under the condition that Ken would be bought out in five years.

That was 25 years ago — and counting.

Sejour's popular Chef Creole restaurant is now in five locations, with a sixth opening soon at Miami International Airport.

"I never said to myself, 'oh I would love to be in the restaurant business,'" Sejour said in an interview in May. "The only people who get into this business are crazy."

Chef Creole is a Haitian restaurant at its roots, but it is also a crossover success.

It all started in 1992 in Little Haiti, when Sejour and his brother, the late Jude Pierre, opened the first Chef Creole, a simple open-air, takeout style location with a few tables and stools.

"The fact that I am Bahamian born of Haitian parents, I was able to venture off and introduce dishes like conch salad, conch fritter and fried conch to our menu," said Sejour, who moved to Miami as a child. "Instead of opening a traditional Haitian restaurant because they were a dime a dozen, we thought, what would make Chef Creole different? Every Haitian restaurant is incredibly good, what would make us stand out? So we came up with 'You buy, we fry.'"

When you enter any Chef Creole, you see the fresh items displayed in the case. The fried shrimp and shrimp creole are the top-selling menu items.

Yet, about five or six years into the business, Sejour noticed that the restaurants were stagnating. "We sponsored everything in the community. But we just weren't making more money. The support wasn't there," he said.

It took a Miami 99 JAMZ saleswoman to help him see the way forward. "She said 'Chef, you know your food is fantastic, you need a diverse crowd, you need to get some of my people in here.' I signed a contract for \$12,000 for a six-month advertising contract. That changed everything," Sejour said. "I went from selling 35 to 40 fishes to 150 to 200 fishes, and the clientele was totally different."

Still, it wasn't easy. "When we experienced the American black crowd, we found that our Haitian customers didn't appreciate that. It was a challenge. The black Americans only asked one question, 'Chef, is that the same fried fish I got yesterday, let me have four of these, five of them, six.'"

SEE RESTAURANTS, 16G



PixExplosionbyJoJo

Wilkinson "Ken" Sejour gave a talk recently at Booker T. Washington High before the students took their college aptitude tests. He let them know that if they did well on the test, they would get a free shrimp dinner. After 175 students did so well, Chef Creole gave them gift cards, and he also set up at the school to feed them.

FROM PAGE 15G

RESTAURANTS

From that point, I started to say to myself 'this is the crowd that we need.'

By 2002, Chef Creole opened at 200 NW 54th St., a black American neighborhood. Today it is the flagship store. Said Sejour, "It is not only black Americans, it's not only Latinos, it is not only Asian people, we have everyone that comes here. We introduced Creole hospitality to a world that was not really familiar with it."

Celebrity chefs Eddie Huang, Andrew Zimmern and Anthony Bourdain have pulled up a stool at the 54th Street location, and it's also where cooking shows have been shot. "What we created to become, it was all showcased here."

Haitian support rallied

too, Sejour added. "I thank God every day. It's a miracle."

But sometimes getting through the day is a miracle in this notoriously tough business. "You are constantly checking the quality, the consistency, the delivery," Sejour said. "If they aren't all running at the same speed, you can lose your shirt in less than a month. That's the reality of it."

Sejour says he has learned not to change whatever it is that is driving repeat business. "Warning: This food is so delicious that you're going to want to wear leggings or something with an elastic waistband," begins a recent 5-star review on Yelp. "I really appreciated the unique outdoor vibe and

the food was D-LISH!" reads another.

It took 2.5 years — and a big assist from Miami-Dade Commissioner Barbara Jordan — but Chef Creole's sixth location is set to open at Miami International Airport in coming weeks.

"Moving forward, ... we will expand to different cities, and I think the airport will be that vehicle that will allow us to go to Atlanta, LAX, Washington Reagan. Then we will have the veins to go into the cities because of the relationships we have cultivated."

Sejour is the vice president of the Little Haiti Optimists and Chef Creole hosts its annual toy drive. Sejour also helps with Alonzo Mourning's foundation in Overtown and gives out money for good grades to his employees.

Sejour gave a recent talk at Booker T. Washington

High before the students took their college aptitude tests. "I spoke very real with them. I said, 'I'm just like you guys. I used to be in the street, I used to run the street, I used to hustle, but guess what, if I could do it over again, how much further I would have been if I had really exercised my mind.' I also let them know if they did well on the test, they would get a free shrimp dinner."

Sure enough, 175 students did well, and Chef Creole set up at the school to feed them and also give them gift cards.

"For me, that was a top-five moment. With everything so unpredictable in our world, the kids need to take two seconds to rethink what they are doing. If we are that vehicle that makes them rethink, then we have done our job."

Follow @ndahlberg on Twitter; email ndahlbergbiz@gmail.com.