

June 8, 2008

BUSINESS

When Food Is the Family Enterprise

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East Islip

SITTING on a banquette in the back of the dining room at Tellers Chophouse here, John and Linda Bohlsen and their grown sons, Michael and Kurt, tried hard to act like customers. They read the menu. They asked to hear the specials — even though they had heard them all before.

The Bohlsens own Tellers, a former bank building with 32-foot ceilings that they bought in 1999. They also own Prime, a waterfront restaurant in Huntington that opened in 2006, the seven-year-old H2O Seafood Grill in Smithtown and, since 1983, the Beachtree Cafe in East Islip.

Part of the responsibility, and the pleasure, of being restaurateurs is that they often find themselves eating together at their own restaurants. But what is dining out for others is dining in for culinary broods, and time to play their own worst critic.

“You have to force yourself to sit down and have a meal and find everything that’s gone wrong,” said John Bohlsen, ordering the feta cheese and date salad. He wondered if anyone else had noticed that a light bulb out front needed replacing.

Michael Bohlsen, 37, noticed that a previous diner had circled a price on the menu. It had to be tossed. Mr. Bohlsen ordered the Cajun-style rock shrimp, which was “way too spicy” when he had it two days earlier; he wanted to make sure the chef had it just right. This time the chorizo chips were missing.

John Bohlsen, 65, checked his watch, worried about the time that was passing between courses. Sometimes the staff seemed afraid to disturb them; other times they doted too much, he said.

Restaurants have been the Bohlsens’ bread and butter for three generations, since Herman Bohlsen, his wife, Hilda, and his brother Gerhardt opened a coffee shop in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. In 1938, they opened a small restaurant in Yaphank, followed by Pine Lake Tavern in West Islip.

After working as his parents’ busboy, John Bohlsen studied the hospitality business at college and honed his skills running officers’ clubs in the Philippines during the Vietnam War. In 1969, he opened an Arby’s franchise in Deer Park. Fourteen years later he sold all 53 of the fast-food restaurants he had amassed,

retired and traveled for six months, then took a new day job at North Fork Bank. (He was vice chairman when it was sold in March to Capital One, where he still works as a consultant.) But he also drifted back into the restaurant business, becoming a partner, then sole owner, of the Beachtree Cafe near his East Islip home.

Having mopped floors as children at Arby's, and unfazed by the decidedly nonbankers' hours, Michael and Kurt joined their father in the 1990s.

"Once it's in your blood it's very hard to do anything else," said Michael Bohlsen, who is in charge of new concepts, marketing and service. The Bohlsens hope to eventually have 10 restaurants.

Despite difficult economic times and surging [food prices](#), some of the Island's best-known food dynasties are expanding. Gillis and George Poll, who are brothers, own Bryant and Cooper, a steakhouse in Roslyn; two prime spots at the tony Americana Manhasset center — Toku, an Asian restaurant that opened in August, and Cipollini, a three-year-old Italian eatery — as well as Majors steakhouses in Woodbury and East Meadow. In April the Polls acquired the George Washington Manor, a catering hall in Roslyn. A new French restaurant at Wheatley Plaza in Greenvale is in the works for next winter.

Their goal is to bring "the urban feel out to Long Island," said Gillis Poll, 55, catering to an affluent suburban clientele that works in New York City and travels widely. "We felt that there weren't as many sophisticated places out here."

Because their restaurants are so close together, the brothers create different themes and menus. (In 1999, a third sibling who previously worked with them, Dean, 50, struck out on his own with Riverbay Seafood Bar and Grill in Williston Park.)

Sometimes siblings recruit one another in the restaurant business, allowing it to grow.

Later this month Leo DeNicola, 45, will be joining his brothers Joseph, 40, and James, 52, owners of Ruvo Restaurant and Bar in Greenlawn and Port Jefferson, in a new dining venture with a seafood focus, La Tavola, in Sayville.

His coming on board full time allows the brothers to "make the leap," said Joseph DeNicola, who opened Ruvo seven years ago after working in the restaurant business in Manhattan. James, a former bond broker, joined him after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Joseph DeNicola is the executive chef; James concentrates on operations and maintenance. Leo, who spent 20 years as a chief steward on Time Warner's corporate planes, will be the "face" of La Tavola. Another brother, Doug, an artist, will make his presence felt as well: his work will adorn the walls of La Tavola. Both Ruvo restaurants are decorated with art by their late father, James.

Like the DeNicolas, John and David Tunney are brothers in the restaurant business who are expanding their empire, but the Tunneys are looking beyond the Island. They currently own Honu Kitchen and Cocktails in Huntington, Besito in Huntington and Roslyn and American Roadside Burgers, with locations in Smithtown, Huntington and Hicksville. A third Besito is being built in West Hartford, Conn., and the Tunneys are in negotiations for a fourth, in Salt Lake City; they also plan to take American Roadside Burgers public, according to John Tunney.

The Tunneys do not come from a family of restaurateurs. In fact, “we were not food-oriented at home at all,” David Tunney said. These days, though, they snack all day long, he said, sampling the food at their restaurants.

John Tunney, 50, who started in the business as a dishwasher at age 14, is known as “the mean one,” he said. At Honu, “The shark’s in the tank” is code for “the owner is in the house.”

“Everyone is worried what we are testing,” John Tunney said as he downed a shrimp salad — his second lunch — on a recent afternoon at Besito in Roslyn while David, 42, cleaned his plate of seared spiced snapper. “We might just be hungry.”