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NEWS 29

Rusty Pelican rises again after completing a \$7M renovation

BY SUSAN R. MILLER

Going from rustic to refined, the iconic Rusty Pelican on Miami's Virginia Key is set to open Dec. 12 after a five-month, \$7 million renovation.

With just days left before its official grand reopening, workers were putting on the finishing touches, while newly hired staff members were being instructed on the finer aspects of how to provide service with a smile and memorizing the menu, much like a football player memorizes a playbook.

When the restaurant closed in July, all 151 of its employees were let go. It has since hired about 250 employees, only a few of whom previously worked there.

The restaurant seats 200, but with its two ballrooms and outdoor terrace, the facility can accommodate about 1,300.

While the menu includes many of the old favorites from the grill, Executive Chef Michael Gilligan has modernized it with an offering of small plates from the land, sea and garden.

There is a showcase wine cellar that holds more than 1,500 bottles.

This is the third incarnation of the Rusty Pelican, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Built in 1972, it underwent its first renovation in 1985. Months later, it burned to the ground and was rebuilt.

The restaurant has already started catering events in its two upstairs ballrooms.

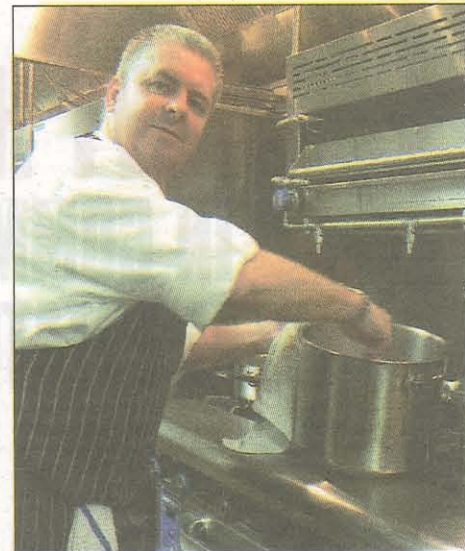
Its first event, on Dec. 2, was a holiday party for 950 American Airlines employees. Just days earlier, the airline's parent company, AMR Corp., filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Although there had been talk of a renovation for several years, plans were put on hold until Specialty Restaurants Corp., which owns and operates the landmark, was able to finalize an agreement with the city to extend



PHOTOS BY SUSAN R. MILLER

Above, the newly remodeled Rusty Pelican on Virginia Key. At right, the Rusty Pelican's new executive chef, Michael Gilligan, in one of two kitchens at the iconic restaurant.



its lease for 25 more years. The deal was put on the back burner while Virginia Key's master plan was being hammered out.



Tallichet

with everyone that we would, at some point, get this approved."

Under terms of the deal, the company had

Despite the delays, there was never any plan to find another location said John Tallichet, president and CEO of Specialty Restaurants Corp. His father, David Tallichet, founded SRC in 1958.

"We have always been committed to be here," he said. "We just knew it was a matter of time working

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to spend at least \$3 million on the renovation, put in a boardwalk and create public access. To do the latter, the back room was demolished to make way for a walkway, said Tallichet, whose company's portfolio includes 22 restaurants nationwide, including the 94th Aero Squadron in Miami and Van Nuys, Calif., and a Rusty Pelican in Tampa.

A few days before the grand opening, a construction fence surrounded the outdoor patio

area. Workers were still laying tile to the steps leading from the patio to the restaurant, doing electrical work and putting on the final touches of paint both inside and out.

The restaurant now has some competition on the key from the Rickenbacker Fish Co., a family-owned restaurant and fish market that opened last December just around the corner.

Prior to the renovation, the company was paying about \$400,000 a year on the lease, which is based on a percentage of gross sales. Tallichet said the company is projecting that will go up to as much as \$900,000 a year.

Prior to the renovation, the restaurant was doing about \$10 million a year in business, and that's expected to increase to \$12 million to \$15 million, Tallichet said.

Although the overhaul took place quickly, there were a few hitches.

"Anytime you peel back an onion, you will find some surprises," Tallichet said, but noted there was nothing that held up the process.