

BUSINESS

RESTAURANTS

LANDMARK RETURNS

The nearly 40-year-old restaurant reopens Monday after a \$9 million makeover, revealing a more contemporary design and menu.

BY ELAINE WALKER

For decades, the Rusty Pelican has been the type of restaurant where you took visitors to ogle the breathtaking water view or to celebrate Mother's Day, a special anniversary or a wedding.

Now, after spending more than \$9 million on a renovation that has transformed the nearly 40-year-old Virginia Key landmark, the Rusty Pelican wants to be the kind of place locals go for more than just a special occasion.

When the new Rusty Pelican opens for dinner on Monday after a five-month closure, diners will find a restaurant with a more modern look everywhere from the menu to the décor and special event spaces. Gone is the circa-1980 furnishings, hanging seashells, Polynesian accents and white tablecloths. The dining room now has a contemporary feel, lots of cherry wood and oversized booths with great views of the floor to ceiling windows looking out on Biscayne Bay. It's also not nearly as cramped, as about 100 seats were removed from the 230-seat dining room.

The bar has been redesigned to make it a gathering spot, with the addition of couches and a VIP room. There's a new stone patio with three fire pits for those who want to feel that bay breeze.

"The idea is to create a place that's less formal and more welcoming," said John Tallichet, president and chief executive of Specialty Restaurants Corp., which has been the Rusty Pelican's owner since it opened in 1972. "We wanted to create an environment that people want to embrace as their everyday place. You can come and have a casual experience or you can do it up."

The menu also has been dramatically revised by Chef Michael Gilligan, previously the executive chef for the W South Beach Hotel. Gilligan's menu fo-



PHOTOS BY AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

NAUTICAL THEME: This is a partial view of the Rusty Pelican dining room. The number of seats was reduced to make the space roomier.

cuses on several dozen small plates designed for sharing, with the majority priced at no more than \$12. These include selections like foie gras and goat cheese empanadas, chilled coconut shrimp with cotton candy, fried grouper sliders and pork belly skewers.

But for those looking for more traditional selections, there are also full-size entrees like classic grilled steaks and pan seared scallops priced closer to a \$30 average. There's also a selection of sushi rolls and raw bar items. And for the old Rusty Pelican regulars, they're promising a new version of the signature cheese toast.

Coming early next year: a new



LIQUID REFRESHMENT: Owner John D. Tallichet shows off the new wine display at the remodeled Rusty Pelican.

• TURN TO RUSTY PELICAN, 8B

Rusty Pelican to reopen Monday

• RUSTY PELICAN, FROM 10B

version of the Pelican's famous brunch, featuring a combination of cooked-to-order entrees and a buffet.

While the check at the old Rusty Pelican averaged about \$50 per person, diners today have a lot more flexibility about how much they want to spend and can easily get out for significantly less. It follows what has become the popular trend among restaurants post-recession.

"We wanted it to be a foodie hangout, but we also don't want to alienate my parents who want a well-done steak with ketchup," Gilligan said. "This is the oldest neighborhood restaurant in Miami. You should be here two or three times a week."

The Rusty Pelican makeover is something that has been a long time coming. Tallichet's company approached the city of Miami in 2003 about the desire to extend its lease and remodel the restaurant. They first had to win voter approval because the property involves a lease of city-owned waterfront land. But even after winning the vote in 2003, the lease was delayed at the urging of activists who wanted the city to first adopt a master plan for Virginia Key, a process that dragged on for years. At the time of the closure in July,



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FEATURED ATTRACTION: The wrap-around deck at the Rusty Pelican is a great place to view the bay.

the restaurant was ringing up about \$10 million in revenue, drawing just over a third of its business from special events, Tallichet said.

Industry experts agree the changes were necessary, but hope that Rusty Pelican stays true to its heritage.

"People come here to take advantage of the waterfront and the tropical experience," said Richard Lackey, a Palm Beach Gardens broker who specializes in restaurants but hasn't seen the remodel. "It bothers me sometimes when people take a proven concept and

strip it down so much that it loses all of the character."

As part of the construction, the restaurant built a boardwalk, allowing the public to be able to walk around the bayfront edge of the property.

The renovation also included a makeover of the second-floor event space, which can accommodate more than 500 people. It now includes a covered outdoor terrace, a separate entry to the restaurant and two bridal rooms.

Joli Spoliansky was checking out the event space this week as a possi-

ble site for her daughter's wedding in 2012 and couldn't get over the improvement to the entire building.

"I'm in complete shock," said Spoliansky, who lives on Brickell Avenue. "What a difference. It's beautiful. We always brought people here, but we had stopped coming. It had a musty smell and an old look. The food wasn't great."

Now, Spoliansky hopes to convince her daughter to change the wedding date because the space isn't available. Plus, she can't wait to return for dinner.