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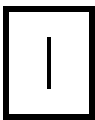
## *We The People*

August 1, 2017    Dori Zinn





**When The Restaurant People began in the mid-'90s with a single Himmarshee spot, the Fort Lauderdale restaurant scene looked quite different than it does today. More than two decades later, the city's culinary tastes have grown – and so has The Restaurant People.**



If you dine in Downtown Fort Lauderdale, there's a good chance you've been to a TRP spot.

Maybe it's the longstanding Tarpon Bend in Himmarshee. Maybe it's YOLO on Las Olas. Maybe it's O Lounge or Vibe Las Olas or Township or Boatyard or S3 or Spatch Peri Peri Chicken. When you eat out in Fort Lauderdale enough, The Restaurant People have a way of finding you.

While Fort Lauderdale's downtown food scene is thriving now, it wasn't always a go-to dining spot. Partners Tim Petrillo, Peter Boulukos and Alan Hooper founded the group in 1996. When TRP was starting out, Las Olas was popular but elsewhere in central Fort Lauderdale, there were some other types of patrons roaming around.

“There wasn’t much around, just a few bars,” Petrillo says of Himmarshee during the mid-to-late ’90s. “We had more prostitutes and drug addicts than we had pedestrians walking the streets. It was transitioning.”

But Petrillo, Boulukos and Hooper didn’t see that as a problem. In fact, they saw it as an opportunity. Around the time they were starting out, the Broward Center for Performing Arts was opening and Las Olas Riverfront was under construction. They opened their first spot, Himmarshee Bar & Grille. That bar isn’t there anymore — Bull Market is — but TRP still owns the property. Tarpon Bend opened later a few doors down.

They know location is everything. They know national trends don’t always jibe with the Fort Lauderdale clientele. They know the guest is the top value above all else. Because of their high standards, they’ve had a number of successful concepts. But there have

been some strikeouts too – and they didn't start out as the big dogs on the local restaurant block.

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## The Early Years



hen all his friends were majoring in finance and real estate, Tim Petrillo wanted to go into hotel and restaurant management. He originally went to Florida State University for business but when he realized it wasn't his passion, he moved back home to Fort Lauderdale and enrolled at Florida International University. Right out of college he got a job close to home, working for Houston's.

"When I was hired for Houston's, I was based out of the Fort Lauderdale store," he says. "I love Fort Lauderdale, and that's why we're based here."

He met Boulukos when he was working for Mark's Las Olas during college and Boulukos was executive chef.

"He just kind of 'got it,'" Petrillo says of Boulukos. "I liked his work ethic."

Petrillo and Hooper had met in college and were scoping out properties at the time. They put a contract down on Himmarshee, then went to develop the TRP business plan that they still essentially operate from today.

There have been a few blunders over the years for the company.

"We've had failures; you can't bat 1,000," Petrillo says. "We've made some poor decisions in hindsight. We didn't really

understand the market as we should have.”

Not soon after the 1999 opening, Petrillo and company wanted to capitalize on the success of Tarpon Bend, so they opened another location out in Weston in 2000. It didn't work out that well. Tarpon Bend does well in a downtown, urban environment, he says. It wasn't the right fit in suburban Weston. The location was open five years before closing.

Then there was that one time they thought it'd be a good idea to have a restaurant

focused solely on... meatballs.

“We opened a place called Fork & Balls. We thought it would be edgy with a narrow menu,” Petrillo says. But it didn't last. “When you see these trends around the country you think they may work, but they don't quite work out the way you had hoped. In New York and Chicago, they were eating them like mad, but it didn't work out in the hot Florida sun. We really didn't do our research on that one as much as we should.”

In hindsight, those failures have given the team clarity. Now they react faster. They pause to consider their locations, their menus, their community and their concepts. But that doesn't mean they still don't take risks. Their biggest risk became their biggest reward.

YOLO opened on Sept. 30, 2008 — the day after the stock market crashed. The Restaurant People had spent double their budget to open this new concept — a concept Petrillo says failed five times before it opened. The recession came, but not to YOLO.

“We were the new kids on the block for a long time because no one else was opening restaurants,” he says. “We were very successful during the recession. We were ‘new’ for two years before anything else opened up.”

None of their concepts are alike except in the sense that they meet their standards.

“Our top value in the company is the guest above all else,” Petrillo says. “Do we hit it 100 percent? No, we stumble, but we try to minimize that.”

For a group that's had more than two decades of success, there are a few things they

are doing to stay that way: They monitor guest counts, they check reviews on social media, and they even have secret shoppers. The work that goes into running a restaurant isn't always what people think it is.

"Opening a restaurant is one thing, keeping it open is another," Petrillo says. "There's this perception of glamour that goes along with it, but it's far from glamorous. It's hard work."

It's even harder to launch something that doesn't look quite like the others. While no two places are alike, there are some newer concepts that stand out a bit more. In the coming months the team will be launching a rooftop bar (aptly called Rooftop), Township — a German-style beer hall and sister location to their Tallahassee spot of the same name, and Taste — a new dining concept of the sort even TRP hasn't tackled yet.

Taste will be part test kitchen and part guest chefs experimenting with new menus. The seating will be limited, maybe 25 people inside at most, and guests can buy tickets ahead of time to enjoy the multi-course meals. It's like a cooking show in your kitchen where you can pick and choose what you want to eat from the different chefs. Petrillo has been crafting the Taste idea for a few years.

"As you think of these concepts and you put them to paper, it changes, but the integrity is still there," Petrillo says of the developing project. "And once it opens, it evolves even more. The guest drives what we deliver. If the guest responds well, we keep going, and we tweak."

Petrillo says the demand for great restaurants downtown is high and the South Beach Food and Wine Festival, which in recent years has expanded into Fort Lauderdale, has helped.

"The growth in downtown has allowed restaurateurs to experiment," he says. "The bigger the market, the bigger the risk you can take. That's why you see emerging cuisine in big cities."

Styles may change and experimentation may become more feasible, but one thing that is never compromised at TRP locations is quality. Boulukos puts the same drive and effort into each and every concept TRP has, which may explain why he doesn't prefer one over the other.

“I never say one is my favorite because you have to love all your children,” he says. “They’re different in design and menus, so they have different elements. We’re not a chain-style where we’re doing the same thing over and over again.”

Tarpon Bend is casual while YOLO is a bit more upscale. Boatyard takes the concepts of its predecessor Bimini Boatyard (which was not a Restaurant People restaurant) and updates them with a sort of Floridian sophistication. O Lounge and Vibe are nightclubs. New River Brewing will open next year, concentrating on high-quality, local craft beer. You’d be hard-pressed to find the parallels between the concepts, except the care and craft put into each of them are all very, very well done.

Adam Fine recognizes the attention to detail. Fine met Petrillo when Tarpon Bend first opened. Fine, founder of Fresh Beer and Native Brewing, is a partner in the New River Brewing concept.

“I was in beer distribution [at the time], so I wanted to sell him beer,” Fine says. “Over the years I saw him open up YOLO and sold him beer there, too.”

Their new joint venture gives them both the opportunity to use their strengths.

“We want to live within what they do and the quality of service they provide,” he says. “They have a vision and their standards, which are great. We’re kind of influencing each other.”

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## New River Brewing



The timing of The Restaurant People teaming up with Fine couldn’t have been more on point. TRP, Fine, and Julian and Lisa Siegel, the couple behind the popular Riverside Market and Riverside Market South, are developing New River Brewing with the aim of opening in early 2018. Fine, who works with the Siegels on Riverside Market and partners on nearby beer and brewing shop Craft Beer Cartel, has been dreaming of a brewery for decades.

Fine grew up in Fort Lauderdale and calls himself a “granddaddy” of local beer brewers. After graduating from the University of Florida, he moved to Houston for work for a few years. He started home-brewing and when he moved back home, he talked about opening up a brewery with his dad. But at the time in the late '90s, it



wasn't a great time for craft beer.

"We realized we were fighting a battle," Fine says. "[At the time] if you started a brewery, the only way you could get into business was getting with a distributor. But distributors didn't know anything about craft breweries."

There wasn't Total Wine or ABC Liquors. Publix didn't show off local craft beer. If you wanted a beer after work, you were largely stuck with traditional Budweiser, Miller or Coors. Or as Fine says, "anything that came in 12-ounce bottles."

So Fine started a distributorship and started to sell his own beer. In 2009 he sold his Fresh Beer company to Brown Distributing, then worked for them for five years. When the time came to partner up with the Siegels, he left Brown. They had a hard time finding the perfect spot for New River Brewing — sometimes it was the low ceilings or the parking lot or location — but they're setting up shop in an 11,000 square-foot warehouse just west of the Broward County Courthouse.

"Whether you win or lose in court, you need a beer at the end of the day," Fine laughs.

When they were just starting to develop their brewery concept, Fine and the Siegels reached out to The Restaurant People for some advice, but Petrillo realized they could give them something more.

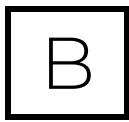
“We don’t have all the great ideas,” Petrillo says. “They came to me to get some ideas on how to set up their brewery. As I was talking to them, I realized how good it was. Then we decided on a joint venture.”

The brewery will occupy 7,000 square feet of the warehouse while the tasting and restaurant room, office space, and private meeting rooms will occupy the rest. Fine was looking to capture the look and feel of Riverside, getting away from the idea that breweries just had small tasting rooms off to the side of the beer-making. He envisioned having an outdoor set indoors, creating an old Florida cracker house inside. TRP told him to go with it.

“You run the funky, cool, craft beer and we will do all the non-fun stuff like help you manage, HR, payables, and back-office stuff,” Petrillo says of the partnership. “This is what you got into the restaurant business for. We have those things in place so it’s easy for us to help people so they don’t have to worry.”

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## The Future of Fort Lauderdale Restaurants



Both Fine and Petrillo had early struggles and now see success in the Fort Lauderdale dining scene. They’ve witnessed the growth of local beer and community-run food locales from the ground up.

“It was a wasteland for a long time,” Fine says. “The community of beer people has grown tremendously. One hundred-fold.”

Food wasn’t much different. Twenty years ago, when Himmarshee was unloved and forgotten, TRP faced a lot of unknowns. Now they practically run the Fort Lauderdale dining scene. So what can possibly improve?

“There’s lots of demand for great restaurants in this town,” Petrillo says. “Fort Lauderdale in general is so much better.”

Boulukos agrees. It’s not just about being a great cook or enjoying dining or nightlife. There’s more than just liking food.

“[Our] concepts are different but the way we report our core values, mission statements, and management expectations all stay the same from store to store,” Boulukos says. “We’re always looking at new menu items, new technology, and always

being better.”

The future of Fort Lauderdale dining will change more as the city’s demographics and development change.

“You’re not going to see chefs taking big, big risks until we have a more dense population downtown,” Petrillo says. “There are some really talented people in this community that take bigger risks at, say, festivals. We want to cultivate that environment.”

Cultivating that environment and moving forward means not just re-reading the good reviews.

“I don’t ever look back and say ‘look how successful we are,’” Boulukos says. “I look forward to improving. What can we do?”

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The advertisement features a dark background with the PrintDynamics logo on the left. The logo consists of the word "PRINTDYNAMICS" in white, with a blue and pink swoosh underneath, and the tagline "We bring imagination to life!" in yellow. To the right of the logo, a list of services is displayed in white text, separated by backslashes. On the far right, there is a pink circular badge with the text "OFFICIAL PRINTER of" in white. Behind the badge is a collage of various printed materials, including magazines and brochures, some with the word "LAUDERDALE" visible.

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