

## SUBSTANCE OVER SIZZLE

THE SECRETS BEHIND THE SUCCESS—AND LONGEVITY—OF FOUR SOUTHWEST FLORIDA RESTAURANTS.

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**Bleu Provence ([www.bleuprovincenaples.com](http://www.bleuprovincenaples.com)) in Naples offers dining al fresco. (See Pages 3-4).**

*Photo by Luminaire Foto*

For food lovers, Southwest Florida can be a place rich in tasty cuisine, locally sourced ingredients and unforgettable tropical settings in which to wine and dine. But anyone who has ever spent time on the other side of the table knows that running a restaurant is hard work, a task made even more challenging by the boom-and-bust cycle of the Southwest Florida tourist season. Yet some local restaurateurs seem to have the magic touch, a special ability to attract guests, send them out with a satisfied smile, and entice them back again and again. So what do these epicurean entrepreneurs know that others in their industry don't?

Even David Rosendorf, a partner at Miami-based law firm Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton, admits such wisdom can be difficult to pinpoint. The firm has a special focus on bankruptcy cases—including restaurant bankruptcy—and Rosendorf explains that in the past six months, he has seen a wave of restaurants file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Some of the most legendary eateries in the country have felt the sting of financial failing: In March, New York City's famed Le Cirque, founded in 1974, filed for Chapter 11. More and more, a restaurant that has survived more than 10 years is rare—“practically a unicorn,” Rosendorf explains. “For that mature restaurant, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to adapt and survive.”

Nationally, 60 percent of restaurants fail in the first three years—slightly fewer than 30 percent within the first year, roughly 19 percent in the second year and about 11 percent in the third year, according to a Cornell University study conducted by R.G. Parsa, Ph.D., who is now with the University of Denver Daniels College of Business. The numbers are cumulative percentages for chain and independently owned businesses.

But Southwest Florida doesn't lack for its share of culinary landmarks, restaurants that have become near-fixtures on the dining landscape. Among those are The Veranda in Fort Myers, The Mucky Duck on Captiva Island, Bleu Provence in Naples and Ridgway Bar & Grill.

Want to know what makes a restaurant cook? Read on, and savor the secrets to success.

### **Know Your Niche**

Fort Myers was a different town when Paul Peden bought the property that would eventually become The Veranda. It was 1978, and the number of restaurants in the area was few. No one had yet imagined meal delivery services, and big grocery chains weren't offering a vast array of gourmet, ready-to-eat prepared meals, either.

All of those eventually arrived, creating more options for hungry diners—and more competition for upscale eateries such as The Veranda.

But The Veranda's lasting popularity has been buoyed by what Peden explains is a clear understanding of its spot in Fort Myers. As local diners have more and more choices in how they eat, Peden says the secret to The Veranda's long-term success hasn't been about being trendy, but about keeping consistent.

"You've got to figure out what your niche is and stay in it. You can't please everybody," Peden says. "We try to stay true what we do at The Veranda, because it's a unique product."

White tablecloths, a gracious courtyard and a historic setting all combine to create an unmistakable Veranda experience, but so too does the professionalism of its wait staff, many of whom have been with the restaurant for more than a decade. The talents of the employees are another reason the restaurant has been such a long-term success, Peden says. (Paul Peden and his son Craig Peden also own and operate the Rib City barbecue restaurant chain.)

And although Peden says The Veranda knows consistency is key to its continued prosperity, that doesn't mean the restaurant doesn't reach for innovation where it fits. They've embraced social media, using Facebook to showcase the restaurant and its offerings, as well as special events and happy guest news, such as engagements and anniversaries that take place at the restaurant.

That push into social media is also helping The Veranda connect with the next generation of clients. After 40 years, the Veranda has become a multi-generational restaurant, Peden says, one where it's not unusual for guests to say, "I came here with my parents and now I'm bringing my children here." Making gentle tweaks to the menu to satisfy changing tastes is necessary, Peden notes, but those guests are coming to enjoy the same experience they had as youngsters, to make new memories with their family.

For that reason, Peden describes The Veranda as "evolving," a place where the change is subtle, not chaotic. "You can't live in the past," he says. "There's no time you can say you're done."

### **Location, Location, Location**

Restaurateur Andreas Bieri is unabashedly honest when it comes to revealing the secret of his decades-long success: Waterfront views are great for business. And the cozy, beachfront eatery he opened in 1975 as The Mucky Duck has a fantastic view of the exact attraction tourists travel to Captiva Island to enjoy—sun and surf.

“I’m not saying we are better than anybody else,” Bieri says with a laugh. “We are very, very fortunate.” Since 1994, Bieri has also owned Captiva’s The Green Flash, a sister restaurant to The Mucky Duck. That restaurant is a bit more upscale, and he often offers to transport diners there by golf cart if they decide the wait at the Duck is too long. (They rarely do, Bieri adds.) “They don’t mind the wait,” Bieri says. “I guess because of the tradition, they have to eat at The Mucky Duck.”

Of course, there’s a bit more to the Duck’s success story than just a great location. Like The Veranda’s Paul Peden, Bieri stresses consistency as being the key to success in Southwest Florida’s competitive restaurant biz. In the kitchen, Bieri’s restaurants have kept up with trends in gluten-free eating, making it possible for most items to be prepared in a way that accommodates gluten-free diners. But there are some items he would never dream of changing, such as the Green Flash’s famed shrimp bisque.

“This would be the biggest mistake I could make,” he says. “No matter how good [the chef] could make it, people would say it’s not the same anymore.”

Being a waterfront restaurant isn’t all smooth sailing, though. Increased proximity to water also means increased proximity to certain kinds of natural disasters, and those businesses that aren’t prepared to handle the fallout of those calamities face almost certain ruin. Fortunately, Bieri had financial reserves in place in 2004 when Hurricane Charley plowed across Captiva as a Category Four storm, causing serious damage to the resort community.

Afterward, lunches remained steady, as visitors came to the island for the day. But dinners slumped, as many of the resorts remained closed for repairs. Bieri estimates his restaurants saw a fifty percent decrease in sales for two years after the storm. Ultimately, the resort diners returned to Captiva, and when they did, their beloved Mucky Duck view was waiting.

Attorney Rosendorf praises restaurateurs who are able to build up a strong reserve fund, since it’s impossible to predict when disaster will strike. But he notes that a slow summer is almost inevitable in Southwest Florida, and those who don’t prepare are asking for a disaster of their own making.

“Every summer is slow here,” he says. “Every restaurant limps by. Not every restaurant owner or manager is prepared to deal with that.”

## **Be the Right Size**

**Bleu Provence** ([www.bleuprovincenaples.com](http://www.bleuprovincenaples.com)) in Naples is almost unrecognizable from the tiny French eatery it started out as 17 years ago. Indoors, it’s almost four times its former size and now boasts a wine room for sipping a libation before dinner or purchasing a bottle to take home. Outdoors, there’s a private patio area for enjoying evenings al fresco.

Yet, despite all these changes, it feels very much the same. It’s still quaintly decorated in blue and white, with posters of dream destinations in the South of France, and a lively and skilled staff. The classically French food is always fresh and delicious, and the vast, award-winning wine list is always worth sighing over. Somehow, Bleu Provence has managed to walk a line between cozy and expansive—with careful growth being the key to longevity.

“The main challenge of Naples is the season,” explains Jacques Cariot, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Chef Lysielle Cariot. Sons Clement and Kevin are managers. “There’s no possibility to make a living if you stay small.”

Cariot notes that the bulk of the restaurant's earnings are made during the four months of season, January to April, and that most people wish to dine between the hours of 6 and 8 p.m. The Cariots discovered early on that they would have to maximize the space in their restaurant if they wished to capture as much revenue as possible during those peak times.

Rosendorf explains that successful expansion is often a difficult line for restaurants to walk; too often, they grow more quickly than their business can support, branching out before their organization is ready. Other times, restaurants don't discover a way to maximize their available space as Bleu Provence did, leaving them unable to continue.

"A lot of time when we see restaurant failures, it's because of overambitious expansion plans," Rosendorf says.

But Bleu Provence has managed to grow with grace, hemming close to their original approach of providing an upscale—but decidedly unfussy—provençal bistro with an almost relentless attention to detail in the restaurant's ambience, service, food and wine.

"It's the way to success so far," Cariot notes. "You never know what's going to happen next. So we never take anything for granted. Zero."

### **Give 'Em What They Want**

It's probably no great surprise that all of our veteran restaurateurs mentioned the importance of excellent customer service, of making sure guests feel welcomed and loved, and of how no compliment or complaint should ever go unacknowledged. But in many ways, customer service is more than just making sure a diner's water glass stays filled; it means actually serving your customers. It means giving them what they want, year after year, and taking your ego out of the equation.

As a chef or restaurant owner, it's easy to want to rush after the flashy new food trend, Tony Ridgway says. "But if all you do is chase trends, that's all you're going to do. Chase trends. You need to be comfortable in your own skin," says Ridgway, who has operated restaurants in Naples for 45 years. With Sukie Honeycutt, Ridgway runs Ridgway Bar & Grill and Tony's Off Third in Old Naples. Their sister properties at Venetian Village are Sukie's Wine Shop at the Village and Bayside Seafood Grill & Bar. The duo notes that they aren't afraid of changing things or trying new recipes, but that it's seldom a good idea to attempt a total makeover when guests already enjoy what's on their plate or in their glass. Ridgway notes that many of the local restaurants that have succeeded through the years may feature different cuisine, but they do have certain commonalities—namely, they feature classically prepared dishes with locally sourced ingredients and a similar price point.

In Southwest Florida, that's what diners want, year after year. Not drama and flair, Ridgway says, just delicious food, prepared properly and served by a caring and conscientious wait staff. "I've always hated sizzle over substance," Ridgway says. "And any restaurant that we've ever been involved with, we've always been more into substance than sizzle." Don't forget the importance of a great partner, either. "We share a similar philosophy," Honeycutt says. "We totally trust and respect each other." "You should have core values that are the same," Ridgway adds. "We agree on the values of the restaurant. We agree on how we treat our people. We treat our people with respect." Rosendorf wholeheartedly affirms that statement. "Even when you have a successful business model, what often causes restaurants to fail is the relationship between the partners," he says.