



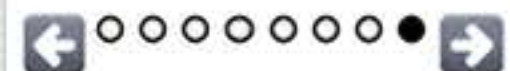
Subscriber Login

Buy Today's Paper

Subscribe Now



DOWNLOAD THESE LATEST EDITIONS



7,890 Visitors
23 Oct 2013 - 24 Oct 2013

Florida Keys Business



Sunday, March 24, 2013

email print

The way we were...

Pat Croce brings back classic version of Half Shell and Turtle Kraals

By MANDY MILES Citizen Staff

Remember when the bar inside Turtle Kraals was a circle, so you could sit facing the water? Pat Croce does.

Remember when TK's Tower Bar was open more than it was closed? Croce does.

And remember when locals flocked to the waterfront watering holes; meeting friends, making new ones and enjoying happy hour prices? Croce does.

He's bringing back the bars' best attributes, while quietly improving other aspects in an understated way.

Croce last week bounded around the restaurants he bought in December, high-fiving hostesses, thanking waiters for picking up straw wrappers and talking excitedly about the changes he's making at Turtle Kraals and the Raw Bar.

The bar at Turtle Kraals once again has seating all the way around it.

"I couldn't understand why you couldn't sit at the bar and look at the water," said Croce, a former owner of the Philadelphia 76ers and creator of a chain of sports therapy centers whose Key West restaurant empire includes TK's, Half Shell, Island Dogs, Charlie Mac's and Rum Barrel.

He has reopened the popular Tower Bar on a regular schedule, replaced the outdoor stage that aggravated nearby neighbors with two bocce courts, approved a brand new Cuban-Caribbean menu that will be unveiled in two weeks and recently opened a new open-air ceviche bar that changes the way people think of the cold fish dish.

The open-air "cevicheria" at Turtle Kraals offers about eight bar stools and an assortment of ceviches, made with yellowtail snapper, hogfish, grouper, diver scallops and sustainable conch. The ceviche bar was created using aged wood reclaimed from the outdoor stage that was recently removed.

"I met with the Key West Bight Neighborhood Association last night, and turned them around," Croce said, referring to the vocal group of residents who live in the Key West Bight area and are often displeased with the amount of noise from bars in the neighborhood.

Croce said he had met with the head of that group, Barbara Bowers, before he bought the businesses and got a list of her concerns.

"Then last night, our General Manager Dave Thibault, gave them all his phone number and email address if the noise ever gets too loud. But it won't," Croce said.

The fish for the ceviche is cured in a marinade that includes more than 20 different ingredients, said Chef Michael Schultz, Croce's director of culinary operations who recently spent eight intense days in Peru perfecting the ceviche recipes while studying under legendary South American Chef Gaston Acurio.

"I thought I knew how to do ceviche -- until Pat sent me to Peru," Schultz said, setting down a "flight," or sample platter, of the colorfully combined dishes that boast rich, complimentary flavors.

Schultz also has planted fresh herbs in four giant terra cotta planters next to the new bocce courts. They'll provide mint for mojitos, along with four different types of basil and fresh tarragon.

Turtle Kraals' new Cuban-Caribbean menu will be introduced in two weeks, although in keeping with his philosophy of keeping the best aspects of each business, Croce is hanging onto the popular Bucket o' Bones, a bucket of spicy ribs.

"Our Cuban mix will feature homemade zucchini pickles, and we're curing and smoking our own ham and mojo pork," Schultz said.

The bocce courts will be surrounded by colorful, Cuban-inspired murals on the fences and across the parking lot at Lands End Marina, the Half Shell Fish Market this week will be open to the public.

"The fish market has always been there, supplying the three restaurants [Turtle Kraals, Half Shell and A B Lobster House]," Croce said. "But it was just for the restaurants. Now, it'll be open to the public for fresh seafood at great prices."

Rick Joyce has been running the fish market for 26 years, and last week was overseeing plans for the new retail display counters.

"He's creating a whole new environment, a whole new energy here," said Shannon Kennedy, marketing director for the Key West restaurants.

"I want people to know I'm not just slapping on a new coat of paint. I'm here to stay," Croce said.

"Pat wants these bars and restaurants to be the way everyone remembers them," Kennedy said, gesturing to the worn, wooden bar that has seen countless drinks poured, sipped -- and spilled -- at the Raw Bar.

A reunion weekend in September also is in the works for Raw Bar alumni, Croce said, acknowledging the motley crew that could assemble happily back in Key West for a wild weekend.

As the new Raw Bar t-shirts declare, "We're bringing the funk back to the Raw Bar."

mmiles@keysnews.com

