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Full steam ahead for Quarterdeck as owner plans fleet of new locations

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To say Paul Flanigan has a lot on his plate would be an understatement.

By early next year he aims to open Quarterdeck restaurants in Palm Beach County and South Beach and roll out two new concept restaurants -- Dive Bar International in Jupiter and Miss Margo's Marina in Fort Lauderdale -- by spring 2006. If that were not enough, he is also working on plans to revitalize Fort Lauderdale beach.

He says the secret behind his success is simple. "It's about doing what you love, serving the food you like and making a personal connection with your customers," said Flanigan, Quarterdeck's managing partner.

And for more than a decade customers have come to know Quarterdeck for its casual atmosphere with saltwater fish tanks, pool tables, patio seating and sliding glass windows.

"I didn't want it to be a seafood place, I wanted it to be a neighborhood place," Flanigan said.

Flanigan bought Quarterdeck on Cordova Road in Fort Lauderdale 20 years ago in a bankruptcy sale from Flanigan's Enterprises Inc., owned by his uncle, Joe Flanigan. Back then it was still Flanigan's, but locals knew it as Quarterdeck. He broke with Flanigan's in 1995, but kept the Quarterdeck name. He considers Flanigan's a "formidable competitor," but unlike many restaurants, Quarterdeck owns the real estate to all of its locations.

"Looking back we never talked about the possibility that we would not succeed," said Frank Zaffere, director of operations. "The secret is to not get a corporate mentality."

And that means including their cell-phone numbers on menus and promoting from within. "All of our managing partners started at the lowest and I think most important levels," Zaffere added.

Average sales of the current six Quarterdeck locations were at \$19 million this year, and Flanigan anticipates that number will increase to \$27 million once the new locations open. The South Beach Quarterdeck will be located in the former Historic Irish House Pub on Alton Road.

"South Beach does not have a concept like this," said Ben Wegman, whose family has owned and operated the Irish Pub since 1977. "Locals will have a place to go that does not charge Lincoln Road prices."

Though he has no development strategy, Flanigan wants to continue growing and next year that growth will mean the debut of Dive Bar and Miss Margo's.

Located on Sawfish Bay, Flanigan envisions Dive Bar as a place where customers, if they come by boat,

can dock and dine. A dive shop will be attached to the restaurant where diners can learn about diving.

Miss Margo's, named after his wife, will be located "kitty-corner" to Quarterdeck on Las Olas Boulevard and will feature a piano bar with room for seating. The attached marina will include new docks, sea walls and landscaping.

The restaurant will be the beginning of a larger concept to revamp Fort Lauderdale beach. A few years ago, while walking on the beach with his wife, he noticed that the beach was not flourishing and "took it as his personal goal" to change that, said Flanigan.

He contracted Ed Stone & Associates, which designed the landscape for the Atlantis Resort hotel in the Bahamas, to design Miss Margo's and a plan for the beach. The plan includes a waterway walking path that encircles the beach, cleaning up vacant, unkempt lots and bringing in new businesses such as Cold Stone Creamery and Betty's Soul Food & BBQ.

"The city and I have to start this. It should be like Duval Street in Key West," he said. "Once that happens everyone will follow suit."

These days Flanigan makes it a point to be home for dinner with his wife of 22 years. For the last six years his wife has been battling metastatic breast cancer. His wife, now with Stage 4 cancer, keeps him grounded.

"She always says, `I am not dying, I am living every day,'" he said. And this is what he plans to do as well.

After Hurricane Wilma, the current Quarterdeck restaurants closed 2 to 10 days and lost \$400,000 in sales and \$60,000 in food inventory. Construction on the new sites was delayed two weeks, and more delays are anticipated for the new concept restaurants as contractors deal with hurricane repairs to other businesses.

"That's OK with me," said Flanigan, who said the restaurants would open on schedule. "Let's get all the existing homes and businesses repaired before we start new ones."

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