

PRIME TIME

for a New Venture

by allison wildermuth



RESTAURATEUR MICHAEL BOHLSEN EXTENDS HIS REACH WITH A NEW CATERING BUSINESS IN HUNTINGTON

If you're a well-established, well-regarded restaurateur on Long Island with several popular restaurants under your belt, what do you do for an encore?

Well, if you're Michael Bohlsen, owner of such hot spots as Prime in Huntington, Tellers in Islip, and Monsoon in Babylon, you edge a little out of your comfort zone and envision a catering enterprise designed to turn the typical catering business on its ear.

In June, Bohlsen plans to open Harbor Club at Prime in Huntington, a custom-tailored, high-end event space that he considers more of a boutique celebration venue than just another place to host a wedding, baby shower or bar mitzvah. "What we're trying to do next door is a little different from what people are used to," said Bohlsen in a recent interview at Prime, which is situated adjacent to Harbor Club at Prime along Huntington Harbor. "When you come to a party here, it will feel like going to a restaurant."

Providing that restaurant-like experience is vital to Bohlsen, who could easily list what he doesn't like about the typical catering hall event. "You wait in line for a drink. It takes you eight minutes to get to the front of the line. And when you get there, the bartender doesn't have the booze

you like. Or you get up there and the bar is closed. Or you just start dancing and having a good time and then they put your food on the table. Or your fork is dirty and when you tell the waiter about it he looks at you as though it's not his job to do anything about it. "We're going to combat these things."

Bohlsen promises parties with an open bar, knowledgeable bartenders, an extensive booze selection and no waiting. He promises that when you're sitting at your table and engrossed in conversation, your glass will be refilled without fuss by a server who knows exactly what you want. The menu will also be unique in that it will feature "the great-



est hits" from restaurants in the Bohlsen Restaurant Group, which, in addition to Prime: An American Kitchen and Bar, Tellers Chophouse and Monsoon Asian Kitchen and Lounge, include Verace True Italian in Islip, H2O Seafood Grill in Smithtown and Beachtree Café in East Islip. So if you happen to love the branzino at Verace, the Beef Wellington at Tellers or the Chilean sea bass at Prime, Bohlsen said, "you'll be able to get that exact dish" at Harbor Club. The same thing goes for the bar, where "you're going to get a real drink."

"We want our guests to feel just as welcome, just as satisfied, as they do here."

The 13,000 square-foot space includes a main banquet room and a lounge-like cocktail area, a terrace for cocktails or ceremonies, and a spacious bridal suite. Floor-to-ceiling windows allow for maximum water views. The interior features couture-style details in monochromatic tones of white, silver and graphite. Guests will step through a grand double wood door entrance onto a plush geometric-patterned carpet leading to espresso wood floors. The walls, meanwhile, are lined with white, wave-patterned plaster, etched glass and reflective fabrics. A state-of-the-art audio and visual system will bring high-quality sound and lighting effects to the space and evenly distribute the sound to ensure that everyone is happy, "including Aunt Sophie sitting in the corner."

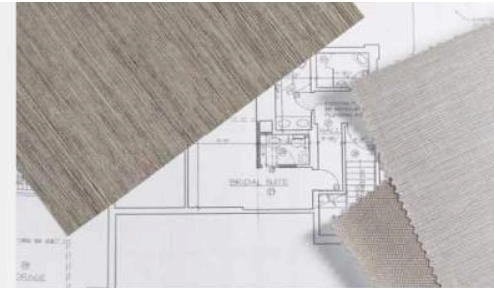
The space, designed by James Wood, who created other restaurant interiors in the Bohlsen Restaurant Group, will be "clean, contemporary, kind of Giorgio Armani-esque," Bohlsen said. It will serve as a "blank canvas" onto which a party host can project anything he or she wants. Linens and flowers will be customized for each affair and a party planner will be available for anyone who wants or needs extra help with party details. Moreover, events will be held one at a time, so that "when we host a party, everyone in the building will focus on the party," rather than bring prospective customers on a tour to see the space. A bride doesn't want to see another woman sizing up her space wearing shorts and flip flops, Bohlsen pointed out.

The timing of this new venture was serendipitous, according to Bohlsen, whose brother, Kurt Bohlsen, is also instrumental in the third-generation family business, actively managing the numerous properties, building and acquiring new businesses, and overseeing construction and physical improvements. The Bohlsen Restaurant Group owns Prime; when the property next door—the catering venue called Harbor Club became available last fall, the brothers decided to acquire it. After much debate, they opted to keep the name as it is an appropriate name for a waterfront spot, Bohlsen said, and he is committed to redefining guests' experience there.

"Harbor Club, when it premiered almost 30 years ago, was a fine example of the tastes of its time," Bohlsen said. "While the water view is timeless, the decor and functionality of the space were thirsty for modernization. We removed every last vestige of the past that met the eye. It is a real transformation with a clean, contemporary 21st century



James Wood with Michael and Kurt Bohlsen



and metropolitan look including the finest finishes inside and out." The difference in the end product, Bohlsen promises, is "like night and day. If you have ever been inside one of our venues, whether it was once a Main Street bank like with Monsoon or Tellers, or our first waterfront property as at Prime, you will know what I mean."

When asked to give a ballpark estimate of the size of his investment in the new business, he merely smiled and said "a lot!" He acknowledged the "big risk" he is undertaking, yet he said he couldn't resist the opportunity to build on his existing business. "It's a natural extension for us," he said. "We're new to the business. We have a lot to learn," he continued. "We're smart enough to know what we don't know but dumb enough to do it anyway."

Bohlsen has a strategy in place. He is hiring people without a lot of catering experience because he does not want to replicate what is done everywhere else. At the same time, both the chef and the general manager at Prime will be involved in both businesses (though a separate general manager will be brought in at Harbor Club at Prime), and the banquet coordinator who handles events in the other restaurants will also lend her expertise.

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And of course Bohlsen knows a thing or two about customer service and the restaurant business. When Prime opened in 2006, a review in *The New York Times* declared, "Prime joins a mere handful of top-notch waterfront restaurants." A year later the same gave Tellers, which opened in 1999, a "very good" rating. Prime and Tellers were both year-on-year winners of Wine Spectator Best Award of Excellence; Prime has won the International Star Diamond Award from the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences; Bohlsen restaurants score in the top 20s consistently with Zagat Survey participants; and chefs across the Bohlsen Restaurant Group have been James Beard Foundation invitees. Bohlsen is proud to point out that one of the keys to his success is his staff, among which there is very little turnover. And, he added, "I know some things intrinsically, and I have a high degree of organization and attention to detail."

Bohlsen began selling the space for private affairs in February with its anticipated renovation expected to be complete and open for business come June 2013. The goal over the summer is to gradually shift some of the events that currently take place at Prime over to Harbor Club at Prime. Otherwise, Bohlsen hopes and expects that positive word of mouth will draw interest and attention to the space. "Our intention is to have an exquisite [venue] that sells itself," he said.

Bohlsen knows that in the restaurant business, you're only as good as the meal you serve that night. "What kind of job we do will define who we are and how people will perceive us," he said. "We want to create a venue that has genuine warmth to it."

Opening a food-related business on Long Island can be tough, Bohlsen admitted. Unlike a hot restaurant that can catch on almost immediately in New York City, a Long Island eatery takes longer to build a following. "It takes a lot of fortitude and patience to stick to it for a few years, but we're used to it, we understand that and we're confident that we can make that happen at Harbor Club." |