

RESTAURANTS by Mark Gordon | Managing Editor

Growin' Gecko's

Restaurants are closing on the Gulf Coast at a breakneck pace. A pair of longtime restaurateurs is trying to buck the trend.

Flat is the new growth.

That's the phrase of the day in restaurant industry, with closings and cutbacks being the most popular menu items over the past year as economic hard times linger on the Gulf Coast. From Tampa to Naples, the list of restaurants that have shuttered is long and diverse, including several Mel's Diners in Lee, Manatee and Sarasota counties; national chains such as Lone Star Steakhouse & Saloon, which had heavy concentrations in the Tampa and St. Petersburg markets; and popular independents, such as El Habanero in downtown Sarasota and Harold's on Bay in Fort Myers.

But a small restaurant group in Sarasota, run by two friends that have been in the business together since they were teenagers, is playing contrarian to the trend. Mike Gowan, 50, and Mike Quillen, 49, owners of Geckos' Grill & Pub, are expanding, not shrinking. The owners plan to spend more than \$700,000 this summer to renovate two restaurants.

Gowan and Quillen own four Gecko's in Sarasota and Manatee counties, as well as three bars in Sarasota. Revenues grew about 10% a year and passed \$10 million with the 2006 opening of the chain's newest and most upscale store, on Clark Road in Sarasota County. The duo opened their first Gecko's in 1992.

But the growth slowed to about zero last year, as customers stopped coming in as often and those who did began to order fewer wings and burgers. "The industry is down

20%," says Gowan, "so far for us to be flat, we are pretty excited about that."

So excited the owners are moving ahead with the expansion plan. The store undergoing the biggest renovation will be the one on State road 70, about a mile west of Interstate 75. That restaurant will be closed for most of July and August, and potential changes include expanding the kitchen and changing the entire décor, to take it from its current old-school style '70s pub feel to a more modern sports bar and family theme.

There are other renovation plans in the works, on a smaller scale, for the Gecko's in the Landings, a few miles south of Downtown Sarasota. That restaurant will close for a few days later this summer.

Quillen and Gowan have slowed down a bigger expansion plan to open new restaurants. A few years ago, the owners were considering moving into the Tampa market, possibly in Brandon, as well as the Fort Myers-Naples area.

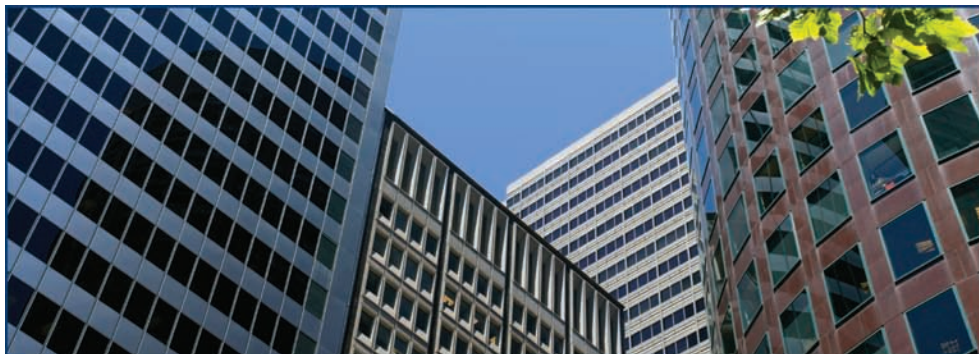
They would still like to do that someday, but for now they are being patient. They passed on a recent opportunity in Venice to build their first Gecko's from the ground up, saying the land price was too high to make it work.

Still, the owners are confident the current expansion will pay off, despite the economic climate. They are financing the projects through several bank loans.

"We believe in this economy," says Quillen. "We believe things will eventually sort themselves out."



File photo
Mike Quillen, left, and Mike Gowan have owned the Gecko's Grill and Pub restaurant chain since opening their first one in Sarasota in 1992. The owners are planning to spend more than \$700,000 on renovating two restaurants this summer.



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