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North County restaurants celebrate longevity

By PAM KRAGEN - pkragen@nctimes.com | Thursday, May 14, 2009 9:48 AM PDT ∞

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Going by restaurant industry statistics, the failure rate for restaurants in America is 60 percent after three to five years. So for a restaurant to make it to the 10-year mark, that's special; to the 25-year mark, unusual, and the 40-year mark, amazing.

Three North County restaurants and chains are marking milestone anniversaries over the next few weeks. Rockin' Baja Coastal Cantina in Oceanside is celebrating 25 years, La Bonne Bouffe in Encinitas is turning 26, and The Brigantine, with locations in Del Mar and Escondido, is 40. Owners of all three restaurants say their secret to longevity is simple — serve unique, high-quality food, offer a good value for the dollar and be able to adapt quickly to changes in the marketplace.

Here's a look at local restaurants celebrating anniversaries and the secrets to their success.



Susan and Rick DiRienzo, owners of Rockin' Baja Coastal Cantina at their Oceanside Harbor restaurant.

Rockin' Baja Coastal Cantina

Founded: 1983

Owners: Rick & Susan DiRienzo of Poway

Locations: Oceanside Harbor, Old Town San Diego, Gaslamp Quarter, Newport Beach (franchises in Montclair, La Quinta and Huntington Beach)

Web: www.rockinbaja.com



Mike and Barbara Morton, foreground, co-founders of The Brigantine restaurant chain, surrounded by their children, who

History: When he was a boy in the '60s, Rick DiRienzo would travel to Mexico with his family and eat Baja-style lobster feasts. Then in 1982, he asked his father whether he could try serving these lobster dinners (with tortillas, refried beans and rice) one night a week at the family's Bonita Store Restaurant. By week two, the place had a 90-minute wait. Founded in 1983 as the Puerto Nuevo Lobster House, and later renamed Rockin' Baja Coastal Cantina, the company has grown to include four local restaurants and three franchises.

The chain is known for its Baja Bucket, a tin bucket filled with grilled carne asada, chicken, Baja shrimp and slipper lobster tails (flash-fried in the shell), served with unlimited sides, chips and salsa, which range from \$19 to \$29 per person.

It hasn't always been smooth sailing for Rockin' Baja, which DiRienzo runs with his wife, Susan. The Oceanside Harbor outlet lost its lease in Oceanside for several years in the early '90s; a San Marcos outlet was forced to close; and the company's planned expansion of 43 franchises nationwide has been put on hold until the economy rebounds. But DiRienzo said his company has survived through three economic downturns because of three factors.

"We have a very unique product that nobody else can or knows how to do, we give a good amount of product for the price and we constantly revamp our menu to keep fresh," DiRienzo said.

One way the company responded to the current recession was introducing larger burritos and a new line of Outrageous Tacos, jumbo-sized soft tacos filled with mahi mahi, shrimp, carnitas, chorizo and lobster, with names like Dirty Tacos, Angry Tacos and The Boss.

"We could see this recession coming two years ago, so we decided to find something new to spice up our menu. We took our chefs to Mexico in a motor home to find the best tacos we could and bring those ideas back with us. They've been a big hit because you get a lot for your money, and you won't find tacos like this anywhere else," DiRienzo said.

DiRienzo said the restaurant business is tough, but he enjoys it, and he can often be found hanging out at the Oceanside Harbor outlet, which he calls his favorite location. "This place represents everything we're about --- a fun, beachy place to bring the family and have a good time and great food."



La Bonne Bouffe owner Dino Dimitriou, left, with the restaurant's chef of 24 years, Julio Solono. (Photo by Pam Kragen)

The Brigantine

Founded: 1969

Owners: Mike and Barbara Morton of Point Loma

Locations: Escondido, Del Mar, Poway, Shelter Island, Coronado, La Mesa and Eastlake (plus seven other restaurants and shops)

Web: www.brigantine.com

Unique Visitors: 235,900

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