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Crab House one of a kind



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Owner's timber adds 'crab shack' atmosphere

PUNTA GORDA -- The concept called for creating a restaurant that stands out on Punta Gorda's skyline, yet still has the ambience of an old Florida crab shack.

Fortunately for the owners of the Laishley Crab House restaurant and bar, which is set to hold its "soft opening" Wednesday, one of their partners could draw upon his personal experience building log houses in the mountains of eastern Tennessee -- and his personal cache of hardwood timber.

To get started, Ron Evans of Smuggler's Enterprises, teamed up with fellow partner Bruce Laishley to buy a portable sawmill. They traveled to Evans' property in Tennessee.

The partners and their crew then sawed up some 100 logs that Evans had left over from several cabin-building projects. They trucked it back to Florida, load after load, with pickups and goose-neck trailers.

Local carpenters -- the partners in the Crab House insisted on hiring only local contractors -- then cut, shaved, planed, carved and nailed the wood to create a one-of-kind, hand-hewn interior.

At least a dozen types of wood, including black walnut, red oak and cedar, were used to shingle the walls and build the booths and bars.

Several logs were peeled of bark and used whole to create pillars and beams. Most of those logs were also carved like totem poles with the reliefs of native fish, animals and birds.

Evans said the only blueprint is the one that would appear in his mind as he'd walk through the empty shell.

"We wanted people to feel the warmth of something casual and different," said Evans. "Instead of walking into a cavernous room, you're walking into a fish house, like those that were here around the turn of the century."

Evans and Laishley are among a half-dozen partners in two separate companies who worked together to establish the Laishley Crab House.

The partnership Marina Park LLC owns the 32,000-square-foot building. Smugglers, which also owns Harpoon Harry's at Fishermen's Village, is renting the second floor for the restaurant. The first floor will be reserved for commercial shops, according to Marina Park partner Chris Evans, Ron's son.

"It's awesome," said local resident Gussie Baker after a recent tour. "I think when people walk in here they're going to be amazed."

Patrons will enter through a lobby to climb a staircase of heavy planks spiraling up around an elevator shaft encased in stone and wood. Alligators and sharks have been carved into the elevator's mantle.

That's just the entrance.

At the top of the stairs, one passes through a set of double doors to a saloon area where a giant crab hangs from a skylight over a central bar.

Chris Evans gets credit for the idea of mounting the giant crab, according to Rick Treworgy, a partner in both Marina Park and Smugglers. He said Chris searched the Internet to locate the crab which was made by a Florida company out of fiberglass.

Treworgy has also left an indelible mark on the restaurant's interior.

Located off the main bar on a mezzanine is a smaller bar that wraps around a 1931 Chevrolet flatbed truck.

Treworgy, owner of the Muscle Car City museum, provided the truck and is overseeing its conversion into a bartenders' galley.

Bottles of liquor will be displayed where the engine used to be. Beer taps will emerge from the grill. Cash registers will be installed in the cab windows. Cold beverage machines will be mounted in the bed, Treworgy said.

On the doors, the partners are working to paint a logo for "Treworgy Distillery," Treworgy said.

Dining areas in the 500-plus seat restaurant include wooden booths set around the central bar and formal tables on a veranda overlooking the Laishley Park Marina. Another dining room could be reserved for special events such as wedding receptions.

Treworgy said he's thrilled with the way the interior came to be dominated by wood.

"Every one of these poles has a different carving to it," he said, as he pointed out eagles, fish, dolphin and ferns in the woodwork.

Ron Evans had previously hired the carver, Randi Boni of Cocke County, Tenn., to carve logs at a Tennessee cabin. So, at Ron's suggestion, the Crab House partners commissioned Boni to carve wildlife into the Crab House.

"This guy's traveled all around the world," said Treworgy. "You can take any tree, tell him what you want to see in it, and he'll carve it."

The menu will range from locally caught blue crab to Alaskan king crab to be flown in daily from Dutch Harbor. A sushi chef will also prepare fresh, raw seafood delights.

"It's Florida cuisine with a touch of New England," said head chef Rodney Monroig. "We're going to have our own seasonings and flavors."

Establishing a restaurant at the city's marina has been a goal since the city evicted tenants of the former Municipal Mobile Home Park to clear the way for redevelopment more than 20 years ago.

A few years ago, Chris Evans said he struck up a conversation about redevelopment progress with former City Councilwoman Marilyn Smith-Mooney. He recalled Smith-Mooney saying, "Every marina needs a restaurant."

Evans said he subsequently ran into Bruce Laishley at a redfish tournament and mentioned Smith-Mooney's comment. The idea for the Crab House took hold.

"The thing that makes this unique is that everybody's creativity went into it," Chris Evans said.

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