



Collier Merrill: Great Southern Restaurant Group

By Camron Becker

The Great Southern Restaurant Group of Pensacola, Inc. (GSRG), manages the Fish House and the Atlas Oyster House in downtown Pensacola, Florida, on a marina overlooking Pensacola Bay. Begun in 1998 by famed Panhandle businessman Collier Merrill, his brothers Will and Burney and renowned Pensacola chef Jim Shirley, the restaurants of GSRG are steeped in Southern tradition, with a flair for unique, complementing flavors. GSRG is a division of Merrill Land Company. Merrill Land has primary interest in real estate developments along the Gulf coast region with offices in Pensacola and Gulf Shores, Alabama.

Investors and developers in a multitude of projects, Collier Merrill says that he and his brothers saw a unique opportunity to enter the restaurant business by partnering with talented chef, Jim Shirley, to create the two concepts both located in downtown Pensacola's historic district on the water. "We knew that it would be a good fit in the community, helping tourism, as well as giving our friends and family a beautiful place to dine and enjoy the bountiful Gulf seafood that our area has to offer."

Local, fresh ingredients are a key to the success of Chef Shirley's creative dishes like Grits à Ya Ya, which include local, stone-ground grits infused with sautéed spinach, portobello mushrooms, garlic, cream, applewood-smoked bacon, smoked Gouda cheese, and grilled shrimp. The Fish House is more of a fine-dining experience, while the Atlas Oyster House is more casual. Both restaurants feature fresh-off-the-dock local seafood.

Fresh, creative food, beautiful surroundings and a focus on the customer keep the restaurants on the top of the list of area favorites. Merrill says he can not stress enough to his employees that "the customer is always right." And his philosophy regarding business is to always have honesty and integrity in the forefront of all of his endeavors. Having his brothers involved in all of the different business opportunities helps. They share the same priorities and attitude about what makes a business work. Says Merrill, "We always work together toward success in all of our endeavors."

Asked what he is most proud of among his accomplishments, Merrill is modest and gives great credit to his employees, "There are many moments that I am proud of. I am fortunate to have an exceptional team of dedicated employees. They all work hard to create success in many areas. I would say that the proud moments that I am fortunate enough to look back on, as well as anticipate, are products of the talented people around me."

Despite amazing success and recognition, life on the Gulf Coast presents its own challenges, among them, dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan. “We have a large family of employees, so naturally we were concerned with locating them and assuring their safety. Being near the water like we are, caused quite severe damage to both restaurants. Yet we were able to get the Atlas up and running within three days—with the community’s help. It was a real blessing to be able to keep our people employed as well as opening the restaurant’s doors so that people had a familiar place to go, meet their friends, and relax from the area-wide cleanup.”

True to his nature, Merrill took the devastation of Hurricane Ivan and turned it into an opportunity to better his restaurants. “Hurricane Ivan affected everyone along the Gulf Coast, and we were particularly concerned about the communities’ well-being. We put forth a great effort to have my restaurants up and running to offer those affected in the area a serene place to join family and friends. We were able to open Atlas Oyster House almost immediately.

The Fish House was more severely damaged and took several months to repair; however, we took this opportunity to improve the restaurant by creating a more efficient kitchen with a better constructional arrangement for service and changed the décor to create an atmosphere favorable to fine dining. The Fish House restaurant now offers two saltwater aquariums with museum-quality artificial coral. The largest aquarium, a 1,300 gallon tank, exhibits exquisite Moon Fish, a Zebra Moray Eel, and other exotic sea life.

More recently, we’ve added the Deck Bar, a separate lower-level waterfront entertainment area that includes a central bar, dining tables, dance area, and a stage for live entertainment. The new 3,500-square-foot addendum complements the existing upper-level 3,400-square-foot deck the Fish House shares with its sister restaurant, Atlas Oyster House. We are excited to be able to offer our guests a great place to enjoy dining and dancing to the tunes of fine regional and local bands right on Pensacola Bay. The Deck Bar is opened in March, and will be a welcome addition to nightlife in downtown Pensacola.”

GSRG has been a member of the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association since 1999 and says an admiration for CEO, Carol Dover partly drove his desire for involvement. “I am impressed by Carol Dover’s passion and leadership for the association. We have served together on past boards, so when we became involved in restaurants, I knew that joining under her leadership would be beneficial for our company. I appreciate her drive and determination for the industry as a whole.” He sees the greatest benefit of a strong trade association as creating the opportunity for this industry to work together to bring about positive change while providing education and support for its members.

Merrill’s involvement extends far beyond the FRLA. He is actively involved in the United Way “because of the worldwide effort it makes to better this country and its individual communities.” As with his interest in educating the hospitality industry, he is similarly dedicated to promoting Florida’s pursuit of the betterment of higher education for all students. Appointed by Governor Jeb Bush, he served on the state’s board of regents for a number of years, and currently serves on the University of West Florida’s Board of Trustees. An often-recognized philanthropist, Merrill is involved with Sacred Heart Health System in Pensacola, as well as many other local cultural and non-profit organizations.

Though he would never boast it, those who know Collier Merrill well also know that he is a major player in Florida’s political arena. Partner and Chef, Jim Shirley, an FRLA Board Member, described his initiation into the world of Mr.

Merrill. “My first mission from Collier was for me, with help from his brother Will, to whomp up grits for 2000 people at a Jeb Bush political rally in the park next door. Then he recruited Congressman Joe Scarborough and his band, Regular Joe, to be our house musicians. From then on he has led a great crew of entertainers, politicians, and pundits to my tables.

Collier is a bit modest when talking about his commitment to the community. For example, he neglected to mention that he’s a former president of the Florida Arts Council, Pensacola Museum of Art, and the American Cancer Society; a member of the state board of trustees for the university system and a current member of the University of West Florida board of trustees.

He’s a major supporter of the American Heart Association and American Lung Association, Pensacola Little Theatre, Pensacola Children’s Chorus, Public Broadcasting, Children’s Home Society, Gulf Coast Kid’s House, Autism Society, and Sacred Heart Children’s Hospital. A true philanthropist, J. Collier Merrill is good man to have on your side.”

Fortunately for FRLA, we can count him as an ally. Fortunately for Pensacola, they can call him a restaurateur, a philanthropist, a political leader and a very talented businessman.