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Manhattan Beach People



Rock'nFish's Mike Zislis. Photo by Kevin Cody

Dine 'n inn

by Richard Foss

Some restaurateurs around Los Angeles keep a distance between themselves and their customers. Then there's Mike Zislis of Rock'nFish.

"When I'm here, which is most of the time, I go from table to table and I talk to everybody. My goal is every night to talk to half of the tables. When there's a line to be seated, it seems like everybody who comes in says to the staff, 'I know Mike.' They're probably telling the truth. Blake, the bar manager, printed up 250 buttons that say, 'I Know Mike,' and has been giving them out."

That personal relationship with customers is one of the elements that has made Rock'nFish a local institution despite being only four years old. Zislis' bonhomie makes him a natural for the hospitality industry, and also his newest venture.

Zislis is at the helm of a group of investors who are opening the hotel in the downtown Manhattan Metlox development.

All the same, the hospitality industry was far from his mind when he started looking at a career.

"I grew up in Palos Verdes and attended Rolling Hills High before going to USC and

Rock'nFish's Mike Zislis may soon have a nearby hotel for his out of town guests

studying economics. My mentor was Arthur Laffer [inventor of the Laffer curve, which argues that lowering taxes increases government revenue by stimulating the economy]. I ended up working for him for a couple years."

That career was derailed when Zislis' hobby became a business.

"I started brewing beer at home when I was 13 years old as a science experiment. It became legal in California the year before, and I remember I saw an ad for a home brewing kit while I was reading Popular Science at my orthodontist's office. It was \$9.95, and hey, how could I resist? By the time I got to college, I was actually pretty good at it.

"When I was at USC brewpubs became legal. I dropped out of USC, and started a brewery construction company called Bohemian Brewing, building brewpubs all over the place. One year I built 48 brewpubs in places like Japan, China, Croatia, and France."

In the midst of that early boom in brewpubs, he and his brother David decided to open their own establishment in Manhattan Beach. Home brewing and building pubs for other people had taught him a lot, but not all the things he needed to know.

"When we started Manhattan Beach Brewing, the volume of beer was amazing. A homebrew batch was five pounds of malt, a brewpub batch was 500 pounds. Just to get the malt into the vat is a workout. Recipes for beer don't scale up exactly, so I needed to adjust everything.

"When we first opened, the beer was really strong, maybe eight per cent alcohol. Everybody was drunk. We changed the recipe very quickly. We opened on July Fourth weekend for the big volleyball tournament. At times there was an hour wait to get in. Now we know when you open a restaurant, you should open during a slow month."

Bohemian Brewing collapsed when the market for new brewpubs became saturated and demand dropped precipitously.

"The year after I built 48 there were 24, the next year 12, and the year after that the company went under. That was the lowest period of my life, about five years ago. I went from being

an executive with a booming company to just sitting at home with nothing going on. That's when I noticed that the property that had been the old Hibachi restaurant had become available. I put together a business plan and raised half million bucks and built Rock'nFish."

"I started out with the name Rockfish. I knew the name was taken by a company in Texas, but you can't trademark the name of an animal by itself, without a logo. They had a tuna that was nothing like our logo.

"Right about the time I was opening they sold their company to Brinker International, one of the largest restaurant chains in America. Their lawyer showed up, and it wasn't a fight that I could win because they were going to throw every lawyer in the world at me.

"I came up with the name Rock'nFish because the "n" fit on the signs I had already hung on the wall. We were out of time and out of money, and we had to open. I called the neon sign company and they made a little 'n' for me and added it to the signs, and we were open. The name really bothered my brother and me. We didn't like Rock'nFish. Now I wouldn't call the place anything else because it's such a rockin' place. It's packed every night."

"During the success of the brewpub company, David and I did a lot of traveling, to Chicago, New York, New Orleans, all these cities with great restaurants. Then we came back to the South Bay, and there just wasn't a great, classic restaurant. There were some good ones here, but nothing that reminded me of a Chicago steakhouse like Gibson's or the Tadich Grill in San Francisco. You get a shrimp and crab Louie at Tadich's for the very first time and you just know that this is how shrimp and crab Louie are supposed to taste. You go to Acme Oyster House and get the gumbo or the po-boy, and that's how they're supposed to taste.

"Rock'nFish worked better than I dared hope. About 60 percent of my guests are from Manhattan Beach, and some come back two or three nights a week, which I never expected. In my business plan I thought this would be a once a month place."

Though Rock'nFish is very much a locals' hangout, the guests at his new project will be from out of town.

"The Metlox project has been going on for five years, and for most of that time I wasn't following it very closely. I started out talking with developer Jonathan that's why I've hired the management company to handle all of that for me. That ensures its success. Talkin about putting in a restaurant. During one of our conversations I learned that the people who had committed to putting in a hotel had backed out. They wanted to have a three-story, 60-room hotel, and the city limited was limiting it to 40 rooms. They wanted 60 because when you're a big corporation, the threshold to pay the onsite management and the corporate management is 50 rooms. A local operator doesn't need that many rooms to make a profit, so I got interested. I don't know a lot about the hotel business, but I know customer service. So I raised three of the six million dollars and put it in escrow, and I signed a lease for the hotel. I've hired a management company that runs ten boutique hotels, and they'll do what they do best and I'll do what I do best."

"We have a beautiful town, the nicest beach in the South Bay, and what do we have for hotels? A couple of motels at each end of town and some corporate places on Pacific Coast Highway. And while they're all good at what they do, none of them are within walking distance of the best we have to offer. There will never be an opportunity to do this again — this is the last piece of open space in the downtown. I was lucky enough to sign a lease with the developer and now the architects are drawing up plans and the designers are designing it. A lot of us have visitors in town, and this way our friends can stay not only close to us, but close to the beach and downtown shops and restaurants. They can park their cars and walk, the way that we do."

Zislis won't be opening the restaurant adjacent to his hotel, which he considers a blessing.

"Trying to run two restaurants the way my brother and I do, with all the personal service, would be really difficult. With just the hotel I can make sure everything's right and the rooms are clean in the mornings, and still work at the restaurant. That's why I've hired a management company for hotel."

"When I opened Rock'nFish I hired Bill Goldblum, the best consultant there is. I believe in surrounding myself with great people, it makes me look that much better. The other half of being an owner is knowing how to motivate your staff. I'm a cheerleader, I'm a coach. Ask anybody who works here what it's like to work for Mike Zislis, and I hope they'll say it's a great experience." MP