



Cohn Restaurant Group

Operators take it one restaurant at a time as they beef up their 'family' of widely varied concepts with upscale additions in California and Hawaii

■ BY LISA JENNINGS

David Cohn claims there was no "master plan" in developing the 10 unique restaurants and one nightclub within the Cohn Restaurant Group "family."

All but one restaurant is in the San Diego area, and all are very different concepts, from the 1950s-themed Corvette Diner with dancing servers in bouffant hairdos, to the recently opened white-tablecloth Island Prime with stunning bayside views of downtown San Diego and Coronado Island. Despite their differences, however, all Cohn restaurants have common threads of service, style and values.

"We just wanted to do interesting restaurants," says Cohn, the San Diego-based company's president and founder along with his wife, Lesley Cohn. "Opportunities just came up. We've taken it a decision at a time and a year at a time."

And the opportunities, it seems, keep coming. Cohn is considering further expansion into Hawaii, where the group was involved with the development of Pineapple Grill last year in the posh Kapalua Resort on the island of Maui. It was the company's first dining spot outside the San Diego area.

In addition, after more than 20 years of creating individual concepts, David Cohn is considering the multiplication of one of the group's San Diego restaurants: the Gaslamp Strip Club, a concept specializing in steak rather than the activity. The group is currently looking for locations for a second unit in the Los Angeles area.

David Cohn prefers to refer to the group as a "family" of restaurants, with 828 employees and a projected \$40 million in revenues in 2006.

Those outside the family, however, see the Cohns as dominant players in San Diego's rapidly growing restaurant scene.

"David Cohn is the Rich Melman of San Diego," says consultant Randall Hiatt, president of Fessel International in Costa Mesa, Calif.

No other multiconcept operator in San Diego offers as diverse a range of restaurants, from "diners, to Mexican, to steakhouses, to Cajun, to really nice restaurants in Balboa Park," Hiatt says. "And it

has all grown very organically."

The Cohns' restaurant career began in 1982, when the couple first opened a small San Diego eatery called Rory's offering hot dogs, burgers and frozen yogurt.

David Cohn, who is originally from the Midwest, where his family was in the grocery business, already was involved with his brothers in several retail meat markets specializing in corn-fed Iowa beef around town. When a 1,200-square-foot restaurant space opened in a strip mall that housed one of the markets, the Cohns decided to try something new.

Rory's lasted for 10 years, but the Cohns didn't stop there. Formally creating the restaurant group in 1986, the fol-



The Cohn Restaurant Group's concepts include Kemo Sabe, above, and Island Prime, left, which both are in the San Diego area.

which was once the city's red-light district.

With the recent construction of a new downtown ballpark nearby, the Gaslamp Quarter is now one of San Diego's hottest restaurant neighborhoods, with an estimated 80 to 90 eateries within 16 blocks.

At the time, however, the quarter was known mostly for sleepy Italian restaurants that catered to downtown workers and conventioners. So the Cohns set up focus groups to ask those who worked and played in the area what they wanted as an alternative.

Their answer was Southwestern cuisine, and Dakota Grill was born — though the menu has evolved over the years to offer broader American fare. There, the per-person check average is about \$39.

Three years later, the Cohns focused on the Hillcrest area of San Diego, another up-and-coming neighborhood at the time, with plans to develop Kemo Sabe, an Asian-meets-Southwestern casual-dining spot. But while they were working on the project, the Cohns often stopped to

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lowing year the Cohns launched the family-friendly Corvette Diner, with a 1950s theme, dancing servers and a DJ. It is now the most affordable Cohn group venue, with a per-person check average of \$14.

At the time, it was the height of the "eatertainment" trend, David Cohn says, "but we were careful not to over-theme it. We really emphasized the food and service, and not just gimmicky dining. And we're still here."

The group later launched other 1950s-themed restaurants, including the now-

defunct Galaxy Grill, which they operated for 10 years in San Diego's Horton Plaza shopping center, and the T-Bird Diner in Escondido, which operated for six years before the Cohns sold the restaurant in 1995.

T-Bird Diner failed in what was then up-and-coming Escondido in part because "we went in too soon," Cohn says.

The group has a long history of targeting urban neighborhoods on the cutting edge of revival. For example, in 1992 the Cohns opened the upscale-casual Dakota Grill in the historic Gaslamp Quarter,

MULTICONCEPT GROWTH COMPANIES

Cohn Restaurant Group

AT A GLANCE

COMPANY: Cohn Restaurant Group**HEADQUARTERS:** San Diego**YEAR FOUNDED:** 1986**NUMBER OF UNITS:** 10 restaurants, one nightclub**CONCEPTS:** Blue Point Coastal Cuisine, fine dining; Corvette Diner, casual; Dakota Grill, upscale casual; Indigo Grill, upscale casual; Island Prime and C Level, fine-dining dinnerhouse and casual lounge; Kemo Sabe, upscale casual; Mister Tiki Mai Tai Lounge, casual; Pineapple Grill at Kapalua Resort, upscale casual; Gaslamp Strip Club, upscale casual; The Prado at Balboa Park, upscale casual.**ANNUAL SALES:** \$40 million projected for 2006**WHERE IT TRADES:** California, Hawaii**NEW MARKET TARGETS:** Hawaii and elsewhere in Southern California**TOP EXECUTIVES:** David Cohn, president; Lesley Cohn, chief financial officer; Deborah Scott, executive chef and partner; Shanon Brant, director of operations.**WEBSITE:** www.cohnrestaurants.com*(Continued from page 42)*

eat at the nearby Indigo Grill, a tiny restaurant operated by chef Deborah Scott, and a partnership was born.

"It was literally like being asked to join the family," says Scott, who is now a partner in the overall restaurant group and executive chef at three venues. The "adoption" meant closing Indigo Grill — which turned out to be temporary — but Scott joined the team that created Kemo Sabe, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

It was at Kemo Sabe, where checks average about \$36 per person, that Scott became known for signature dishes such as her "skirts on fire," a charbroiled skirt steak covered in onions and Mandarin-serrano relish, and her nut-crusted fried brie appetizer. The latter soon will appear in area Whole Foods markets as a retail product.

Meanwhile, the Cohns returned to the Gaslamp Quarter in 1996 to open Blue Point Coastal Cuisine, their first fine-dining restaurant — and the most expensive, with a per-person check average of \$65.

On New Year's Eve 1999, the Cohns opened The Prado in San Diego's tourist-friendly Balboa Park. Prado is a 400-seat restaurant and banquet space leased from the city in a rebuilt historic building.

The 25,000-square-foot facility includes the restaurant and catering kitchens, as well as a school for cooking classes and

wine education, and it remains one of the group's most high-profile locations.

In 2001, the Cohns tapped Scott again to open a bigger and better version of Indigo Grill, cementing her relationship with the family.

"I've had total freedom," says the chef. "I don't intend to do anything without the Cohns. They're a great support structure, and we're a great team."

The next project opened the following year: Gaslamp Strip Club — the "strip" refers to the steak, not the entertainment, though the sexy restaurant is decorated with pin-up artwork by Alberto Vargas.

With a retro look created by a Hollywood set designer and a cook-your-own-steak concept, the Strip Club, with a per-person check average of \$38, is now seen as the group's potential growth vehicle.

Los Angeles is the most likely second

ner Chris Kaiwi operates the restaurant.

Since then, other developers and restaurant operators have approached the Cohns to consider more opportunities in Hawaii. David Cohn says more is in the pipeline for Hawaii, though details are yet to be announced.

In 2005, the group also opened two venues in a restaurant space on the Harbor Island Peninsula, which overlooks downtown San Diego. The Cohns converted the 8,500-square-foot space, which was built in 1969, into two venues: C Level, a more casual lunch and dinner spot averaging about \$34 per person for dinner, and Island Prime, a formal steakhouse averaging about \$59 per person for dinner, with Scott designing the menu for both.

The focus on San Diego helps with operational challenges, notes Shanon Brant, director of operations. "If I need someone from Prado to go to Island Prime to fill in for a couple weeks, I can do that

without relocating anybody," he notes.

Also the Cohn name is well-known locally. A recent gift card passport to Cohn group restaurants offered in area Costco stores, for example, so far has generated more than \$1 million in sales.

David Cohn is reluctant to release information about unit sales. But he notes that all growth has been funded internally, and the company is debt-free. Growth has come with the development of people and partners who are willing to take on more responsibility, he says.

The Cohns' two children, for example, Jeremy Cohn and Jessica Cohn Feinman, also are becoming increasingly involved in the company. Jeremy Cohn is marketing manager and Feinman manages special events.

"We all wear a lot of hats," David Cohn says. Still, it may be time, he adds, to develop a more formal infrastructure. They are looking to hire a chief financial officer, for example.

"I have seen companies like ours grow too quickly, or see overhead eat up profits," David Cohn says. "We'll take it a position at a time.

"Friends in the industry have been openly critical of the way we've done things," he adds.

But, as a private company, the Cohns have had the freedom to make decisions that haven't necessarily been based on bottom-line interests.

"No one bats 1,000 percent, but we've had more succeed than fail," he contends. "At some point, you just have to make that leap of faith. You just have to go with what feels right." ■



Left: The Prado, a 400-seat restaurant and banquet space, resides in a historic building in San Diego's Balboa Park.

Below: Guests can grill their own steaks at the Gaslamp Strip Club. The Cohns may expand the Strip Club to Los Angeles.

site, says David Cohn, though the clones will have a local feel.

In 2004, the Cohns took a step toward the more casual with Mister Tiki Mai Tai Lounge in the Gaslamp Quarter, their younger, more-hip take on Trader Vic's. With a per-person check average of \$29, the restaurant features sushi along with the more typical pupu platters and "mondo martikis," served in giant martini glasses with lots of straws.

Last year was a particularly busy one for the Cohns with the opening of Pineapple Grill in Hawaii, which features Pacific Rim fare. The Cohn group was key in the development and design, but part-

