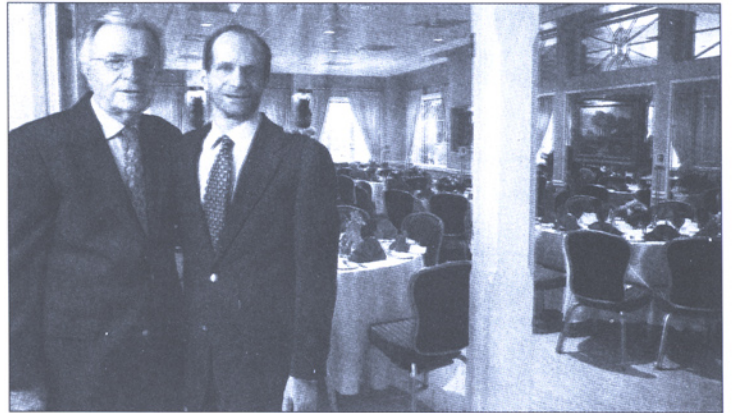


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WHEN MANNERS COUNT

Smoothing out sticky situations is what restaurant-caterer does best.



FAMILY TIES: Bernard Perron, left, founded Benvenuto in Boynton Beach 30 years ago. The restaurant is now run by his son-in-law, Jean-Philippe Gaudree, right.
Staff photo/Nicholas R. Von Staden

BY MARCIA HEROUX POUNDS
BUSINESS WRITER

The bride apparently knew *where* she wanted to get married — she just hadn't settled on the groom.

Before tying the knot at **Benvenuto**, a bride brought three prospective grooms over the course of a year to see the restaurant. On the night of her wedding, she wasn't happy with her hair so she kept her guests — and the restaurant staff — waiting for three hours. The champagne was flowing, music was playing, and no one seemed to mind the bride hadn't arrived. Not every wedding is such a challenge at Benvenuto, but smoothing over sticky situations is what the restaurant does best.

"This business is very humbling. There are so many things you can't control," said Bernard Perron, founder of Benvenuto at 500 S. Federal Highway in Boynton Beach.

Thirty years ago, before Interstate 95 was even completed, Perron saw opportunity in Boynton Beach. Perron and his family are celebrating three decades at Benvenuto, which specializes in private parties. The family also owns **Brooks**, a Deerfield Beach restaurant opened in 1981.

Originally from France, Perron and his wife had been living in the Bahamas in the mid-1970s when they decided South Florida was the place to open a restaurant. Perron chartered a plane and flew over the area. "There was nothing between Boca Raton and Palm Beach," he says.

As competition increased from new upscale restaurants in South Florida, Benvenuto moved to specializing in catering parties. Benvenuto's competitors in the catering business range from other restaurants and hotels to Publix Supermarkets, Perron said.

He has learned that business cannot be

static, Perron said. "What's going to work now today is not going to work tomorrow," he said.

In 1998, Benvenuto tripled in size to 21,000 square feet, adding a courtyard and more dining areas to accommodate more private parties, which is about 95 percent of the business now. Package prices per person range from \$54 to \$135, including cocktails, dinner and wine.

Benvenuto hosts at least four weddings a week as well as bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, wedding anniversary parties and other social occasions. Perhaps a sign of our times: 20 percent of the weddings booked are canceled as late as the day of the wedding.

The restaurant-caterer draws customers from a wide demographic. Debbie Plaxen lives several miles west in Wellington, but she held her two sons' bar mitzvahs at Benvenuto. "They really give you a lot for your money," she said.

Plaxen especially liked the custom-prepared menus for guests at the event with her son's name on it. "Customers sit down and choose what they want," she explained.

Flexibility is the restaurant's edge in the business, said Jean-Philippe Gaudree, Perron's son-in-law who runs Benvenuto. If a customer wants something not being offered at the event, for example, the chef whips it up.

"You always give your customer more than he expects," Perron said.

The operation of Benvenuto and Brooks is a family affair. Besides Gaudree, Perron's daughters Anne Gaudree and Lisa Howe, his son Marc Perron, and son-in-law Jon Howe work in the business. Anne and Lisa both handle restaurant finances; Marc and Jon are chefs.

A staff of 80 people works at Benvenuto and 70 at Brooks. Several workers have been at Benvenuto for as long as 20 years.

Annual revenues for both restaurants are about \$6 million, which is 50 percent higher than six years ago, Perron said. Benvenuto was hit hard by this year's hurricanes; weddings and other events were canceled. Much of the business did not come back, Gaudree said.

But the most difficult time for the restaurant was 2000, during the Y2K scare. Perron said the hype about Y2K effects scared many people from large parties that New Year's Eve. The parties have not come back to the level they once were, Perron said.

Since then, Benvenuto has been more proactive about business. Besides social occasions, Benvenuto now keeps busy with corporate events, seminars and industry association meetings. The restaurant also has found new business with special evenings that feature a gourmet meal with opera selections, a swing band or jazz ensemble.

To constantly improve his operation, Perron and his managers keep track of everything from a waiter's tips to noting the rare meal returned to the kitchen.

But manners are the most important part of Benvenuto's business. Perron and his family members in the business set an example for the staff, greeting clients at the door as they arrive and walking them to the door when they leave.

"We are not execs. We are part of the team," Perron said.

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