

BUSINESS PROFILE

Wherever restaurateur Rob DeGennaro is, he's local

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"Dine with the locals." That's been Rob DeGennaro's slogan for the past two decades, since he opened his first restaurant (the Hungry Heron on Sanibel Island) to his latest venture, Icabod's Wicked Good Food and Drink in South Fort Myers. He also owns a restaurant in Northeast Harbour, Maine, called The Tan Turtle Tavern, where he applies the same concept.

"We felt that if we took care of the people in the nearby area," said Mr. DeGennaro, "what goes around, comes around. Word of mouth travels with the visitors and tourists."

To emphasize his commitment at Icabod's, he said, all his food products and other goods, from soup to nuts, are ordered from Lee County vendors. The menu here is improbably vast (a signature of Mr. DeGennaro's eateries), written in the voice of the fictional troll for which Icabod's is named, an orange-haired gastronome.

"Oh boy!!!" the troll exclaims about the lime-garlic mussels (\$11.95). "A true Tavern tradition and local's favorite!!!"

About the scallop brushetta (\$9.95), the troll asks, "Why not give this a try? You'll be singin' a song!!!"

There are too many dishes to name — more than 200 on the menu — from filet mignon or stuffed lobster to shepherd's pie and burgers. And the castle-like, two-story restaurant is just as eclectic, buzzing with about 70 employees in

peak season.

One suspects the gregarious, multi-tasking troll might be something of an alter-ego for Mr. DeGennaro, 52, who is tall and dark-haired, but equally energetic.

"I think Icabod's is a collection of everything we've ever done," Mr. DeGennaro said during a lunch hour last week, seating tables in between being interviewed. "So many people walk in and say, 'you make it look easy.' That's because we've done it all."

He has live music, events and promotions lined up every day of the week. There is a Monday cornhole contest (a family party game), Tuesday karaoke and Wednesday ladies' night. He has implemented the "mug club," in which customers purchase their own beer mug and get a discount when they come in; and an "express lunch" that gets you out the door in 30 minutes.

Mr. DeGennaro started off as a busboy and a cook at a steakhouse where he grew up, in Wayne, N.J. He went to school for engineering, he said, graduating from the University of Florida, but kept returning to restaurants. Mr. DeGennaro moved to Sanibel Island 27 years ago with his wife, Cathy. They have a son who is at the University of Miami; and a daughter, who goes to Fort



Rob DeGennaro and his father, Frank.

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Myers High School.

On Sanibel, they opened their first restaurant, the Hungry Heron. A string of others followed, nine of them in all: RC Otter's and The Island Cow on Sanibel, then La Captiva Art Café and The Captiva Island Inn.

After Hurricane Charley, Mr. DeGennaro took his "dine with the locals" concept to Maine, where he opened the Harbour Cottage Inn, Whales Rib Tavern and The Tan Turtle Tavern. All his restaurants and inns in Florida and Maine are still open, although the Tan Turtle is the only one he still owns there. A man-

agement team takes care of it now, as Mr. DeGennaro is focusing most of his attention on Icabod's. He's also started a restaurant consulting company in Fort Myers, Fresh Start, which aims to help new or struggling restaurants succeed.

His family is in on the act as well. Mr. DeGennaro's sister, Angie, sometimes appears as a hostess at Icabod's. His mother and his father, Frank, who is a retired clothing designer, work there in an advisory capacity. Some of Frank DeGennaro's paintings hang in a hallway near the washrooms. They look like New England scenes — with lakes, boats, skies — the kinds of paintings you want to walk into.

It's all a part of the personality of the restaurant, and of Mr. DeGennaro, who seeks out other personable eateries for his own dining adventures.

"When I go out to dine, I go out to those types of restaurants where I feel like you're going to get something special," he said.

The rest of the time, the fun-loving, over-the-top show at Icabod's must go on.

"I just go with the flow," Mr. DeGennaro said. ■

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