



Press Kit

About Mel's Diner

Affectionately known as "Southwest Florida's Kitchen," Mel's Diner has been a popular Florida chain since 1989. The company has experienced significant growth in recent years, yet still prides itself on its simplicities and charm, like family-friendly service, comfort foods prepared from scratch and great value.

Founded by Chris Karakosta in San Carlos, Fla. in 1989, the restaurant set out to mimic the look and feel of Chris' family's original Chicago-based diner, Dimitri's. With Mel's, he sought to return to the familiarity and wholesomeness of Dimitri's, while also supplying an environment where his family could spend more time together -- they originally served as his staff in the eatery.

The Mel's Diner restaurants are designed with retro flair and feature many of the qualities commonly associated with those establishments: Formica dining tables, pastel-colored booths, neon lights and glass displays. The menu takes that impression one step further, offering an assortment of comfort foods and family favorites, like meatloaf, burgers, turkey and more.

Currently, the chain boasts 10 locations throughout southwest Florida and plans to add at least three additional locations in 2006. Additionally, Mel's Diner will be refreshing its image, introducing an updated décor and refocusing the menu to reflect the quality products Mel's has built its reputation on for the past 15 years.

Chris Karakosta, President and CEO

Restaurants have been in Chris' blood from the beginning. Born in Chicago and raised in nearby Elmhurst, Ill., Chris spent a majority of his childhood and high school years working in the kitchens and dining rooms of the two eateries his parents owned and operated. After briefly attending college, Chris returned home to run one of his father's restaurants, Dimitri's. The experience would supply him with a strong foundation in the restaurant industry.

In 1980, Chris opened two of his own successful Chicago-based eateries, On Stage and Reel People, both Hollywood-themed establishments. However, in 1983 he closed those restaurants and moved to Naples, Fla., where he joined in several restaurants ventures including the upscale steak and seafood establishment, Green Onion.

In 1989, he purchased a diner in San Carlos, Fla. and remodeled it in the spirit of his family's restaurant, Dimitri's. That spot became the first Mel's Diner and its blend of home cooking, family-friendly service and good value made it an immediate success with locals. Through the next 15 years, Chris would oversee the expansion of Mel's Diner throughout the region. Today, there are a total of 10 locations, with two more expected to open in early 2006. Chris' restaurant success didn't stop with Mel's. When his son returned from college the two of them developed Stevie Tomato's Sports Page, one of the area's first sports bars.

After selling Stevie Tomato's to his daughter and son-in-law in 2002, Chris and his son, Stephen, returned to the sports bar concept and opened Big Al's Sports Grill in 2003. While this restaurant still catered to sports fans like Stevie Tomato's, it also took on a more sophisticated approach, so that customers were encouraged to come for a full meal, not just the big game. Big Al's menu boasts a playful mix of traditional American sports bar favorites, like burgers and wings, as well as more elegant fare, like filet mignon, freshly made salads, and international specialties, such as enchiladas and gyros.

J. Richard Locker, Executive Vice President

Prior to entering the restaurant industry in 1997, Richard Locker practiced law and was a commercial real estate syndicator in Naples, Fla.

Born in Canton, Ohio, in 1946, Richard attended the University of Dayton, where he earned a Bachelor's Degree in political science in 1968. He then went on to earn his Juris Doctor from Northern Kentucky State University. After graduating from law school in 1973, he moved to Naples to practice law full time. In 1982, he entered the real estate business, but ten years later he returned to law and represented a number of local clients, including Mel's Diner, from 1994-1997.

Richard was introduced to Mel's Diner President and CEO Chris Karakosta through Karakosta's son, Stephen. Ironically, Richard was Stephen's soccer coach.

As Executive Vice President for Mel's Diner, Richard's responsibilities include acting as the company's Chief Financial Officer, in-house legal counsel and strategic planner. He also fills an integral role of assisting with the Company's expansion plans.

"As the oldest executive in the Company, I would like to see us achieve financial stability," says Locker. "Growth seems like the best way to accomplish this."

Ralph Desiano, Chief Operating Officer

Born in Brooklyn, New York and raised in Queens-Rosedale, Ralph graduated from Hofstra University, earning a degree in management. After college, he went to work for Long Island retailer, Fortunoff. From there, he spent time in the service departments of dealerships for Nissan and Mitsubishi before starting two beverage distribution companies in New York, New Famous Beer Inc. and Countywide Beverage.

Ralph entered the restaurant industry as a franchise operator for Pro*Portion, a popular healthy-eating, quick casual establishment in Long Island. After enhancing the store's reputation, he went to work as a vice president in Pro*Portion's corporate office.

Joining forces with Pizzeria Uno in 1994, he quickly rose through the ranks becoming the district manager for 10 locations in the New York and New Jersey area. He was then promoted to Division VP of Operations at Pizzeria Uno's corporate level. Ralph left Pizzeria Uno's to become the VP of Operations at the BRIAD Group, the second largest operator of T.G.I. Friday's and On the Border restaurants in the country.

Ralph moved to Florida in 2004 to become the Chief Operating Officer at Mel's Diner. In the first year he was with the company, he was able to revamp the structure of the operation, taking it to a place of corporate stability.

"I'm here because it's a great concept. It's an icon in south Florida. Everyone knows the name. It's carved out a nice little niche."

Fred Scherger, Director of Culinary Operations

In the little time Fred has been with Mel's Diner, Fred has had a tremendous impact throughout the organization. Born in Long Island and raised in Ringwood, N.J., Fred grew up working in restaurants and quickly learned the ins and outs of kitchen operations. After attending the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., he landed an exclusive externship at the Marriot Marco Island Resort on Florida's southwest coast.

Following that experience, Fred moved to Miami, where he enrolled in Florida International University and earned a degree in hospitality management. During his time in college he also worked full-time in the kitchen of celebrated Miami eatery, Mark's Place. Following graduation, he moved to Tampa and worked for Marty Blitz at the acclaimed restaurant *Mise en Place*.

In 1997, he joined on with Compass Group, the largest food service company in the world. His responsibilities included revamping its menus for trade shows, college functions and cafeteria cuisine. After his promotion to regional chef for the southeast, he began doing numerous account openings and training sessions throughout the region. His subsequent positions would take him to the Eckerd Corporation and to Whitsons Food Service, where he managed 11 accounts.

Seeking a change of lifestyle, Fred chose to return to Florida in 2005. He was hired by Mel's Diner as their Director of Culinary Operations. In the short time he's been with Mel's he's already revamped much of the menu, including, in his words, "making the meatloaf 100% better." At the same time, he's become a mentor to many of the company's kitchen staff, where he uses his many experiences behind the line as a means to better teach and hone their cooking and management skills.

Brad Cohen, District Manager

Born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, Brad grew up in the restaurant industry and spent much of his childhood working in his uncle's establishments in Cleveland. He attended the University of Wisconsin-Stout and received a degree in Hotel-Restaurant Management in 1986.

"I never thought of anything else," Cohen says. "From the minute I was a kid, walking into my uncle's restaurants, I knew that's what I wanted to do."

After college he moved to Florida, where he received a management internship with Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom. He remained with Disney World and ended up managing such touted theme park eateries such as the Brown Derby (inside MGM Studios). Seeking a change, Brad went to work for rival resort Universal Studios Orlando, where he managed several restaurants. However, he returned to Disney three years later to head operations at the acclaimed Artist Point restaurant (inside the Wilderness Lodge Resort) and then at the celebrated Flying Fish Café (located in the Atlantic City Boardwalk Resort complex).

In 2004, Brad decided to explore a different career direction and joined Mel's Diner as District Manager. The position puts him in charge of operations for the locations in Ft. Myers, San Carlos, Bonita, and Golden Gate.

"It offers you the opportunity to be part of the decision making," says Brad, "and I don't know many restaurant companies where someone in my position has this sort of contact with the corporate end."

James Rodriguez, District Manager

Born in Brooklyn and raised in Harlem, James served six years with the U.S. Coast Guard before embarking on his career in the restaurant industry. He started with the Marriott in 1987 and then went to work for Roy Rogers in New York City, where he managed the location across from the World Trade Center. While employed with the company he also attended Interborough College, where he studied business management.

After running his own property management company in Manhattan for several years, James became vice president of marketing for Interstate Energy. During this role he single-handedly created an entire residential market. In 1999, he returned to the restaurant industry with a position at Ranch*1, a New York City-based sandwich chain. From there he moved on to Applebee's where one of his chief successes was transforming one of its worst performing locations into one of its most successful. Additionally, James also opened one of the largest Applebee's units in Queens and became executive GM of their Flatbush location, which generated \$8 to \$9 million in sales per year.

James moved to Florida in 2004 and joined Mel's Diner. As District Manager he manages operations for the company's locations in Port Charlotte, Venice, Sarasota, Bradenton, and New Port Richey.

"I love challenges, the chance to change things," says Rodriguez. "The opportunity to take Mel's to the next level really got me excited. I'd like to see our company be an industry leader."

Kostika Terezi, Owner-Manager

Born in Tirana, Albania, Kostika came to the United States in 1991 to visit his grandfather who lived in Florida. During his trip, however, his native country of Albania broke into civil war and as a result he found himself unable to return to his homeland. Electing to stay in the U.S., Kostika attended Florida International University in Miami, while working with a variety of area restaurants and establishments.

In 1993, he met Chris Karakosta (Kostika grandfather was friends with Chris' father) and in 1998 he moved to Naples, Fla. to work for Mel's Diner. He began as a restaurant manager for the Naples and Golden Gate locations eventually becoming a franchise partner for these stores.

"Mel's has been great for me," says Kostika. "When I look at how far we've come.... we've got great people. It's a different way of thinking and a different way of doing things and a different way of moving forward."

Stephen Karakosta, Owner Big Al's Sports Grill

When Stephen's family opened their first restaurant in Florida in 1989, he followed in his father's footsteps by working in the family business. Mel's Diner in San Carlos, gave Stephen the opportunity to learn all of the in's and out's of running a successful restaurant.

After graduating from Florida Atlantic University, Stephen returned to southwest Florida to help his father run the family business. During that time, Stephen and his father opened Stevie Tomato's Sports Page, one of the area's first sports bars.

Stevie Tomato's Sports Page and Mel's Diner provided Stephen with a formal education in restaurant management. Once Stevie Tomato's was sold to Stephen's sister and brother-in-law he decided it was time to do something on his own.

"I just thought it was time to become a partner or an owner," says Karakosta, "and being at Stevie's excited me, because I love sports and I've always played them."

Identifying the need for a new concept in the area, Stephen and his father developed Big Al's Sports Grill in March of 2003. Unlike typical sports bars, the establishment caters to a more upscale (nonetheless sports loving) crowd and boasts a menu that mixes classic pub grub with gourmet fare.

Quick Facts

Type of concept: Full-service, casual diner

Corporate-owned locations: 10

Coming Soon (in 2006): Sarasota, Cape Coral, Naples

Average Unit Volume: \$2.6 million

Systemwide Sales (2004): \$24.5 million

Projected Systemwide Sales (2005): \$26 million

Average Check (per person): \$9.00

Total # of Employees: 550

Location of first restaurant: San Carlos, FL

Year first restaurant opened: May of 1989

Web site: www.melsdiners.com

Awards:

Best of Southwest Florida Readers Choice Polls

Best All-Around Restaurant

Best All-Around Diner

Best Breakfast

Best Cheeseburger

Best Chicken

Best Restaurant the Locals Eat

Best Meal Under \$10

Best Homemade Food

Charities:

National: Loveland, March of Dimes, American Cancer Society, Children's Miracle Network, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Red Cross, United Way, Habitat for Humanity

Local: golf tournaments, schools, children's hospital, auto clubs, humane societies, chambers of commerce, senior organizations

Mel's Locations:

Mel's Diner Golden Gate

12035 Collier Boulevard, Naples, FL 34116
Phone: 239-455-4242 | Fax: 239-455-0288

Mel's Diner Naples

3650 Tamiami Trail, N.Naples, FL 34103
Phone: 239-643-9898 | Fax: 239-643-0195

Mel's Diner Bonita Springs

28601 Trails Edge Blvd., Bonita Springs, FL 34134
Phone: 239-949-3080 | Fax: 239-949-1590

Mel's Diner San Carlos

19050 S. Tamiami Trail, San Carlos, FL 33908
Phone: 239-985-2220 | Fax: 239-985-2224

Mel's Diner Fort Myers

4820 Cleveland Avenue, Fort Myers, FL 33907
Phone: 239-275-7850 | Fax: 239-274-3663

Mel's Diner Port Charlotte

1789 S. Tamiami Trail, Port Charlotte, FL 33983
Phone: 941-743-0055 | Fax: 941-743-2401

Mel's Diner Venice

1763 S. Tamiami Trail, Venice, FL 34293
Phone: 941-408-8157 | Fax: 941-408-1891

Mel's Diner Sarasota

3740 Bee Ridge Road, Sarasota, FL 34233
Phone: 941-923-6070 | Fax: 941-927-1941

Mel's Diner Bradenton

1313 Cortez Road, Bradenton, FL 34207
Phone: 941-752-5833 | Fax: 941-739-6363

Mel's Diner Port Richey

9223 U.S. Highway 19, Port Richey, FL 34668
Phone: 727-844-7949 | Fax: 727-843-8467