

The Villages

'Unbelievable' year at Bonefish Grill

Restaurant celebrates a successful first year in The Villages

By **DAVID R. CORDER**
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THE VILLAGES – Mike Fink smiles a lot when he mentions guests like Richard and Jo Ann Pultz.

The Village of Summerhill couple have become a fixture at Bonefish Grill, ever since Fink opened the seafood restaurant almost a year ago in Buffalo Ridge Plaza Shopping Center.

Visit the restaurant just about any day, and there is a one-in-three chance you will find the Summerhill couple.

The couple have dined there, to date, about 127 times since the restaurant

opened April 21, 2008.

"My wife loves the seafood," Richard said in explaining the restaurant's popularity. "I like steak, and they have a good one. The food is impeccable. It's absolutely delicious."

If you think the couple's patronage is unusual, just visit the restaurant any afternoon around 5 p.m. or so. The parking lot is always full, and generally guests are waiting for seats.

"It's been a quick year for me," said Fink, the restaurant's managing partner. "It's been a phenomenal one, too."

That seems to be the sentiment at the restaurant chain's parent company, Tampa-based OSI Restaurant Partners LLC. It also owns Outback Steakhouse



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Mike Fink is the managing partner of the Bonefish Grill in Buffalo Ridge Plaza Shopping Center.

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and Carrabba's Italian Grill, among other restaurant chains.

"It has matched our projections," said Warren Shelor, Bonefish Grill's southeastern coastal area joint venture partner, about the restaurant's performance. "Yes, it is very gratifying."

While sales are proprietary, Fink offered an anecdotal glimpse of just how gratifying.

"Warren and I thought we would be busy; we just didn't know how busy," Fink said. "But the first four weeks, it was pretty unbelievable. We were the No. 1 Bonefish Grill in the company for four straight weeks."

What makes such results more striking is the April 21 opening came after many Villagers already had returned north for the summer.

"We had a pretty unbelievable summer, considering how the economy is going," Fink said. "It was a great first month; it's been a great first year, yeah."

Then, again, Fink and Shelor suspected opportunity



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Richard Pultz, left, enjoys his 127th visit to Bonefish Grill. **John Brucker**, the restaurant's bartender, and **Mike Fink**, the managing partner, share a laugh with him.

for success existed in The Villages. The first indication was all the letters and e-mails Villagers sent to corporate decision-makers, urging them to consider an expansion into The Villages.

Ever since, Fink has listened closely to his customers. It explains why he opens the restaurant for lunch on special days like the approaching Easter Sunday.

"Not all Bonefish Grills do it," Fink said of the occasional lunch offering. "It's just there is such a big request here for

lunch (on those special days)."

But Fink doesn't have plans anytime in the future to add a full-time lunch menu.

"What we really want to make sure our clientele understands is that we want one shift to do as well as we can, to keep the quality of the shift where it needs to be," he said.

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