

Long Island Business NEWS

Where Business Gets Down to Business

February 24, 2012 – March 1, 2012

Branching out

*The owners of Tellers
Chophouse hope to vault
to success with another
bank conversion*

By DAVID WINZELBERG

Not since Frank and Jesse have two brothers shown such an interest in banks.

Michael and Kurt Bohlsen, operators of the popular Tellers Chophouse in a former Islip bank building, have converted another failed financial institute in Babylon, offering Asian-fusion fare in a spacious, two-level, 10,000-square-foot lounge and restaurant they've dubbed Monsoon.

Now awash in bright white lighting, the former Bank of Babylon building's grey stone exterior was completely restored as part of the project, while the pillared main entrance opens into a lounge and dining area with a 35-foot-high ceiling, red-tiled walls and black lattice window screens.

See BOHLSSEN, 58A



KURT & MICHAEL BOHLSSEN: The former Bank of Babylon is now Asian-fusion restaurant Monsoon.

Bohlsen: A family history of Long Island restaurants

From 8A

The 30-foot-long bar boasts a double-sided, glass-framed temperature-controlled wine storage unit. Overhead, a 12-foot video screen shows natural and architectural wonders and a custom-produced short film features a martial-arts contest that ends differently each night.

Additional kitsch: An iPad station that allows guests to tweet, text or e-mail photos on the spot. Diners upstairs can also gaze down through a 20-foot window to watch the action in a kitchen designed by James Beard Award winner Jimi Yui.

Although the original bank vault remains as a wine vault at Tellers, the vault at Monsoon had to be completely removed because it took up too much of the restaurant's usable floor space.

Restaurants have been the Bohlsen family gig since the 1930s, when Herman Bohlsen, his wife Hilda and his brother Gerhardt, ran a coffee shop in Red Hook, Brooklyn. In the 1960s, the Bohlsens moved to Long Island and opened a

small restaurant in Yaphank, then the Pine Lake Tavern in West Islip. In 1969, Herman's son John opened an Arby's franchise in Deer Park and eventually built 54 of the fast-food stores before selling out in 1984.

John Bohlsen bought the Beachtree Café in East Islip in 1983, opened Tellers in Islip in 1999 and H2O Seafood Grill in Smithtown in 2001. He also served on the board of North Fork Bank – he was elected vice chairman in 1989 – until its sale to Capital One in 2006. In 2009, Bohlsen and a group of investors acquired Bank United in Florida, where he now spends most of his time.

Monsoon is the third addition by sons Michael and Kurt, who launched Huntington Harbor's Prime in 2006 and Verace in Islip in 2010.

They admit they've made some costly mistakes, but got some valuable lessons in return.

At Prime, for example, the Bohlsens brought in a management team from Las Vegas and a chef from Manhattan, moves that quickly led to customer complaints about arrogance and offbeat menu offerings. They made a similar mis-

take at Verace, bringing in a chef from Italy who didn't understand local tastes.

"What we learned is this: People come to us because of our quality and food they recognize, blended with American sensibilities," Michael Bohlsen said.

Added Kurt: "It's painful to say you made a mistake. And very expensive."

With 225 seats and a staff of 100, Monsoon is the brothers' biggest to date, and there is a lot riding on its success, although they declined to say how much.

With Monsoon open, the brothers are already in pursuit of their next undertaking, which they'd like to lease rather than buy. They need at least 5,000 square feet – although up to 10,000 feet would be better – and at least 100 parking spaces. The brothers will even consider space in a shopping center, a departure from their freestanding buildings.

"We wouldn't say no to anything," Michael Bohlsen said. A bank, we bet, included.

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