



Frank Chivas' Baystar Restaurant Group

Beach-Themed Florida Dining

by Judy Kneiszel

Florida restaurateur, Frank Chivas, believes in karma—a person's actions influencing his fate—and so far, it's worked well for him.

Chivas is civic minded and philanthropic as exemplified by his involvement in the Clearwater-based Chi Chi Rodriguez Academy for struggling children, which named him "humanitarian of the year" in 2008. The community has paid him back by supporting his five restaurants, even through recent hard economic times. But karma, he says, doesn't allow him to rest.

"We are marketing all the time," he says. "We are fighting the battle every day to get people in our restaurants."

Chivas' Baystar Restaurant Group includes four restaurants in the Gulf Coast's Clearwater area: Salt Rock Grill, Island Way Grill, Rumba Island Bar and

Grill, and Marlin Darlin' Key West Grill. He is also the owner of Pep's Island Bar and Grill on the ocean side of the peninsula in Jupiter, Florida. Pep's was originally a chain of six, but Chivas sold off the other five. Chains, it seems, are not his preferred business-model.

"All my restaurants are different," he says. "Rumba is Caribbean, Island Way is more Asian. Salt Rock is more like a chop house and Marlin Darlin' has a Key West flair."

All of his restaurants have an island or beach feel, and feature menus dominated by seafood. So why not just have a chain of cookie cutter seafood restaurants?

"I get bored easily," Chivas says. "It would be too easy to open five the same, but I definitely still get the benefit of purchasing for five. It's all numbers."

One reason he sites for operating individual concepts is the freedom and flexibility to tailor a restaurant's hours, offerings and pricing according to its individual market. Rumba is near downtown businesses where it makes sense to be open for lunch. Other Chivas restaurants are open for dinner only, but some of those open early to accommodate retirees and snowbirds who flock to Florida from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and other cold-weather climes, boosting business about 25 percent in the winter months. Island Way Grill has the capacity to present an elegant Sunday brunch.

It's no secret the restaurants are connected and Frank says they "advertise within each other's walls." That means maybe someone having a workday lunch at Rumba will learn about Salt Rock and plan a dinner date there a few nights later, or decide to try Island Way's brunch over the weekend.

Kristi Cheatham, Public Affairs and Gas Sales Manager for Clearwater Gas System, says she's known Chivas for more than a decade and admires what he has accomplished.

"I've seen his business grow and develop," she says. "He's very particular and wants everything done right. He knows his market and he's smart. He really gets how to serve particular demographics. The lunch deals at Rumba, for example, are just tailored perfectly to the business crowd."

Natural Gas Boosts Profitability

Clearwater Gas System is a municipal gas system owned and operated by the City of Clearwater. It serves more than 18,000 customers, and Cheatham says the natural gas it provides keeps Chivas' Clearwater restaurants efficient and profitable.

One popular selection at Rumba that relies on natural gas cooking is the Island Shrimp and Rice Bowl, which the menu describes as "a sautéed carnival of shrimp, fresh fruit, veggies and pecans served over coconut rice." It is priced at \$6.99 with an optional topping of grilled seafood or chicken for \$4-\$7.50 more. Rumba's chefs sauté the shrimp and other "bowl" ingredients over a natural gas flame to keep up with quality and demand.

"Chivas knows seafood and all his kitchens are gas because he knows that controlled heat is best for maintaining the flavor when sautéing seafood," Cheatham says.

Chivas agrees that natural gas is important in his kitchens for sautéing seafood, simmering sauces and roasting meats.

"We use a lot of natural gas for cooking," he says. "It's also our fuel of choice for water heating."

Cheatham says that while Chivas has always been a proponent of using economical natural gas for water heating, he has recently reduced his operating costs



Each of Frank Chivas' Baystar Restaurant Group's five restaurants is unique with influences ranging from Caribbean and Asian to chop house like the Salt Rock Grill pictured above.

even further by switching to commercial style tankless water heaters.

“We suggested them to him when they first came on the market,” she says. “And he’s good about doing his homework, so he started asking around to see what the benefits are. Once he did his research, he was very quick to get on board with gas tankless water heaters, which have helped him save money and space at his locations.”

Gas Adds Warmth & Light Outdoors Too

In addition to cooking and water heating, Chivas uses natural gas for patio heating and sign illumination which he says gives his restaurants a competitive edge.

“We have outside seating at all of our locations, and one thing we’ve learned is that when it gets cold you’d better have patio heaters,” he says. “Otherwise when it gets down into the 50s, no one is going to sit out there.”

And, he says, sometimes the heaters attract people who ultimately decide to sit inside.

“People know we have heaters and so they’ll say, ‘Let’s go to Salt Rock or Island Way and we can sit outside. That doesn’t mean they will ... they might change their minds once they get here, but at least they are here, and it was the idea of the gas patio heaters that brought them.’”

Gas-lit signs also contribute to Chivas’ success.

“He has these huge natural gas bowls that light up the sign at Salt Rock Grill,” Cheatham says. “The gas flames on each side of the sign definitely get people’s attention because they are located right on busy Gulf Boulevard.”

Natural gas torches light up the sign at Island Way Grill too, and Chivas says he plans to install some on the Rumba sign also.

Promotions Keep Customers Coming

While the natural gas torch flames may light their way, what really attracts customers to Chivas’ restaurants these days are the promotions he came up with to offset the effects the downturn in the economy was having on restaurant customer counts.

He devised what he calls the “2010 Promotion” which means in the year 2010, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. each day, two people can eat for \$20.10 at Island Way Grill or Salt Rock Grill. The promotion brings in the retirees and the snowbirds, who fill up the dining rooms at 4 p.m. Their meal includes sour dough bread and herbed olive oil, a house or Caesar salad, and a dessert. Entrée choices include “Chicken Rock’n Bleu,” a roasted chicken breast stuffed with Virginia ham, mozzarella cheese and fresh spinach served with a champagne mushroom sauce and garlic mashed potatoes. Another popular early bird choice is Shrimp Pasta Sauté, which includes shrimp sautéed over a natural gas flame, then tossed with grilled asparagus,

pasta and a white truffle cream sauce.

At Marlin Darlin’, a similar offer, which Chivas calls the “real deal for real people” includes an appetizer, entrée and a “mini indulgence” dessert for \$10 a person from opening to close. “Real deal” entrée choices at Marlin Darlin’ include coconut shrimp, jumbo lump crab cakes, fillet mignon kabobs, shrimp scampi and Cuban pork Havana.



Florida Faces Effects of Oil Spill

While special deals like the “2010 promotion” and “real deal” have helped Chivas weather the economic storm, there’s no telling how his and other gulf coast businesses will change because of the April 20 oil rig explosion that caused oil to spew into the Gulf of Mexico for months.

“It’s all speculation right now,” he says. “It hasn’t hurt business much yet or affected the consumptive seafood yet. But it’s going to be devastating. This will cause an environmental meltdown and we will feel the effects for 15 to 20 years. It’s going to affect the whole state of Florida and the whole world before it’s over.”

When news of the spill first hit, Chivas acted fast.

“He’s usually on the cutting edge of things, and I wasn’t surprised that he was one of the first restaurateurs to jump on it and expedite his order for seafood,” Cheatham says.

But, Chivas knows he can only do so much when it comes to ordering. The problem is much bigger.

“We’re getting involved in saving turtles and wildlife, because, again, I believe in karma,” he says. “If it doesn’t affect our beach it will affect our neighbor’s beach. We’re going to have to help each other. And we’ll all learn from this.”

Chivas says he’s been in the seafood business most of his adult life and he’s seen the benefit of serving sustainable seafood.

“My philosophy is if you take care of the resource it will take care of you,” he says.

But the resource has surely been harmed by the oil spill. Gulf coast restaurateurs like Chivas can only hope they’ve banked enough karma that the damage to their businesses will be minimal.

“Frank is the seafood guru,” Cheatham says. “He’ll help everyone cope with this, I’m sure. I am very grateful that four of his locations are in this service territory and that he’s associated with Clearwater Gas.”



Island Way Gas Equipment

- 2 – Blodgett Flattop Ovens
- 2 – Jade Woks
- 2 – Pitco Frialator Fryers
- 2 – ?? Outdoor Gas Lanterns
- 1 – Rinnai Tankless Water Heater
- ??- Outdoor Gas Patio Heaters



Salt Rock Grill

Location: 19325 Gulf Boulevard,
Indian Shores, Florida

Phone: (727) 593-7625

Hours of Operation: Sunday-Thursday 4 - 10 p.m.;
Friday-Saturday 4 - 11p.m.; early-bird specials daily
4 - 5:30 p.m.; Tiki bar: Saturday 2 p.m. - midnight (or
later); Sunday 2 - 10 p.m.

Seating Capacity: 400

Opened: 1997

Web Site: www.saltrockgrill.com

Menu Sampling: Appetizer: Medibean Shrimp —
sautéed with olive oil, fresh garlic, parsley, vermouth,
cracked black pepper, Kalamata olives and crumbled
feta cheese, grilled garlic bread to dip, \$8.50; Entrée:
Jumbo lump crab cakes – Aztec corn sautéed with
Nueske bacon, served with Cajun remoulade, \$19.90



Rumba Island Bar and Grill

(formerly Hog Fish Grill)

Location: 1800 Gulf to Bay Boulevard,
Clearwater, Florida

Phone: (727) 446-7027

Hours of Operation: Sunday-Thursday 11:30 a.m. -
9:30 p.m.; Friday and Saturday until 10 p.m.

Seating Capacity: 220

Opened: First acquired in 2003, changed name in
2008

Web Site:

www.baystarrestaurantgroup.com/rumbaisland/default.html

Menu Sampling: Appetizer: Drunken Shrimp —
cooked in beer, island spiced in a smoking cast iron
skillet \$8.49. Entrée: Rasta Seafood Pasta — sautéed
rock shrimp, blue crab meat and mussels, with olive
oil, garlic, tomatoes, finished off with a scampi
cream sauce, \$10.99



Island Way Grill

Location: 20 Island Way,
Clearwater, Florida

Phone: (727) 461-6617

Hours of Operation: Monday - Friday 4 - 10 p.m.;
Saturday 4 - 11 p.m.; Sunday brunch 11 a.m. - 3 p.m.;
Sunday dinner 4 - 10 p.m.

Seating Capacity: 500

Opened: 2001

Web Site: www.islandwaygrill.com

Menu Sampling: Appetizer: Thai clam pot – a dozen
clams steamed with coriander, fresh opal basil and
somen noodles, \$8.95. Entrée: Island Way Mixed
Grill – pan seared beef tenderloin medallions, jumbo
garlic shrimp, grilled double-boned lamb chop, and
grilled asparagus, served with a béarnaise sauce,
\$21.95



Frank Chivas, owner of Baystar Restaurant Group, stands beneath a natural gas patio heater with Kristi Cheatham, Public Affairs and Gas Sales Manager for Clearwater Gas System. Four of Chivas' five restaurants are in the Clearwater Gas service territory: Salt Rock Grill, Island Way Grill, Rumba Island Bar & Grill and Marlin Darlin' Key West Grill.



Marlin Darlin' Key West Grill

Location: 2819 W Bay Drive,
Belleair Bluffs, Florida

Phone: (727) 584-1700

Hours of Operation: Sunday through Thursday 4 - 10 p.m.; limited menu to 11:30 p.m.; Friday and Saturday 4 - 11 p.m., limited menu to 12:30 a.m.

Seating Capacity: 200

Opened: 2007

Web Site: www.marlindarlin.net

Menu Sampling: Appetizer: Flat bread pizza: Margherita: fresh mozzarella, tomato, basil, roasted garlic and olive oil, \$7.90. Entrée: Grouper Key West sautéed black grouper in ginger, garlic, onion, red and yellow peppers, tomatoes and a Thai curry sauce, served with island rice, \$15.90

