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# Tampa Bay Times



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## In its 30 years, Beef 'O' Brady's became a defining Tampa Bay franchise



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BRANDON — It was almost called Potatoes O'Brien. The "neighborhood hangout" chain didn't serve wings. Or have TVs. Or pour liquor. It was a tiny unassuming Irish pub — named partly after the owner's mother — at the end of a mundane strip mall. It served steaks, at least until a thief burgled the meat. *Then* it started selling wings.

In 1985, Beef 'O' Brady's looked, felt, tasted very different than today's Beef 'O' Brady's, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary. The place had little interest in sports — until the family of Brandon High School baseball phenom Jody Reed needed a place to watch him play second base for the Boston Red Sox. *Then* it started showing games.

The last-ditch effort of an Irishman named Jim Mellody — a down-on-his-luck restaurateur who had failed several times over at pizza and Italian places — would transform into a local food joint that would define Tampa Bay as a whole: friendly, boozy, sporty, more concerned about a good time than a great menu.

It was simple, humble.

*It was us.*

"It's real, unpretentious," says Beef 'O' Brady's CEO Chris Elliott. "I think that's what people like about it. It's their home away from home. There are certain values that don't get old."

"We wanted it to be about family, about community, and that hasn't changed," says Jeanette Mellody, Jim's widow, sitting in the original Beef's, which is adorned with chummy pictures of her smiling husband.

Not only did the customer come first in those early days, sometimes the customer ran the whole dang place. If Jim had to leave early, "He'd just tell people to leave money on the counter, whatever you owe," says daughter Melissa Massaro.

That's a loose, loving policy — and maybe why his freezer full of steaks, the "Beef" in Beef 'O' Brady's, was robbed clean, a tough blow. And yet, the crime came with an Irish blessing: Not only was change essential, change was profitable, one Beef's turning into many, then turning into one of the most defining franchises in Tampa Bay history.

Jim Mellody died in November 2002 after a battle with cancer. He was 63.

This anniversary year is making Jeanette extra weepy: "Jim just wanted to give people a safe, clean place to eat."

In a way, he still is.

There are now 202 Beef 'O' Brady's locations spread over 23 states. There are also two international stores in, of all places, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The recession hit the chain hard; there were once as many as 270 stores. But Elliott says Beef's, which is corporately owned by Family Sports Concepts Inc., but heavily franchised, is as financially sound as it has been in years.

In fact, as a sign of that business health — and also a sign of how millennials continue to dictate taste trends — Beef 'O' Brady's will open a prototype fast-casual location in Lakeland in August. Smaller menu, fewer TVs, counter service. It will not be a place to linger like its predecessor; Beef's Express will be another quick stop in busy lives.

And in 2015, that kind of looks a lot like Tampa, too.

"Fast-casual is the hottest segment in the restaurant industry," says Elliott, "especially for millennials. Beef's Express will offer the best of what you get at Beef 'O' Brady's but in a fast-casual atmosphere. No one in fast-casual is doing wings."

As another sign that the restaurant is making a comeback, Elliott said he was asked if Beef 'O' Brady's would once again be interested in sponsoring college football's St. Petersburg Bowl, which the restaurant did for five years. (Bitcoin was the latest sponsor to drop out; the controversial cryptocurrency was gone as title sponsor after one year.)

Elliott smiles, shakes his head: "No, no. In terms of name recognition it was great. But it got to be too expensive."

Before each Beef 'O' Brady's Bowl, Google hits would skyrocket as great swaths of the country were trying to find out what was up with that silly, Seussian name.

"The name was my contribution," Jeanette says with a wink.

"I used to get made fun of in high school," says Jim Mellody Jr. "Kids would laugh and ask me what a Beef 'O' Brady's was?"

But no one asks him that anymore.

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