Le Chateau

Sitting on the oceanfront at 39 7th Street in Atlantic Beach, Florida from 1954 to 1985, Le Chateau restaurant and bar was elegant. Silk brocade billowing on the ceiling of the main dining room provided beauty and mystery. Breathtaking! Well-spaced chandeliers punctuated the cloth. A large window overlooked the sea with lights at night so diners could see the waves while sitting at well-appointed tables. Delicious food prepared and served by an excellent staff satisfied the eye as well as the palate. The patio at the entrance alerted patrons that this was no ordinary place. The upstairs was originally living quarters, but eventually became a banquet room reached by a staircase with wrought iron rails.

Long before it became a restaurant, it was the home of a rich bachelor, Haydn W. “Ted” Crosby, heir to the Greenleaf and Crosby jewelry firm which owned a 12-storey building in Jacksonville at the corner of Laura and Adams Street.
Crosby indulged himself in building his Spanish-style, red-tiled roof oceanfront home in 1937 and furnishing it with expensive furniture and accessories. To enter, one passed through wrought iron gates into a patio with a “bathing pool.” The drawing room featured two fire places and a plate glass window facing the ocean and exposed cedar beams. The downstairs also contained a kitchen dining room, and a bathroom. Upstairs, the three bedrooms each were warmed by a fireplace; occupants enjoyed a wrought iron balcony.

Crosby was so proud of his new home that he opened it for a public tour on August 23, 1937. During the seven years he lived there, he entertained numerous luminaries such as the Duke of Windsor.

He could afford the whimsy of naming the house “Echidna” for a spiny South American mammal resembling an anteater or a hedgehog with a long snout. (See photo below). The yucca plants with their spines reminded him of this little animal.
Atlantic Beach was “nowhere” in those years, containing less than 500 hundred people, the very nice Atlantic Beach Hotel, and a few businesses along Atlantic Boulevard and Mayport Road. World War II began in Europe on September 1, 1939; the United States joined it after the Germans and their allies declared war on the US on December 11, 1941 and, in 1942, built a navy base in Mayport. The “fun” of having “Echidna” disappeared. He sold it in 1944 to Gerry Adams who owned the neighboring Atlantic Beach Hotel and moved into the Seminole Hotel in downtown Jacksonville until 1948 after which he moved to the St. Regis Hotel in New York City where he died in 1950.

The building had several owners before becoming an elegant restaurant. Adams renamed it as the Atlantic Beach Club. Unlike the private home, the private club had modest furnishings. At times, Adams would rent it to families according to his daughter Nancy. After a few years, Adams sold it to Jean Monjay of Georgia who rented it out and used as a summer home. Monjay sold it to William Oldham Mize, II.

Mize was an experienced restaurateur. A native of Hazel Green (born May 23, 1915 in Hazel Green, Kentucky) he owned and operated “The Bungalow”
there.
DROP BY

The Bungalow

for

NICE SANDWICHES

COLD DRINKS

PLEASANT MANAGEMENT

HAZEL GREEN

KENTUCKY
After he served in the Army Air Corp during World War II, he moved to Jacksonville Beach, Florida where he purchased Ed Kinlaw’s drive-in called “Ed’s Eats” at 120 3rd Avenue North (the southwest corner with Second Street North) in May, 1946. Ray Purdy owned it as “Ray’s Eats” and Fred Blas changed it “Fred’s Eats” when he bought it. Mize would do more than change the name.
Mize expanded it into a full-scale restaurant with two dining rooms and more drive-in space. The business quickly grew in popularity. Until the Surf Maid Drive-in was built on Beach Boulevard, it was the hangout for Fletcher students. Mize participated full in the civic life of the community, even using his flying ability to land on the beach as Santa Clause. He prospered.
Second Dining Room
Then Bill Mize bought “Echidna” in 1954 and created Le Chateau restaurant, while using the upstairs as his home. The drawing room became the dining room. In 1956, he added an ocean front dining room. The courtyard became an integral part of the restaurant where guests could be seated on special occasions.
Courtyard with pool
The beams were hidden by silk
For special occasions, he seated guests around the pool.
It was open for dinner and for Sunday lunch as well as for special events. In the 1950s, part of the Junior-Senior Prom experience was to eat at Le Chateau after the dance.

The menu was appealing and not cheap although it might appear so to the year 2013 eyes. We often forget to compare prices to the income available although many are fond of saying “the dollar was worth more then.” On Menu #2, a New York Cut Sirloin Steak cost $3.95. Since the Federal minimum wage in 1956 was $1 an hour, a minimum wage worker would have to work 3.95 hours to buy that dinner. In 2013, those same 3.95 hours would $28.65, thus making that same dinner worth $28.65 today. At minimum wage working 40-hour a week for 50 weeks, the minimum wage worker would earn $2,000 a year in1956. A family income of $2,000 meant the family was in the bottom 20% of the country. Le Chateau patrons earned considerably more. Families with between $3,801 and $5,283 in 1950 and between $6,364 and $8,800 in 1960 were in earning more than 60% of the nation’s families (See “Family Income Distributions, 1950-2000”
Charcoal Broiled Steaks

(Choice U. S. Graded)

New York Cut Sirloin Steak
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$3.95

Choice Fillet Mignon
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$3.75

Chopped Sirloin Steak
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$1.95

Baked Virginia Ham
Sauerkraut Sauce
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$2.25

Grilled Pork Chops (2)
Applesauce
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$2.20

Baby Veal Cutlets
Tomato Sauce
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$1.95

Fresh Baked Crabmeat on Casserole
Potato, Fresh Vegetable and Salad Bowl
$1.95

¼ Tender Spring Fried Chicken
Potato, Fresh Vegetable and Salad Bowl
$1.95

Fresh Sea Scallops Tartar Sauce
Potato, Fresh Vegetable and Salad Bowl
$1.95

Broiled or Fried Fillet of Trout
Lemon and Butter
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$1.75

Combination Marine Platter
Fried Jumbo Shrimp
Select Oysters
Fillet of Fresh Florida Fish
Scallops - Lobster Tail
French Fried Potatoes
Salad Bowl
$2.50

(All dinners include hot or iced tea or coffee)

Broiled or Fried Pensacola Red Snapper Steak
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$2.95

Select Baltimore Oysters
Tartar Sauce
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$1.95

Whole Broiled Pompano
Lemon and Butter
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$3.50

Fresh Fried Mayport Shrimp
Seafood Sauce
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$1.85

Broiled Florida Lobster Tails
Drawn Butter
Potato, Fresh Vegetable & Salad Bowl
$2.50
Le Chateau Menu #2

Mize earned a profit of 20% in 1956 from gross sales of $175,000 but he tried to sell it the next year. An advertisement of the offer (show below) explains the details. He was asking $225,000 in the spring of 1957 but he was not able to sell it until the spring of 1959 according to handwritten notes on one page. He was willing to finance the purchase in 1957; presumably, he was in 1959 as well.
Le Chateau

ATLANTIC BEACH, FLORIDA

“DIRECTLY ON THE OCEAN”

Offered for Immediate Sale!

CHAS. E. COMMANDER & COMPANY

318 W. FORSYTH STREET, JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA
A Superb Restaurant

The entrance to the Le Chateau leads through a large open tropical patio, with its beautiful fish pool, into a comfortable waiting lounge with 2 fireplaces. Connecting is a dance floor. Air-conditioned year 'round.

LE CHATEAU IS EXCELLENTLY AND TASTEFULLY FURNISHED, FROM THE ENTRANCE TO ITS EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES CAN ACCOMMODATE OVER 300 GUESTS.
and Cocktail Lounge

FOR LARGE INCOME INVESTMENT...

One of the finest restaurants in Florida, Le Chateau, offers large income possibilities as a rare investment. Located directly on the Atlantic Ocean, its spacious picture windows enable guests to enjoy their meal amid refreshing ocean panorama. Spanish architecture, artistic wrought iron work, and fabulous furnishings are long remembered by the many patrons who have dined at Le Chateau.

Interior of Main Dining Room, showing large picture windows at right.
Cocktail Lounge, where guests visit with their friends before an enjoyable meal.
Ocean side of Dining Room, showing large picture window view of Atlantic Ocean.
Preben Johansen, a Danish immigrant who arrived in the United States in 1948, bought it in 1959. Johansen and his wife made Le Chateau even finer. In the center of the tiled terrace/patio, stood the Greek statue, La Dora. Her beauty was highlighted by carefully placed plantings. Eventually, a piano bar was built adjacent to the patio.
In 1970, he hired Gene Nordan to play in the new piano bar; it attracted customers including such visiting luminaries as Liberace, Barry Goldwater, Betty Grable, Jane Russell, Mamie Van Doren, Victor Borge, Prince Andrew, David and Julie Eisenhower, and Taylor Caldwell. Nordan and the bar passed into legend. Years later, after Le Chateau and its famous bar were gone, Nordan wrote the songs and starred in “Piano Bar,” a musical staged more than once locally by Players By The Sea.
Matchbook. Photo by Walter Bennett
In early September, 1964, Hurricane Dora struck Jacksonville with the beach communities bearing the brunt. Le Chateau was severely damaged, perhaps as much as $500,000 worth. The beautiful dining room overlooking the dining room was crushed and sliding towards the sea by the time the hurricane passed.
Destroyed dining room
The indomitable Dane rebuilt with the aid of the United States government in the form of a disaster loan. Johansen was not quite 37 years old with a wife and four children and Le Chateau provided him with a good income and would again. He had purchased the Homestead restaurant on Beach Boulevard in 1962 from Alpha O. Paynter not many months before she died at age 75. So, he had income during the year of rebuilding and modernizing. When it reopened, customers were thrilled with what the Johansens had done. The dining room was larger, a new bar adjoined the glass-enclosed patio with La Dora at the center, and a banquet room built on the second floor, reachable by an attractive staircase.
Preben Johansen, Earl Slemp

Le Chateau prospered until Preben, Sr. died September 13, 1982, a little over a month before his 56th birthday. He had been the heart and soul of the restaurant. None of his children wanted to take on the restaurant and Nina soon decided that someone else should be given the chance. She sold it to ten investors in December, 1982 but they lacked the savvy to operate a fine restaurant and declared bankruptcy in June, 1984. Nina bought the property back from the bankruptcy court in 1985. Her efforts to find a restaurateur to operate or buy it failed. Life at the beach had changed and it was off the beaten path. So she sold it to Dan Crisp who leveled it to build a ten-unit condo complex called Le Chateau Condominiums, preserving the name of the restaurant.
The restaurant is preserved in the memories of its patrons over the many years, by Gene Nordan who still plays virtuoso popular piano music, by stories passed through generations, by the Mize and Johansen families, in bits and pieces scattered in print and in electronic media, and, of course, in this essay.

Kathy Johansen Marvin, daughter of Preben and Nina, did enter the restaurant business with her husband Malcolm with the First Street Grill and, for a short time beginning on 2001, the Homestead Restaurant which her father had sold in 1975.

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**SOURCES**

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Census and Official Data

