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# Golfweek

GOLF'S NEWS LEADER ONLINE

## Carpenter: Sam Snead's Tavern a local gem with nationwide plans

*Golf-themed restaurant has 7 locations, with 7 more scheduled to open in 2000*

Orlando, Fla.



Ken Carpenter

Tom Reilly and Tim Guidera have different travel agendas when they make annual springtime visits to Orlando, but one thing remains a constant on their itineraries -- dinner at Sam Snead's Tavern.

Reilly, the director of auxiliary plant services for John Carroll University near Cleveland, and his wife, Barb, who manages a suburban Gap store, come to Central Florida for two weeks of Cleveland Indians' spring training baseball and fun in the sun. Guidera, a sports columnist for the Savannah (Ga.) Morning News, spends a week covering the Bay Hill Invitational and doing prep work for the MCI Classic, his region's PGA Tour event.

But their real mission is dining at Snead's -- as often as four nights in a week.

Snead's is a "theme" restaurant in the world capital of such establishments, but while the Hard Rock Cafes, Planet Hollywoods and Rainforest



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Casey snags after the mighty tourist dollar, Snead's serves a fervently loyal local clientele -- and those out-of-town visitors who keep coming back for more.

"Our busiest weeks are during the PGA Show (end of January), Bay Hill (mid-March) and from Christmas to New Year's," said Pat Casey, owner/operator of the Orlando Sam Snead's Tavern and president of the Pike



Sam Snead's Tavern in Orlando

Corporation, which is licensing the concept to restaurateurs around North America. "But we're busy every week. We are, and always will be, a local restaurant, and our customers love us for that."

Snead's, as the name suggests, is a paean to the phenomenal career of Slammin' Sammy Snead, whose 81 official PGA Tour wins and as many as 84 more worldwide triumphs are all celebrated in gold plaques and authentic memorabilia mounted throughout the 204-seat restaurant.

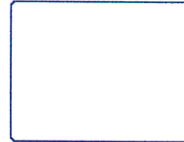
The original Sam Snead's Tavern was started in 1980 by the Slammer and his son, Jack, at The Homestead resort in Hot Springs, Va., Sam's hometown. In 1991, one of Casey's partners, who had done some course-design work with Snead, approached him about opening an Orlando version of the restaurant.

"We were originally planning a Southwest restaurant," said Casey, who hails from Texas and spent eight years of a 29-year restaurant management career running the East Coast operations for TGI Friday's. "But we went up to Hot Springs to meet with Sam. We toured the tavern, toured his home and his trophy room, played golf. After two days I came away thinking it worked there, but might not in Florida."

But Casey eventually changed his mind, and spent

<http://www.golfweek.com/articles/2000/homepages/11115.asp>

Archives



SIX MONTHS LEADING HIS SOUTHWEST THEME. THE restaurant, located in a shopping plaza well off the tourist track but directly across the street from the 16th green at MetroWest Country Club, opened May 12, 1992.

"I realized that golfers make great customers," said Casey. "When they play bad, they want to drown their sorrows. When they play good, they want to celebrate."

Casey said most restaurants spend 2 to 4 percent of their revenues on advertising, but he has taken a different tack. "We donate to every local charity, school, church and synagogue," said Casey, "because we like to stay involved in the community, because we like the area, and the money stays in the area.

"Of course, it doesn't hurt that if we're sponsoring a kid's tuba lessons, his parents might decide to stop by for dinner. I don't think anybody can compete with us, locally."

Snead's also stages an annual golf tournament to benefit the Children's Miracle Network, and Snead has made a few appearances at the event. During one such visit a couple years ago, Sam was holding court at an overcrowded tavern table while tennis great Monica Seles dined a few feet away, virtually unnoticed. That kind of celebrity spotting is common at Snead's, but the stars blend in among the regulars.

Casey has decided to take the concept on the road, mainly through licensing agreements. He opened restaurants in Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Alpharetta, Ga., in 1995, and another location in 1997 at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., where Snead was the longtime professional. (The Georgia restaurant was sold to outside operators in 1996, and eventually closed.)

Other licensed Sam Snead's Taverns are open at the Chateau Cartier Relais Resort in Aylmer, Quebec (outside Ottawa, Ontario); in Naples, Fla., across from Greg Norman's Tiburon Golf Club; and in the West Palm Beach, Fla., airport. (Host Marriott runs the West Palm eatery and is negotiating with Casey for other airport locations;

the operators of the Chateau Cartier are planning another restaurant at a resort in San Juan, Puerto Rico.)

Casey plans to open three more company-owned locations in Orlando this year (including a downtown site), and four other licensed outlets could open in 2000: the San Juan resort site; at Perdido Key near Pensacola, Fla.; at the World Golf Village near St. Augustine, Fla.; and in Ocala, Fla. Casey said he is in negotiations with an operator who wants to open three locations in Philadelphia, and another with his sights on the Phoenix market.

Prospective licensees can expect to pay a \$40,000 initial fee, an ongoing fee of 5 percent of adjusted gross sales, and a memorabilia lease – paid directly to Jack Snead's company – for the Snead treasures to be housed on site. Those packages can run up to \$70,000, and the Sneads frame, install and retain ownership of all the items.

“We're lucky that Sam never threw anything away,” said Casey of the memorabilia. “Some of the pieces are copies, but many of the items in the taverns are originals.”

What definitely is original is the Sam Snead's menu. While the golf decor and the see-and-be-seen atmosphere might be attractions, it's the food that keeps people like Reilley, Guidera and the Orlando golf community coming back for more.

In one regular's opinion, Snead's offers three items unsurpassed anywhere – the barbecued ribs, the chicken marsala and the carrot cake. But a for a while, the world's best ribs were taken off the menu.

“We do everything the old-fashioned way,” said Casey. “We smoke all our own fish, ribs and chicken, and we cook everything over an oak grill – there's no gas in our kitchen.

“But the ribs were our No. 1 return item because some people think good ribs have to fall off the bone. But to do that you have to cook the ribs too long, leach all the flavor out of them and then

recipe, but we're not going to boil 'em. The flavor should be in the ribs, not the sauce."

After a couple of months, and no small furor from devotees, the ribs are back.

While working on two huge slabs, Reilley and Guidera looked like they were in culinary heaven.

"These are so good, it's ridiculous," said Reilley, who ventured away from his usual choice of grilled grouper. "I now know what I'll order for my last meal if I ever end up on death row," said Guidera. The next night they were back – and got the ribs again. (Barb Reilley stuck with the chicken marsala over linguine both nights.)

"People used to compare us to other restaurants . . . now they compare us to the last time they were here," said Casey. "We appreciate that people keep coming back. We have a standing reservation for the NBC TV crew for Wednesday, Thursday and Friday during Bay Hill week. They don't call anymore, because they know we're saving tables for them."

Casey sits in the tavern right before the lunch-time opening, buoyant on his 49th birthday April 20. A banquet room with 65 more seats is being added onto his flagship location, the kitchen is being doubled in size to allow for an expanded menu, and growth for the small chain is progressing steadily.

"You know, we all work hard all our lives, hoping to do well," Casey said. "We feel like we hit it here."

One frequent customer agrees.

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Ken Carpenter is editor of [golfweek.com](http://golfweek.com).

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[www.samsneadstavern.com](http://www.samsneadstavern.com)