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Power lunch at Joe's: A recipe that works

Brett Graff, Special to The Miami Herald

In Miami, there are the mega-yachts, high-profile achievement awards and courtside seats. But today's prize for the most impressive status symbol held by a member of our business community goes to Akerman Senterfitt's public policy advisor Mike Abrams, for having his very own lunch table at Joe's Stone Crabs.

Don't see his name on it? Look to the right, on the wall, where there's a gold plaque – the only one like it in the place – that reads very clearly, "Reserved for MIKE ABRAMS."

Not even Abrams can say for sure how he secured this restaurant real estate, speculating it was a 60th birthday present from the Sawitz family matriarch, but what is apparent is its valuable location. In the South Florida professional community, the Joe's power lunch hasn't lost any voltage in decades, and the joint is packed daily with the people who move corporate, legal and philanthropic mountains. The most prominent among them are always sitting in one of the two rows of tables running through the center of the main dining room, which owner Steve Sawitz jokingly refers to as Park Place and Boardwalk. The table heading up the right row – which boasts an unobstructed view of it all – belongs to Abrams.

"Anytime I want to recruit or develop business, I'll take them here," he says. "People love the food, the service, and they love the show."

He's referring to the marquee names at almost every table. For example, on a recent Tuesday, KnoxSeaton senior principal George Knox sat on the inner left side, declaring deadpan, "I'm not a power player and I'm not a regular." Too bad he was belied by Sawitz, who seated him prominently at a table he later declared (while grinning) had been reserved for Legal Legends, a distinction Knox had received in 2010 from the 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society. Knox was lunching with general litigation attorney Pamela Chavies, hoping she'd agree to help plan a scholarship component of the 2012 convention for Sigma Pi Phi, an 8,000-member organization of African-American professionals.

"It's a social luncheon around a business topic," says Knox.

Just behind him, construction king Bobby Castellano sat with Victoria Palacios, the vice president of sales for his new (and still confidential) conservation business, discussing with her and insurance exec John Lander a \$25 million policy for a key man in the company.

One table over was banker-turned-University of Miami chairman Leonard Abess Jr., sitting with UM board member, beverage and automotive executive Manny Kadre. Also there: Weiss Serota Helfman managing partner Michael Popok eating with Katz Barron partner John Squitiero; novelty manufacturer Sam Hollander celebrating his birthday with Gordon Miller and Isaac Serure; and research associate professor of biomedical engineering, radiology and family medicine at University of Miami, Dr. Edward Dauer with his daughter, Allison Dauer, a nurse at Bascom Palmer's pediatric ENT clinic.



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Other Joe's regulars include: Best Buddies International founder, Anthony Shriver ; Miami Beach Community leader Stu Blumberg ; former Miami Beach mayor and Akerman Senterfitt partner Neisen Kasdin ; Judge Rosa Rodriguez ; trial lawyer Aaron Podhurst ; commercial property negotiator Lyle Stern; actress and activist Sharon Gless ; and real estate lawyer Steve Helfman.

At this power lunch, the only name that's more important to know than any of the diners — and perhaps at least in part why Joe's can say it's the second highest revenue-grossing restaurant in the country — is Anthony Arneson (known around here as Anthony.) He's the maitre d' with 28-years seniority and a photographic memory that retains the name and face of every customer. (He keeps a stack of notes in his podium if he needs help, but only for the first or second sighting.)

"Once we know someone's name, we call them by name," says Anthony, who accepts gratuities only from exiting customers and prefers serving the lunch crowd over the evening diners. "We get more important people at lunch."

And if we haven't said so, it's because it just seems so obvious, but the food here never fails. The Joe's menu is fat with Florida favorites such as jumbo stone crabs served over ice; the house chopped salad with honey roasted peanuts; mahi mahi with parmesan custard; lobster macaroni and cheese; and a crab cake sandwich.

It's a recipe that's working. Says Weiss Serota's Popok: "There's always an 'ahhhh' moment when you tell a client you're going to Joe's."

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