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# CLUB MANAGEMENT

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Richard LaRocca
- Unbelievable  
F&B makeovers

## Why we're entering a remarkable time for private clubs

### STATE OF THE PRIVATE CLUB

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The casual style of The Cabin restaurant is a big hit with members at The Cliffs at Mountain Park.

# Dining Makeovers

The Cliffs, seven private luxury developments in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, are known for their high-profile chefs and outstanding cuisine. But when The Cliffs at Mountain Park opened in 2013, its restaurant, called The Cabin, was very different from the others.

“We did not want The Cabin to be like your grandfather’s country club,” said David Sawyer, managing partner of The Cliffs Clubs. “We wanted to take a very casual approach.”

The Cabin is more rustic and casual, featuring old planks and attractive stone-work.

“It was done intentionally, because we realized that our members don’t want to dress up to go out to dinner all the time,”

**Clubs find that changing their approach to f&b makes a big difference.**

**By Rebecca Larsen**



Sawyer said. “It’s what’s happening to the restaurant industry as a whole.”

The Cabin is just one example of the latest trend in club dining – more casual, more open, less stodgy, in keeping with the changing demographics of club membership. As more clubs adapt their offerings to attract and keep younger, more active members, they are shifting their approach to food and beverage options.

At The Cabin, members can wear blue jeans, which used to be a big no-no in the private club world. The whole family is welcome, including the kids, Sawyer said. The Cabin also focuses on its outside dining area, where two fire pits and two fireplaces flicker. Nearby is an old-fashioned party barn, with large windows





and 40-foot ceilings, where weddings and other special events are celebrated. When not being used for parties, it's the golf cart storage area.

Because The Cabin quickly became very popular with members, managers at the other six clubs of The Cliffs decided their restaurants could benefit from a more casual feel, Sawyer said. They are removing tablecloths and replacing carpeting with hardwood floors.

The new approach has won industry recognition for The Cabin at The Cliffs, which captured first place for best new private club dining facility in Golf Inc. magazine's 2017 Golden Fork competition.

Many private clubs around the country are adopting the laid-back, casual style. Traditional club bars have become pubs. Big-screen TVs are moving into the dining rooms. In some casual eating areas, you might even see members in shorts and polo shirts or workout clothes with the kids and grandkids running around instead of eating – just like home. It's a way of getting families to dine at the club instead of going to Applebee's or Chili's.

But making major changes to follow new trends can sometimes require a big price tag. Here is how The Cliffs

Clubs and two other clubs, Willoughby Golf Club in Stuart, Fla., and Cape Fear Country Club in Wilmington, N.C., handled their dining renovations.

## Present a united front

When Cape Fear Country Club launched a major expansion, giving its food and beverage service a more casual atmosphere was the overriding goal. The club surveyed members to find out what they wanted.

Sixty-eight percent of those who replied wanted "adult casual dining," "a bar and grill pub-style venue" and/or "family casual dining." Seventy-six percent wanted an outdoor terrace and patio for dining. Another frequent request: No strict dress code.

Club members, directors and managers were all included on the planning team that set out to reach those goals, Cape Fear General Manager Mary Geiss, CCM, said. Everyone wanted to meet member expectations.

Planning began during the Great Recession, and the project was completed in June 2014. It included a redesign by H. Chambers Co., an architecture and design firm that specializes in private

clubs. The original clubhouse had a 2,050-square-foot grillroom for informal dining and a 715-square-foot bar. The bar was popular with members but was small and cramped.

The planners decided to change the configuration of that area and add a second clubhouse building. They also created an outdoor dining terrace for 56, a casual dining and bar area in the original clubhouse and a family activities center in the new building, which also has an ultra-casual dining space. The ultra-casual space, designed to seat and serve families, has yielded a 60 percent increase in summer food and beverage sales, replacing an old snack bar by the pool that was torn down.

Food and beverage sales overall are up 30 percent, Geiss said. And, she said the new dining area has been a key factor in attracting new members.

Willoughby Golf Club officials also use member surveys and focus groups to help determine what members want. The club has a contract with a local consultant, who polls members for their opinions. Those surveys had a major influence on the club's recent renovation.

But there can be skeptics when it comes to going casual.





A new outdoor terrace dining area was a key element in the clubhouse renovation at Cape Fear Country Club.

“Some members had joined The Cliffs in the mid-2000s and were still interested in having some formality and luxury,” Sawyer said. “They were worried that The Cabin wouldn’t meet their standards. But we moved ahead, and the risk paid off.”

He said The Cabin beat expectations for revenue by 50 percent last year and is now The Cliffs’ most popular restaurant.

No matter where members at The Cliffs live and no matter where the closest clubhouse is, those members can eat at any of the seven clubhouse restaurants. Some may have to drive 20 minutes or more to get to The Cabin. But in its first year, The Cabin had 32,308 covers, and it still averages 32 percent more revenue than other Cliffs restaurants.

## Outdoor dining a makeover essential

Clubs undergoing dining renovations often increase the size of terraces or add patios. Some wish they had added even more outdoor dining.

At Cape Fear, the terrace menu now includes steak and seafood prepared on the grill in a 2,730-square-foot covered

area. The spot is so popular that reservations are required. Portable heaters help extend the outdoor dining season into the fall.

Outdoor dining is also popular at Willoughby Golf Club, partly because it allows members to enjoy the warm Florida evenings, General Manager Michele Reilly said. Outdoor space was

a key focus when the club started a \$3.6 million renovation in 2011.

Among Willoughby’s outdoor options is a cabana bar and grill that was enlarged during the remodel. A new back patio off the clubhouse grillroom has a fireplace and big-screen TVs. This area is the half-way point for golfers and serves lunches and snacks.

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Cape Fear Country Club's renovated bar and grill offers casual dining.

Besides having the usual favorites on the menu, the cabana bar and grill serves casual, healthful options. Partly because of these changes, lunch business has increased by more than 30 percent.

"We knew it would be busier, but didn't know how busy," Reilly said.

Along with offering more casual food, Willoughby now allow more casual dress when dining. Members can be served while wearing bathing suits or shorts and flip-flops.

## Families important, but so are adults

At Cape Fear, a 930-square-foot dining area was added adjoining the new family activities center, Geiss said. Parents arrive to pick up their children from games or lessons at the center, then the whole family can eat in the dining area, rather than driving to public restaurants nearby, as was often the case in the past.

Meanwhile, the renovated bar and grill at Cape Fear is designed to be



The outdoor patio overlooks the golf course at Cape Fear Country Club.

popular with members who don't have children or who want to enjoy a night without the kids.

Willoughby offers not only a casual bar in the Grille Room but also the Pointe Bar, which is quieter and more adult-oriented. A formal dining room with a crystal chandelier, skylights and floor-to-ceiling windows is used for dinner and sometimes dancing on Friday nights.

"Jackets are not required on Fridays, but some members still like to wear them," Reilly said.

The club is now open six nights a

week at times with activities for members.

"Some nights are more formal, and some are more casual," she said.

## Monitor popular off-site spots for menu changes

Managers at Cape Fear try to produce menu items similar to those that are popular at family restaurants in the area. Selections include gourmet pizza, craft beers and lots of dishes with lower price points.

Occasional special events are great sellers. Half-price appetizers and two-for-one burger nights draw big turnouts, Geiss said.

Willoughby also has made an effort to offer menu options at lower prices than families might pay at nearby restaurants.

The Cabin at The Cliffs has more casual entrees but still maintains its reputation for great cuisine, Sawyer said. Chefs at all The Cliffs properties understand that they are competing with many outstanding restaurants in nearby towns such as Asheville, N.C., and Greenville, S.C.

The menu includes club classics for those who want something traditional. Entrees include hazelnut-encrusted Carolina mountain trout, southern seafood cioppino and grass-fed beef tenderloin. Starters include low country

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## Phased remodel can pay off

During its makeover, Willoughby Golf Club invested \$3.6 million to remake its clubhouse and enhance dining options. The renovation was done in phases, beginning in 2011 with the first bar improvements and ending in 2015 with the outdoor renovations.

After the initial bar improvements, food-and-beverage revenue increased by 47 percent. That was followed by the dining room renovations.

In the second major phase, another bar was added, as well as the popular patio. Since the remodeling ended, revenue has continued to grow.

"Member bar revenue has gone up by 90 percent since 2010," Reilly said.

Willoughby has paid for its improvements with money from a capital fund that new members must contribute to when they move into the community. On occasion, the upgrades are financed through small assessments on members.

"We've also seen a lot of growth the past several years in the real estate market, which has helped with bringing an increase in new members," Reilly said.

Besides phasing in renovations, Reilly said it was beneficial to do construction during the summer, when many seasonal residents of the Florida club weren't around.

Renovations at Cape Fear Country Club cost \$7.7 million. The work also was done in phases, with the new clubhouse building being completed in 2016. There was a small assessment for members in 2013, and the club took on debt for the rest of the expenses.

The work has paid off, Geiss said.

"We have definitely experienced a surge in members due to the changes," she said. "We had 89 new member families join last year, while in each of the last four years we had only 45 new members."



Sunset views of the Boston skyline attract patrons to the Crossing 9's patio dining at Granite Links Golf Club.

## Redesign of public space pays off for club

Private clubs that allow public business in their restaurants can often benefit financially by renovating and expanding public areas. Granite Links Golf Club in Quincy, Mass., is an example of a club that found success in opening portions of its facility to non-members.

The high-end, semi-private club allows some public play on its golf course, and guests can dine in the club's Tavern Restaurant along with members, said Diane Brickley, Granite Links membership director. Another restaurant, however, is for members only.

But there's a second semi-private eating spot at Granite Links: Crossing 9's Patio & Bar. This seasonal tented venue sits on a spectacular site overlooking the par-5 ninth hole with a backdrop of 7,000 wooded acres. From the spot, you can also see the Boston skyline and enjoy scenic sunsets.

This patio area started as a humble turn shack, where golfers picked up water and drinks as they made the turn from one of the club's three 9-hole

courses to another. But the setting was so stunning that the club decided to add some sit-down seating.

In 2015 and 2016, Granite Links invested about a quarter of a million dollars to turn what started as a 150-square-foot box into a dining and drinking destination that draws hundreds of public customers.

The 2,300-square-foot tented dining area adjoins a 1,200-square-foot patio deck. The kitchen was expanded, restrooms were built and a gas fire pit was added, along with outdoor sofa seating. Live music is offered Thursdays through Sundays.

Young and old and families with children visit regularly, and there's a good-size crowd of millennials coming after work and on weekends. It's open six to seven months of the year.

"The investment has more than paid for itself," Brickley said. "In its first post-renovation season, the facility's revenue went from a previous average of \$450,000 a year to almost \$2 million a year."

