

The Secret to Longevity

Columbia Restaurant Group and Fowler White Boggs Banker

By Steven Andersen

According to a 2003 Ohio State University study, 59 percent of restaurants go under within their first three years. In 1991, professors from Michigan State and Cornell University found that 70 percent of restaurants never see their 10th anniversary. But there's apparently no research out there on the odds of a restaurant making it to the century mark. So if you really want to know the secret to longevity in a notoriously short-lived business, you'll have to ask Richard Gonzmart.

"It's about passion for what you do," he explains. "It has a lot to do with being loyal, staying committed to your goals and, through good times and bad, you stick with each other."

Gonzmart is president of Columbia Restaurant Group, whose Tampa flagship was founded by his great-grandfather over 100 years ago. With his two daughters, a niece and other family members now involved in the company, the family business is now in its fifth generation.

"We've been blessed to work with a lot of family businesses," Gonzmart continues. "Our dairy company has been serving us for 96 years. Our bread company has been selling to us for 93 years."

And Columbia Restaurant Group's law firm, Fowler White Boggs Banker, has been with them for half a century.



Jeffrey C. Shannon (left), Fowler White Boggs Banker; Richard Gonzmart, Columbia Restaurant Group

"Fowler White has been working with us since 1958," he says. "I met recently with Jack Boggs, who has helped us with estate planning for four generations. His first account was my grandfather."

What began as a simple estate-planning account grew to a full-service relationship, including employment matters, corporate, real estate, permitting and immigration.

"We've seen the family evolve," says Jeffrey C. Shannon, a Fowler White partner who has worked with Columbia for more than 25 years. "We've gotten to know the children and the grandchildren. There's always some

new legal issue to tend to, because the nature of the business involves a lot of personnel, a lot of corporate structures. It's the oldest, largest restaurant in Florida."

Risk and Reward

Columbia's story traces the arc of Tampa itself, and its historic Latin Quarter, Ybor City.

It started as a corner café in Ybor City for the cigar rollers who had immigrated from Cuba, Shannon explains. It has grown organically, room by room to the point where today it occupies a full city block.

Photography by Duterre

In recent decades the company opened five additional Columbia restaurants around Florida, including a more casual dining

location in Sarasota, and a new café in the Tampa Bay History Museum. But the sprawling Ybor City original remains the heart of the business—and the family.

Although the official history has it that Gonzmart's maternal great-grandfather, Casimiro Hernandez Sr., opened the Columbia Restaurant Café in 1905, Gonzmart learned while doing research for the 100-year anniversary that the café actually opened its doors on Dec. 17, 1903.

"Actually, it didn't even have a door; the place was open 24 hours a day," he laughs.

Columbia Restaurant Group

Columbia Restaurant Group owns six restaurants and a café in Florida, including the landmark original Columbia Restaurant in Tampa's Ybor City, the state's largest and oldest restaurant. Their renowned menu features Spanish and Cuban cuisine with a few secret family recipes for good measure. For more than 100 years, Columbia has set the standard for fine dining and entertainment.

Richard Gonzmart is president of the Columbia Restaurant Group. A member of the fourth generation to manage the family-owned business, he has participated in the company's greatest period of expansion.

But revising history would mean they'd actually missed the real century mark, so they decided to stick with tradition and celebrate 100 years in 2005.

In its early years, the 60-seat café did steady business, but that was threatened when prohibition came along. Instead of taking a conservative approach, Casimiro decided to expand next door in an effort to survive by selling more food. The gamble paid off and proved to be the first of many successful expansions.

A 1934 handshake deal with a local banker allowed Casimiro Hernandez Jr., the second generation to run the business, to take the Columbia to the next level. He borrowed \$50,000 to build Tampa's first air-conditioned dining room, a risky move that elevated the establishment into the class of fine dining.

Hail Cesar

In 1935, a 15-year-old stand-in violinist at the Columbia tried to impress his sweetheart by taking her to dinner at the restaurant (with her mother in tow as a chaperone).

Columbia, the Gem of Florida

Through Five Generations



1905: Columbia Restaurant is founded in Tampa's Ybor City by Casimiro Hernandez Sr.

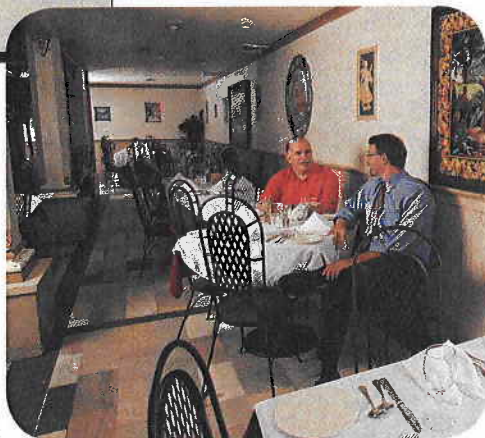
2nd 1927: Casimiro Hernandez Jr. takes over the operation of the restaurant.

1935: Casimiro Jr. builds the first air-conditioned dining room in Tampa, complete with an elevated dance floor.



1937: Casimiro Jr. builds a courtyard dining room like those found in Andalusia.

1950s: Casimiro Jr. hires his new son-in-law, Cesar Gonzmart.



"I learned lessons early on. I was probably 3½ when my grandfather taught me how to tell fresh fish in the cooler. I watched him throw out 60 gallons of our famous bean soup because it was too salty. I learned a lot from his commitment to quality."

It turned out to be a fateful faux pas. The young man, Cesar Gonzalez-Martinez, did not realize that the girl, Adela, was the only child of Casimiro Jr. The next day Cesar was fired.

But luckily for the Columbia, Cesar's story didn't end there. He went on to be a violinist in the Havana Symphony Orchestra. One day he was surprised to learn that the orchestra would feature a recent Julliard graduate as a guest performer: Adela Hernandez.

Cesar and Adela rekindled their romance, married and became the third generation to run the restaurant.

Cesar, who had shortened his family name to Gonzmart when he started his own orchestra ("Gonzalez-Martinez is a name like Jones-

Smith," explains Gonzmart), managed the restaurant with debonair, charismatic flair. In 1956 he opened a 300-seat showroom to stage the best Latin music and dance of the era.

"My dad was a real showman. He saw the business through the '50s and '60s and beyond," Gonzmart recalls. "I think he's the only person who could have kept the Columbia alive during this period."

Like so many urban landscapes, Ybor City experienced a long, steady decline. As factories closed and storefronts were boarded up, the Columbia was one of the few businesses to survive. Cesar and his talents as an impresario and host made the difference. He continued to play violin six nights a week until the end of his life.

1956: Cesar builds a 300-seat showroom.



1958: Fowler White Boggs Banker begins working with Columbia.

1959: Columbia opens a second restaurant in Sarasota.



1970s: Richard and Casey Gonzmart become the fourth generation to manage the Columbia.

1983: Third restaurant opens in St. Augustine (pictured above).

1988: Fourth location opens in St. Petersburg.

1989: Fifth restaurant debuts at Sand Key on Clearwater Beach.

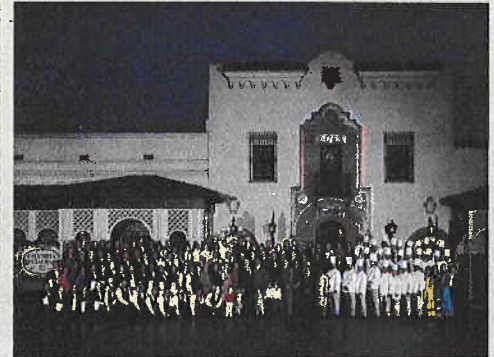
1996: Lauren Gonzmart becomes the first member of the fifth generation to join the company full time.

1997: Sixth restaurant opens near Orlando.



2001: Massive new kitchen is built in Ybor City.

2005: The Gonzmart family and the Columbia Restaurant celebrate 100 years.



Photos courtesy of Columbia Restaurant

“A lot of restaurants, our competition, didn’t make it through to the ’90s,” Gonzmart recalls. “That history is gone forever.”

Of course, expanding the Columbia from a single corner storefront to the sprawling complex it is today was not without challenges, and Fowler White was there to help.

“It was a gradual, organic growth pattern,” Shannon explains. “With the addition of each new dining room, the permitting issues had changed; the zoning requirements had changed as they evolved in the city of Tampa. The restaurant needed some legal expertise to wade through those things.”

The Next Generation

Today the Gonzmarts—Richard’s brother Casey is company chairman—run Columbia Restaurant Group with an attention to detail that seems to be a family trait.

“I learned lessons early on,” Richard Gonzmart says. “I was probably 3½ when my grandfather taught me how to tell fresh fish in the cooler. I watched him throw out 60 gallons of our famous bean soup because it was too salty. I learned a lot from his commitment to quality.”

That commitment has allowed the Columbia restaurant in Ybor City to reach its present stature: 1,700 seats in 15 dining rooms with live entertainment six nights a week, including flamenco dancing and jazz bands.

“I just went and bought a new 7-foot-6-inch Yamaha grand on Friday,” Gonzmart says. “I haven’t told my CFO yet. We had my mom’s 1920 Steinway, but the thing was shot. I felt it was time to find the best piano around.”

That’s not the only contribution his generation has made to the business. Eight years ago they completed a new, 5,000-plus-square-foot kitchen with better access to all the sprawling restaurant’s dining rooms.

The current challenge is not survival. Ybor City has experienced a renewal in the last 20 years, as the Columbia brand has spread throughout Florida. Instead, the Gonzmarts are planning for the next generation.

“You have to have faith in the people you work with,” Gonzmart says. “I have nothing but trust in Fowler White. They’re not just our attorneys, they’ve become our friends. When I saw Mr. Boggs at the table last week, as we planned to be sure we could pass the business on to the sixth generation, it gave me a sense of confidence. It’s not often a gentleman who has been there for over 50 years and accomplished so much would take the time to sit down in a meeting like that. Would another big law firm really care? I don’t know if they would. They’ve always been there for us.” ●

partnership at a glance

Fowler White Boggs Banker

Fowler White Boggs Banker is a full-service law firm serving Florida with offices in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Fort Myers, Tallahassee, Orlando, Jacksonville and Fort Lauderdale. With more than 200 lawyers, the firm is organized into industry and client teams to best track legislation, monitor market competition, and watch legal and regulatory trends in the service of their clients.

Jeffrey C. Shannon is a shareholder in Fowler White’s Tampa office. His practice includes real estate, partnership and deal structures and other transactional matters. He has worked with Columbia Restaurant Group for more than 25 years. He can be reached at jjshannon@fowlerwhite.com.