

Coming To Perdido Pass: The Gulf Restaurant

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ORANGE BEACH, Ala. – Johnny Fisher has lots of ideas about setting up food and entertainment for the masses. It’s his passion.

“I call him the ‘think outside the box guy,’” Dale Greenstein of Mobile Fixture said recently.

This time around Fisher’s outside-of-the-box thinking led him, well, to the inside of a box. Several of them in fact.

“When you Google shipping containers and see how they are being used around the world it’s pretty impressive,” a grinning Fisher said. “So thanks to the internet you’re able to see the possibilities.

“It’s like working with Legos. You’re only limited by your imagination.”

Fisher’s imagination went into overdrive when he was recently faced with a limitation. His answer was the shipping containers, an interactive restaurant with a view and a completely outside dining room.

To fulfill that vision he turned to architect Courtney Brett.

“It was designed by Courtney Brett, a local architect who incidentally is the youngest licensed architect in America,” Fisher said. “She’s 24, she graduated from Auburn as a teenager, and was part of the rural studios program at Auburn. She’s quite a talent and we’re excited she’s on the team.”

The Gulf, located just west of Perdido Pass in Orange Beach, will open for business on Tuesday anchored by a premium burger and grouper sandwich, delicious hand cut fries and hand-scooped milkshakes. An addition will be a “chalkboard menu” featuring “whatever’s fresh, whatever chef Ira Gallon is inspired to create.

“We’re using the Gulf of Mexico as inspiration. And of course that lends itself to a lot of possibilities. Ira has quite a culinary pedigree and has some great ideas for the chalkboard. I just found out he spent four years in a sushi restaurant so it’s safe to say sushi will find its way to the chalkboard very soon.”

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Orders will be taken at a walk-up window and servers will bring your food when it’s ready.

Fisher has partnered with Shaul Zislin, owner of the Hangout and Surf Style beach stores, to revive a restaurant on the west side of Perdido Pass. The popular Outrigger was located there before a hurricane took it out. The lot has since been vacant.

But, a limitation reared its ugly head. The popular Perdido Pass fishing wall has been closed since April because erosion has eaten away at its foundation and made it unsafe.

A fence blocks access as the state ponders a fix. The wall was to be a focal point incorporated into the overall park-like design of the coming restaurant. And it will be when the time comes.

The state is studying plans and hope repairs begin soon. Fisher and Zislin hope the Gulf will be an impetus to make fixing the wall a priority.

They decided the sea wall wasn't a setback at all. It was an opportunity.

"Shaun is an amazing partner," Fisher said. "He's becoming legendary down here with the things he's done. His vision is incredible. And he truly wants to create something that is memorable and world class. With that type of commitment I think we're destined for great things."

As he sat cross-legged on the irrigated lawn of the dining room and caught some shade from one of the dozen or so newly planted palm trees, Fisher began the story of The Gulf.

"In lieu of doing a food truck I said let's just get a shipping container and do sort of a temporary pop-up restaurant," Fisher said. "One shipping container grew to four and here we are. It's sort of semi-temporary, semi-permanent.

"I call it food truck 2.0. We're going to do really thoughtful delicious food."

Perdido Pass, Fisher says, will be the star of this show.

"It's really all about providing a place to enjoy the pass," he said. "I'm completely amazed at the view more and more every day. It's as good as it gets and it's right here under our fingertips.

"There's just so much activity out here on the water. We've got dolphins, we got surfers, we got skim boarders and all the herons that are out there fishing and all the local fishermen that come by. There's so much to watch its natural theater at its best."

And fishing boats. Fisher hopes to foster interaction with the many charters that will sail right by The Gulf to and from fishing grounds.

"It was the heart and soul of Orange Beach, and spawned the growth of tourism with the charter fishing industry," he said. "We do not want to lose that whatsoever and we want to really celebrate it. I think we're going to be able to really, really, promote the charter fishing industry and hopefully be able to book some trips from right here."

Fisher plans to equip the restaurant with a marine radio and interact with crews as they come into the pass from a day of fishing.

"They'll all know when they come through the pass you switch over to our channel and say 'come back Gulf,'" Fisher said. "And we'll say 'hey, Capt. Ben, what you got for us today?' and it will be over our loudspeaker. And he'll say, 'aw, we tore them wahoo up, look what we got.'

"And he'll pull right here and he'll have a family from Birmingham holding up a big wahoo and everyone here clapping. If you want to be on that boat tomorrow, come right over here and you can book your trip. It's fun theater."

Live music will be a part of The Gulf on some days, but mostly, Fisher says, they will spin vintage vinyl records on a turntable playing whole albums at a time.

"It's our way of helping slow down their lives a little," Fisher said. "Spinning whole sides of albums is how we used to listen to music and it's so different from today. We just want to slow it down a bit."

Ron Kutter of Kutter Landscaping added some unique touches as well. Each of the dozen or so palm trees brought in also has water pumped directly to the roots.

There's a grass wall on the front of the restaurant and grass floors on the observation deck, both with their own irrigation systems. The wall is latticed with holes perfectly sized to hold a flat of flowers to add color to the wall.

Kutter is impressed with concept and the buzz his friends Fisher and Zislin have created surrounding The Gulf.

"They are doing what they set out to do, generate interest while they figure out what's going to happen there," Kutter said.

Fisher is anxious to see the reaction on Tuesday.

"It's yet to be seen how it's going to develop and what it's going to become," he said. "It might be such a hit it that it becomes legendary and we have to leave it here and build a big restaurant around it."