

The Alfresco Tale of Two Cafes

By JACOB OGLES
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Restaurants in different areas of the City of Sarasota are sheltered by different codes

On a hot May afternoon, the sun beats down on the pavement outside Cork and The Bottleshop on St. Armands Circle. A year ago, awnings stretched over the concrete, providing ample shade, but now, diners must huddle under orange umbrellas. After owners spent upwards of \$2,000 on awnings at the sidewalk café, the City asked Cork to tear its awnings down because the shade was in violation of City code.

The situation stands in stark contrast to a recently finished renovation of El Greco Mediterranean Café in downtown Sarasota. There, a maroon shelter covers patio furniture sitting all the way by Main Street. Owners of the Greek restaurant, though they did not complain, would not be allowed to do major renovation without making sure sufficient awnings draped over the front of the business.

Even with special engineering demands for supports so close to the road, it took just two months for El Greco to get its renovation plan approved with the City.

So what wins one shade and the blessing of officials and the other legislative ire? Planning and Development General Manager Gretchen Schneider says different rules govern each restaurant. Cork is located in the one part of town where awnings are prohibited by law. El Greco is in the one area where the awnings are required.

"The code in downtown was designed to make it more pedestrian viable," Schneider explains. "You have two different zone districts so you have two different stories."

When a downtown business undergoes a major renovation, an awning must be installed which shades those walking on city sidewalks from the beating sun or pouring rain. The rule is unlikely to change, as businesses like El Greco are more than anxious to extend luxurious patios drawing customers in to eat or shop.

Owners of El Greco were unable to comment, but staff at the restaurant said the canopies have done wonders for business, particularly at night. As patrons lined the front of the restaurant at lunchtime one June day, staff said few these days are left waiting for long. The extended patio provides extra seating and a preferred spot for many younger diners who crave a metropolitan atmosphere with their meal.

Merchants on St. Armands Circle had

only complaints about awnings. Many were upset about garish awnings on some businesses, some of which are grandfathered in under the law and still stand. Because of concerns, the City passed a rule prohibiting awnings only on the Circle.

"But we thought we were in compliance when we put up our awnings," says Cork managing partner Jeff Trefry. "We weren't aware there was a moratorium against them."

After the problem was pointed out, Cork owners asked for a special exception but were denied because they had no exceptional hardship compared to other St. Armands businesses.

So what can change things? Schneider says only an alteration to City code. She expects that would be granted if enough businesses banded together to lobby for change. Cork owners are trying to rally troops, but expect any alteration in City rules to be at least a year in the making.

ACCESS Jeff Trefry, Cork and The Bottleshop, 941-388-2675; El Greco Mediterranean Café, 941-365-2234; Gretchen Schneider, Sarasota City Hall, 941-954-4156.

The Schedule

JUNE 11: LEGISLATIVE ROUNDTABLE RECAP - PANCAKES & POLITICS, 7:30AM Join the Manatee Chamber of Commerce to hear from the local delegation and ask questions about the results from the 2009 legislative session. Cost is \$20 for Manatee Chamber members and \$40 for non-members (includes full breakfast buffet and pancakes). Reservations required by June 4 to Lisa at LisaR@ManateeChamber.com. Bradenton Country Club, 4646 Ninth Avenue West, Bradenton.

JUNE 17: SARASOTA PRIME TIME, 5:30PM Network with an expected 400+ attendees at Sarasota Prime Time. For a \$5 admission fee, you'll have the opportunity to mingle with fellow businessmen and women, while enjoying complimentary hors d'oeuvres provided by Chamber member restaurants and the chance to visit more than 60 exhibitors. During the evening, the Premier Volunteer Award of the quarter will be presented to a special volunteer who goes above and beyond. Sahib Shrine Center, 600 North Beneva Rd., 941-366-4449. For more information, call Amy Nostadt at 941-556-4055.

JUNE 17: SAMA MEMBERS DINNER MEETING, 6PM Neil Spirtas of the citizens advisory board for TBARTA will discuss mid-term and long-term goals as well as collaboration and coordination and the next steps for TBARTA. Advanced reservations required by June 15. Cost is \$25 for SAMA members invited guests. Holiday Inn Lakewood Ranch, 6231 Lake Osprey Dr., Lakewood Ranch. For more information, call Peter Straw at 941-376-4272.

JUNE 18: EDC ROCKS 2009, 5PM An invitation to the movers and shakers of Sarasota County's business community for a celebration and networking event that can't be missed. Includes Hors d'oeuvres, cash bar and live music by the Cryin' Shames. Tickets are \$15. Mote Marine Laboratory, 1600 Ken Thompson Pkwy., Sarasota, 941-338-4441. For more information, email Tammy Lindemuth at tindemuth@edcsarasotacounty.com.

JUNE 18: EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES WITH INTERNATIONAL TRADE RECEPTION, 4PM Learn about trade opportunities as the International Business Council of The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce and The Institute for Public Policy and Leadership at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee present Liz Reilly, director of TradeRoots, U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Deadline for online reservations is June 16th. Online tickets are \$20 for Chamber members and \$25 for non-members. The cost is \$25 at the door for Chamber members and \$30 at the door for non-members. Sarasota Bradenton International Airport at the Dan P. McClure Auditorium, 5900 Auditorium Ln., Sarasota. —E.Nimptsch

PALM AVENUE GARAGE

A 700-space garage will have 14,500 square feet of first-floor retail.

This rendering of a planned parking garage on Palm Avenue was released by Sarasota officials, who hope by the end of June to issue a request for construction proposals. Officials want construction to begin in April. Chief Planner Steven Stancel says the project was based on input at a neighborhood meeting where residents considered both a Mediterranean and a contemporary design, but demanded something with more "pizzazz." The plans have an estimated cost of \$12.5 million, including \$8.5 million for the parking, \$1.2 million for first-floor retail, \$1.4 million for site work and off-site improvements and other costs for expenses such as façade upgrading and public art. City officials also are hoping to buy an easement from the Sarasota Opera House at a cost of approximately \$600,000.—J.Ogles



RENDERING COURTESY OF FLEISCHMAN GARCIA ARCHITECTS