

Six Degrees of Separation

By Tom Ricca

It is a commonly heard theory that we are all connected with someone else, anywhere in the world, by a chain of acquaintances with no more than five intermediate contacts. There was even a movie by that name widely distributed in 1993 starring Will Smith, Donald Sutherland, and Stockard Channing.

While I am not sure how true that theory might be, I do know that in my 38-year career in foodservice consulting, I can connect some of our recent projects to the very beginning in one grand circle. I suspect that most of our colleagues who have been practicing for a number of years can do the same, but may not have thought to follow the trail and connect the dots.

Our company began its life on January 1, 1973, in the back corner of the bedroom of our one-room house in central Denver. Armed with a degree in architecture, I had spent a half-dozen years of working in foodservice and a couple of years with the original master of foodservice design, Fred Schmid, in Los Angeles, CA. He taught me, above all else, beliefs I still hold to be the essence of ethical practice, and I still hear his words, "Find the natural solution", in guiding my approach to design.

Fred, for some of our younger members, was one of the original founders of what is now FCSI. I was also mentored by some of Fred's senior designers, Tony Clevenger, Don Spilger, Carl Hansen, and Don Moser, to name a few. As energized as I was to be

working with such a stellar cast, we made a family decision to return from Los Angeles to Denver, and so began my "six degrees of separation" story.

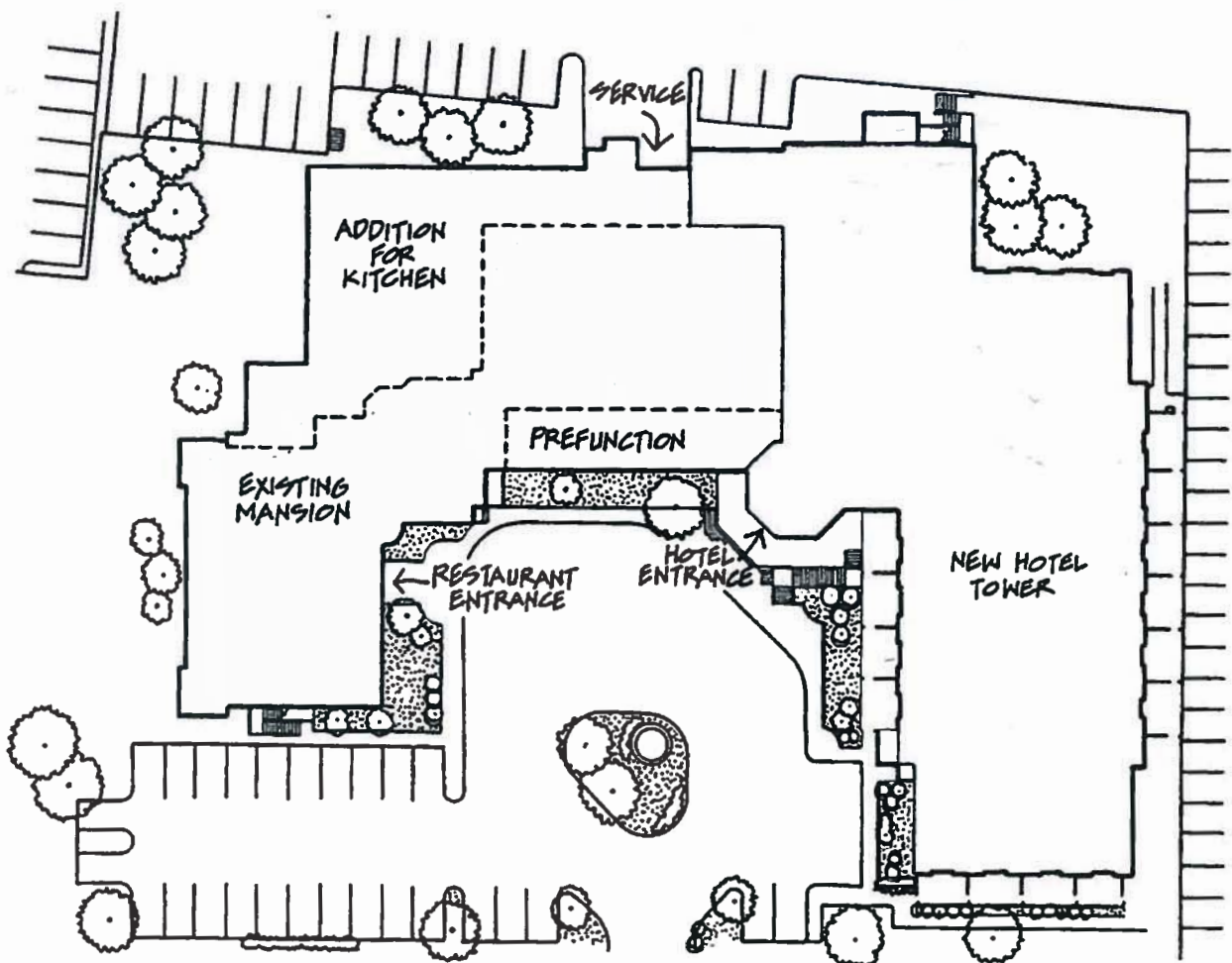
The beginning – Lujon's to Cricket's

My very first client was John Fleming, who came to Denver from a position with The 21-Club in New York, to open a new restaurant with his partner, Lou Wilcox. John and Lou offered me the chance to design their kitchen – for no fee. Instead, I was offered a small percentage of ownership in the restaurant, which was to be called "Lujon's." This, of course, made no sense to someone with a family to support and no other income. But those who know me know that caution is not one of my strongest traits.

The restaurant opened in 1973, and still exists today under a different name. It featured a large water-wheel at the entrance, a 120-seat dining room, and a 60-seat bar on an upper level. The kitchen is about 1200 square feet and was designed with a clockwise flow starting with the dish drop, cold food, hot food, and service bar.

As far as my "investment" goes, that did

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Site sketch for The Mansion on Turtle Creek

not work out well. John and Lou had a falling out, and John went back to New York. Lujon's quickly foundered. At first glance, this looked like the end of the story with an expensive "lessons learned" for me.

But it turned out that John felt badly that I had done so much work for no reward, so when he was put in charge of 21 Management's new expansion program, he called me. Their first venture outside of New York City was to be in Chicago, in a converted apartment building that became the Tremont Hotel, an elegant 135-key "boutique hotel" that still flourishes on Chestnut Street, just off Michigan Avenue and the "Miracle Mile".

We designed the kitchen to serve the 120-seat restaurant in a 2100 square foot triangular-shaped space, and subsequently, in 1977, were recognized by *Institutions Magazine* with our first Food Service Design Award.

This restaurant, originally called Cricket's after the owner's daughter, was operated by 21 Management for a number of years. It was conceived to be the Chicago version of 21, with its famous signature chicken hash, 21 burgers, and checkered tablecloths. Today it is known as Mike Ditka's and is still a

popular restaurant and bar.

The owner and developer of Cricket's was John Coleman, who later went on to complete renovations of a women's apartment in New York into the Ritz Carlton Hotel, Central Park South, and The Jockey Club in Washington, D.C. We had the opportunity to work with him on those projects as well.

The second connection – John Fleming

The circle evolved further, when, in 1980, 21 Management struck a deal with Caroline Hunt to operate a hotel in the Shepard-King Mansion in Dallas, originally built in 1908. John Fleming invited me to join the preliminary investigative team of architects to walk the property, then a vacated medical office building, to brainstorm how it might be designed to function as a hotel.

I shared the astonishment of the discovery, when drywall was pulled away, of beautiful ornate fireplaces and coffered ceilings, and a grand curved stairway. This was ultimately refurbished into the 5-star hotel and restaurant called The Mansion on Turtle Creek.



At the pool bar at Las Ventanas al Paraiso in Mexico, guests enjoy high end snacks by an infinity pool that expands horizons to the Sea of Cortez.

It became obvious that the mansion itself, as more and more wonderful details were discovered, had to be preserved in its original form, so the back of house support needed was added discretely to connect the mansion with what would be the hotel tower with a grand ballroom and several meeting rooms. The kitchen was then designed to provide a la carte service to the 80-seat dining room, classic banquet service to the ballroom, and elegant room service to the guest suites. The Mansion on Turtle Creek developed a reputation for its culinary excellence and became locally famous for the Tortilla Soup and Lobster Tacos that are still on the menu today.

The first executive chef was Dean Fearing, who presided over the kitchens for more than 20 years, and became a widely-respected and celebrated chef. Dean Fearing was recruited and hired by John Fleming, and The Mansion on Turtle Creek became our second Institutions Magazine Design Award winner.

The Mansion is still thriving, and is one of the premier restaurants and hotels in Dallas. Ultimately, however, Caroline Hunt formed her own new hotel management company, Rosewood Hotels, and severed ties with 21 Management. Rosewood Hotels is now managing premier hotels and resorts worldwide, and after its initial years of slow growth, ventured internationally in the early 1990's.

One of the project managers for Rosewood Hotels in those early years was an architecturally-trained associate named Hal Thannisch, who later became an independent consultant and development expert who now assists in the creation and realization of luxury resorts. The second project manager was Eric Prevette, who evolved through senior hospitality management roles and is now managing director of Unique Hotels, a hospitality development consulting firm. Both became key figures in the future of our firm.

The third connection – Hal Thannisch

When, in the early 1990's, Rosewood ventured to Mexico, Hal Thannisch was brought in to create the vision, and put together the design team to execute it. He took us along with him to work with the team that created Las Ventanas Al Paraiso, (Windows to Paradise), in Cabo San Lucas, Baja, Mexico. Opened in 1997, Las Ventanas features 71 luxury suites, infinity pools, an acclaimed restaurant, and 5-star service throughout.

Our role at Las Ventanas was to develop the foodservice systems to support the 80-seat haute cuisine open-air dining room, The Seagrille Restaurant, a poolside outdoor grille, and the limited banquet offerings in the three meeting rooms. Room service is delivered in baskets by bicycle,



Tom's designed kitchen @ Pelican Hill Resort

Tom poses with the culinary staff in the show kitchen at The Pelican Grille.

so the systems to make that work had to be conceived and executed.

At the service entry to the resort are located a commissary for holding bulk inventory in coolers and freezers, a wash room and breakdown kitchen to clean and prepare fresh fruits and vegetables, and the staff cafeteria and kitchen. The laundry and central housekeeping center are also located at the service building.

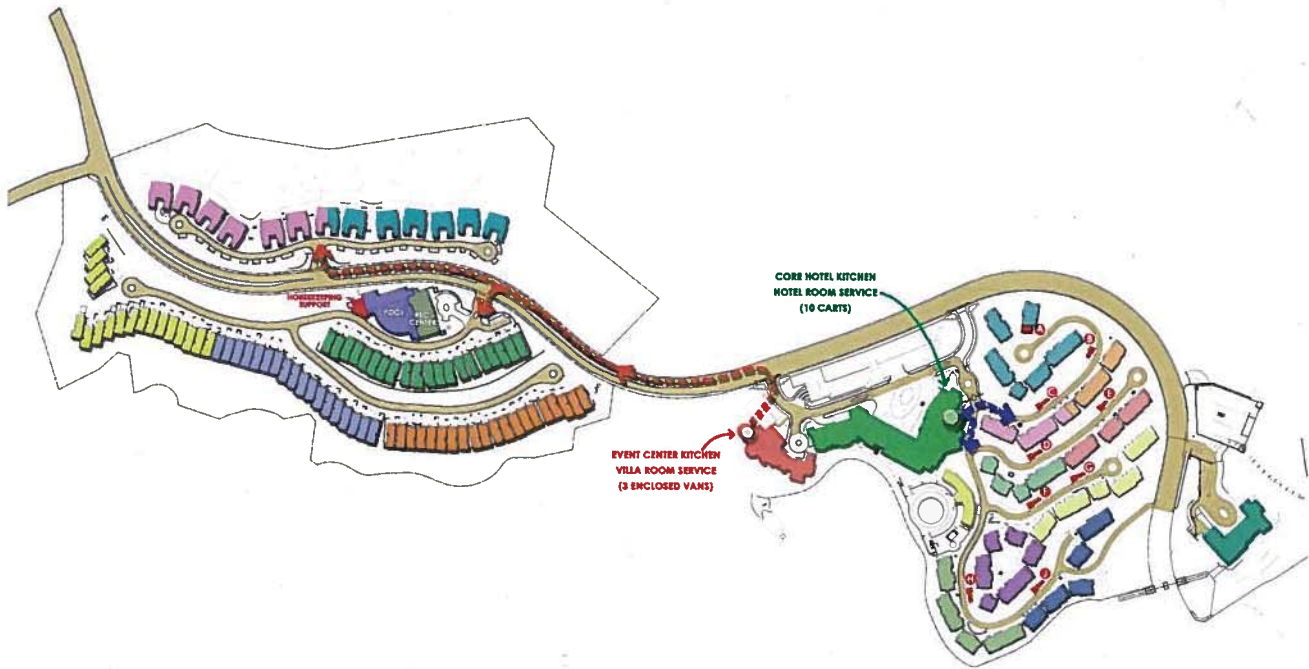
The resort features two bars, which offer a variety of tapas-style food options. The small lobby bar is a quiet, jewel of a spot that, because it is on the upper lobby level, overlooks the lower levels of the gardens, the infinity pool, and the Sea of Cortez beyond. The larger bar is half "swim-up", with stools literally in the pool, as well as standard stools that yield a view of the pool and deck. It is located between the pool and Seagrille Restaurant, so it can support all of the activities at both venues, as well as specializing in

freshly-made ceviche, seafood salads, and grilled chicken and burgers.

Las Ventanas Al Paraiso is now owned by Ty Warner, but continues to be managed by Rosewood Hotels and Resorts, and is annually selected by *Conde Naste Magazine* as one of the premier resorts in the world.

The fourth connection – Eric Prevet

When Eric Prevet was selected to be the president of the Resort Properties Division of the Irvine Companies, he was tasked to oversee the creation of a new resort to encompass one of the premier golf courses on the west coast, Pelican Hill. While the two existing championship golf courses literally parallel the Pacific Ocean in Newport Beach, California, and already had a beautiful clubhouse, The Irvine Company envisioned adding 128 villas (356 bedrooms) and 204 multi-bedroom bungalow suites (238 bedrooms) run as a 594-room



hotel that would replace the clubhouse, and add a world-class spa, a family-friendly pool, and 20,000 square feet of conference and event spaces.

The resort is not “flagged”, so Eric’s role encompassed all of the responsibilities that a major hotel operating company would have multiple resources to access. One of Eric’s first moves was to bring in his colleague from Rosewood, Hal Thannisch, to assist in the collaboration of planning the new resort. Hal, when the time was appropriate, ultimately recommended our firm to plan the back-of-house areas. The circle continued.

We were charged with the responsibility to program and plan all of the foodservice facilities, the staff amenities, the laundry and housekeeping, waste management systems, and the logistical infrastructure of the entire resort.

The food venues at The Resort at Pelican Hill include The Pelican Grille at the golf clubhouse, which features a custom Eurogrille and show kitchen that serves several hundred dining, bar, and balcony seats that overlook the golf course with views to the Pacific Ocean; Andrea Restaurant in the hotel core building, which is annually selected as one of the top-10 Italian restaurants in California; The Coliseum Pool Bar and Café, that occupies a semi-circular space framing the largest circular pool in the world; and two Great Rooms that welcome guests with casual beverages and light meals

in the lobbies of the core hotel and the activity center for the private villas. There are also two coffee and pastry Cafés at the clubhouse and main reception building.

Of course, a robust room service, staff dining and banquet kitchen to service the 20,000 square feet of ballroom and meeting space, plus the regularly used function lawn had to be carefully planned to insure that the resort could provide the highest levels of culinary execution for its guests.

We were also asked to assist in the development of a logistical plan for the resort. Because all the villas and bungalows are spread over a vast hillside in individual settings, we had to solve and document the method of transporting meals, linen, trash, and staff between the main core hotel and each residence, in a manner that would be as invisible to the guests as possible. This included the design and selection of the transport carts, 12 satellite staging cottages, the routes and scheduling of travel throughout the resort.

The ultimate reward for anyone in our chosen profession is to hear from the culinary team who work in the facilities you helped design, that you have given them the best palette on which to create their special brand of artistry. On a very recent visit to the property, I was welcomed by a team of chefs who went out of their way to thank me for the kitchen where they spend their working lives.

Part of the site logistics plan for Pelican Hill Resort

The fifth connection – Dean Fearing

After more than 20 years in the kitchens of the Mansion on Turtle Creek, in 2006 Dean was recruited to open a signature restaurant in the Ritz Carlton in Dallas. When he decided to make that move, we were among his team to create what opened in 2007 as Fearing's. This features 379 seats spread over seven dining venues, a farm-to-table seasonal menu, and a very popular interactive display kitchen and chef's table.

Since opening, the restaurant has garnered the most prestigious awards for dining available, including Number One in Hotel Dining, 2009, *Zagat*; Restaurant of the Year – 2007, *Esquire Magazine*; Top 10 Hotel Restaurants, *Hotels Magazine*; and feature articles in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Food Arts*, and *Food and Wine*.

The James Beard Foundation selected Dean as 'Best Chef in the Southwest', and his signature dishes currently feature Tortilla Soup, Barbequed Shrimp Tacos, and Chicken-Fried Maine Lobster, described as "genuine tastes of Texas". We are proud to have been his choice to design his kitchen. It was an affirmation of the work we did almost 20 years earlier at the Mansion on Turtle Creek.

The kitchen at Fearing's is almost entirely on exhibit, which allows Dean and his culinary staff to literally perform their magic "on stage". Working closely with him in the planning stages allowed us to add unique features like a batter-drawer built into the chef's counter, wood burning grills and smoker for his special flavors, and granite counters for guests dining and absorbing the energy of meals being prepared.

The circle of connections continues

So, 38 years later, the connection I made with John Fleming to design Lujon's for no compensation has turned into a career of opportunities to connect with some of the most exciting and innovative people in their professions in the world, and to touch in our small way, projects that are known and honored far and wide.

If I were to look at the ancillary relationships that have grown out of these six events, such as the architects and other consultants with whom we have worked in the process of completing them, I could expand the branches to include the wonderful assignments that emanated to include places such as Atlantis II, Bahamas; The Ritz Carlton, Barcelona; and The New Dallas Cowboys Stadium.

Thank you, John Fleming, wherever you are! 🍷

The kitchen at Fearing's is almost entirely on exhibit allowing Dean Fearing and his staff to perform on stage. Because the kitchen is on display, its look has to be as chic as that of the restaurant.

