

Saving a landmark: Robert Risley rebuilds a historic resort

In the mid-1970s, when engineer Robert Risley couldn't find a restaurant he liked in Halifax, he decided to open one himself. That was the beginning of what has become a four decade career in the hospitality business. He has owned multiple restaurants in Halifax over the years, adapting to meet changing consumer tastes and trends. Today, his company, RCR Hospitality Group Limited, has seven Halifax restaurants, as well as the area's largest catering business. It includes management of the Cunard Centre at Pier 23, which can host up to 4,000. In 1988, he became an owner of the White Point Beach Resort in Queens County. Then, in 2011, the main lodge was destroyed by fire. Risley, a BDC client, promised to rebuild in a year, although he was told it couldn't be done. He did it and in the process proved once again that it doesn't pay to bet against this entrepreneur.

Here's what Risley has to say on:

...the beginnings of his business

I graduated from the Technical University of Nova Scotia in 1965 in mechanical engineering and got a job with Alcan in Montreal right away. After nine months, I decided working for a big corporation was not for me. I moved back to Halifax and began my own specialty construction products company. That company, which I have in partnership with another chap, is still thriving.

In the mid-'70s, I decided to get involved in the restaurant business because there were very few good places to dine in Halifax. I thought the business would be easy if you had a love of food. But that is far from the case. Over the years I've had a great many restaurants, some successful, some not.

...on the restaurant business

Over the last 20 years, the dining public in this area has become much more astute and critical. I attribute that to people travelling more. They see what is happening in other parts of the world and expect to find the same things here.

The restaurant business has been tough since the economic meltdown in 2008. Our costs continue to escalate every year, particularly for utilities and labour, but we're not able to increase our menu prices because people are so cost conscious.

That means we have to be as efficient as possible. We've been fairly successful doing bulk buying because of our size, but can't compromise on food quality or service.

...on rebuilding the White Point Beach Resort

In 1988, a good friend and I and a third partner put together some financing and bought the White Point Beach Resort, a Nova Scotia institution that started in 1928. We expanded it through the help of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, built a new conference centre and opened the property year round.

At that time White Point Beach Resort was like an old boat that you throw money into. One by one, my partners decided that it was too much for them. But I was determined to see it through.

BDC has helped us a lot. With White Point, they proved to be very flexible when we asked if we could modify the repayment terms of a loan or hold off on principal payments for a few months. They were always very supportive because they understood the cyclical nature of our business.

On November 8, 2011, there was a fire in the main lodge of White Point. It was very devastating to everybody concerned—to the 160 people who worked there and to me. The question of whether to rebuild was the source of much discussion between my wife and me. But when it came down to it, I couldn't go down in history as being the one who put an end to a Nova Scotia institution and cause untold hardship to the lives of so many wonderful people.

I had a vision for the rebuilding, but I also had constraints. There was only a certain number of dollars, and I was bound and determined to have it open again within a year. Everyone told me that was impossible, which just made me want to do it more.

We put together a design-and-build team that was on board with my vision and my timeline, and we pulled it off in record time.

We have a wonderful marketing person at White Point who was able to engage everybody during our construction. We had tens of thousands of followers on Facebook and we had a construction webcam. You could log in and actually watch the lodge being built.

In conjunction with the rebuilding of the main lodge, we arranged financing to renovate the existing cottages on the property. When we opened we not only had a brand-new main lodge, but our other facilities were nicely freshened up. The response has been amazing.

...on being an entrepreneur

The Internet and social media have had a huge impact on our business. They allow us to engage people in our operations. That's particularly true of White Point. We still have our live webcam. You can look at the beach and listen to the ocean.

There's always room for improvement. I don't think you can ever sit on your laurels and say things are exactly the way you want them to be.

I've always known how to hire good people. I think it is the key to any business. One of the best decisions I made was to bring my senior people in on an equity basis.

When starting out, entrepreneurs should make sure their chosen field is a sound one and put together a good business plan. And then you just have to trust in your intuition and make that leap. It has worked out for me more times than not.

Source: BDC <https://www.bdc.ca/en/articles-tools/business-strategy-planning/manage-business/pages/robert-risley-rebuilds-historic-resort.aspx>