

COVER STORY

PRINCE'S: Loyal fans fill restaurant

From E-1

kissed a lot. When people order, you can tell it's like they've been having withdrawal."

That's gratifying to Broussard who spent three years trying to raise capital to reopen Prince's. After much rejection, he assembled a limited partnership.

Broussard got involved with Prince's late in its 50-plus year life. At one time there were 20 Prince's drive-ins across town, but by the mid-1980s when he came on the scene only the flagship location at 4509 South Main remained.

Originally he supplied the restaurant with meat. Elizabeth Flores, an employee since 1940, had become owner in 1985 after the daughter of founder Doug "King" Prince died.

"Because I liked the food so much and Liz so much, I'd go down and have a hamburger almost every day," Broussard said. "When Liz said she was going to close, I told her I wouldn't allow it."

Flores and Broussard became partners and kept the business going until they became too concerned about crime in the neighborhood surrounding the drive-in. "People were afraid to sit outside," Flores said.

Initially the two had planned to reopen immediately, but financing proved elusive. Later Flores decided she was ready to retire, so Broussard bought her interest.

Although Flores is not involved financially with the business, she has helped Broussard reopen Prince's along with a few other former Prince's employees including a veteran cook of more than 40 years.

Old pictures that once hung in the original Prince's grace the walls along with a number of period photos from Houston's past. Classic car pictures also are part of the decor since Prince's was a traditional hangout for car enthusiasts.

Broussard won't be able to offer the same atmosphere as the old location since the new Prince's only offers indoor service. But he hopes to in the future.

The menu features traditional favorites from the old Prince's although a few items such as fried oysters and some Mexican food were dropped in favor of health-conscious items. Broussard said the majority of sales so far have harkened back to the past.

"You go to James Coney Island to get a hot dog, and I want people to come here to get a hamburger," he said.



Craig Hartley/The Houston Post

Andrew Solomon, one of the co-owners of Houston Jewelry, believes a more focused inventory displayed effectively will help bring customers to the new location.

Houston Jewelry Redux

Houston Jewelry has come full circle, returning to its entrepreneurial roots.

From a single-store operation started in 1953, the company expanded into an extended family venture in two cities in the 1970s.

Now it's back to a single store, operated by Andrew and Rex Solomon, the son-in-law and grandson, respectively, of one of the founders.

Begun in 1953 by Abe "Honey" Donsky and a partner in a 2,000-square-foot store on Main Street, the business prospered. In 1973 Donsky and two brothers joined their businesses to form a five-store Houston-Dallas group.

With designs on becoming big in the burgeoning catalog-showroom segment, Houston Jewelry opened an 83,000-square-foot flagship at Westheimer and Gessner.

The company had a decent ride on that retail wave, but it soon became clear the approach was losing popularity with consumers. The business already was in transition when one of the founding brothers died, forcing a family decision on the future.

The Solomons favored keeping the big store at Westheimer and Gessner open but agreed to go along with a decision to turn it into a real estate venture.

"Fortunately this family has avoided being locked in a Sakowitz-Wyatt situation," Rex Solomon said, alluding to the families who ended up in court over the estate of the founder of the now-closed Sakowitz stores.

The newest incarnation of Houston Jewelry, opened in September at 9521 Westheimer, just a couple of blocks east of the company's longtime flagship.

The new operation, known as Houston Jewelry and Fine Gifts, has only 6,000 square feet, but the Solomons believe that's large enough to dominate in gifts. Many gift shops are more in the 2,000-square-foot range.

It has shed many of the company's well-known departments such as cameras and luggage to focus on jewelry, watches, china, silver, perfume and other gifts.

Although cameras had been a big part of Houston Jewelry's past, the Solomons could see little future for profit potential.

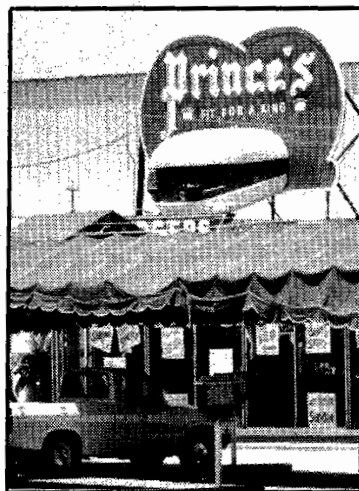
"It's almost impossible to make money in cameras with Sam's (Clubs) and ordering by mail," he said. "Plus there is obsolescence in cameras so quickly. Now the sales staff doesn't have to learn about cameras every season."

Their idea is an everyday-low-price approach for some of the finer things in life. Each item is tagged with a "regular" retail price and Houston Jewelry's price to show consumers how much they may save. Cash register receipts total the estimated savings as well as the bill.

But to get away from the image of a discounter, they've worked hard on display, incorporating shiny cases, antiques and even a fireplace in the store.

They kept costs down by using refurbished fixtures and even granite flooring from the old store along with other pieces picked up along the way such as chandeliers from the old Sakowitz store.

"We had Baccarat and Lalique (at the old store), but they were displayed like Wal-Mart," Rex Solomon said. "We want to display like Neiman Marcus so the Neiman Marcus customer feels



Post files

The old Prince's drive-in shut down in 1990.

comfortable here."

In addition to high-profile name gifts and jewelry, Houston Jewelry also carries estate jewelry, its own line of watches and some unique art photography — work done by Andrew Solomon.

"I always wanted to show my photography in a gallery," he said. "Now I have my own place."

Boost for Norton Ditto

The Ditto family is back in control of the long-time Houston clothier, Norton Ditto, and so is Dick Hite, who worked for the firm for 15 years including a stint as president in the early 1980s.

Hite's return as president and chief executive officer was part of the package put together by Lanson Ditto and Mrs. Ben Ditto, who stepped in to save the struggling business that had been sold to a group of managers three years ago.

Hite, well-known in Houston circles through his involvement

in politics and businesses such as The Houstonian and Urban Retreat, will be one of the key players in turning around the business that caters to the "dress for success" crowd.

The group that had purchased Norton Ditto had difficulty handling its debt in the face of a slow economy and heightened competition and its inventory suffered, Hite said. Since the Dittos held the note, their investment now will go toward building inventory.

Hite acknowledges that competition remains tough but noted that there are a limited number of direct competitors.

"Anybody that sells a suit is a competitor, but there are not that many specialty stores catering to business and professional men and women," he said. "People are going to go to the best restaurant, the best hotel and the best clothier. No longer can you just be good. You have to be the best."

He said the company also plans to broaden its appeal by adding European suits to its mix.

Lanson Ditto, who has been working with Hite on the turnaround, said the repurchase was made to preserve the business.

"Our business was built on strong personal relationships with our customers," he said. "Renewing these special relationships is one of our top priorities."

Norton Ditto's ownership has moved through several families in its long history.

In 1908 Henry H. Barringer and Court Norton founded the downtown store as Barrington Norton Co., specialists in custom tailoring and shirt making. Norton later bought Barringer out, and operated as Norton's Inc. When Sanford Carracci bought an interest in 1943, it became Norton Carracci.

The Ditto family, under patriarch Lanson Ditto Sr., bought Carracci's interest three years later and altered the name a fourth time to Norton Ditto. In 1951, the Ditto family bought Norton's interest. In 1981, they expanded to include women's clothing.

Three years ago, Ben Ditto and Lanson Ditto Jr. sold the business to a group of long-time managers which included Ben's son, Philip Ditto. Ben Ditto died of cancer soon after the sale.

With the re-entry of the Dittos as owner, the Ditto family tradition continues since Philip Ditto remains with the business and Lanson Ditto is an adviser. But another family may be included. Hite said his agreement calls for him to become a part owner in the future.

Ditto said response to the ownership change, which occurred in mid-October, has been positive.

"Houstonians want their own companies and people to do well, but you have to earn their business," he said.