

They gotta eat! III Forks, Cantina Laredo owner looking to expand

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Quality brings the customers.

So says **Bill Watson**, spokesman for the **III Forks** and **Cantina Laredo** restaurants at the **Midtown** shopping and dining complex in Palm Beach Gardens.

The restaurants' parent company, **Consolidated Restaurant Operations** of Dallas, is making another bet on Palm Beach County: Consolidated plans to open a III Forks in Boca Raton by mid-year.

It's the second III Forks in the area. The privately-held Consolidated operates a III Forks and a Cantina Laredo in Palm Beach Gardens.

Last month's closing of rival Mexican eatery, **Rosa Mexicano**, doesn't portend bad tidings for Cantina, Watson says. Business remains brisk at the restaurant, which offers food at lower prices than Rosa did, he adds.

And Watson isn't the least bit worried about the III Forks opening soon in the **200 East** condominium, located on Palmetto Park Road in Boca Raton. This, even though the steak house is around the corner from **Chops Lobster Bar** and the nearby **Ruth's Chris Steakhouse**.

"We're accustomed to having great competitors," Watson said. "We believe that we make each other better."

Consolidated is so bullish on South Florida that it's doing a deal to build both a III Forks and a Cantina Laredo in the **Gulfstream Park** mixed-use redevelopment project in Hallandale Beach.

So does that mean Watson predicts a quick end to the recession? That, he cannot say.

"We're realists," he said. "Nobody has a clear view into when this economic situation improves. But the one thing is that quality will always be sought out. If there are fewer occasions than there were a year ago for people to go out to eat, then the importance they place on quality is even greater.

"And then," Watson added optimistically, "when the economy does turn and things improve and life is abundant again, we're still going to be there - doing even better."

- With Valentine's Day coming up, will lovers fail to shower their sweethearts with treats?

Fat chance. **Hoffman's Chocolates** of Greenacres expects this Feb. 14 to be a big seller.

The reason may be the recession, said Hoffman's chief executive **Fred Meltzer**.

It seems that people still want to buy gifts, but the economic crisis has forced many Valentine's Day customers to downsize their purchases.

"They may not spend \$60 or \$70 on flowers," Meltzer said, but they will spring for a box of chocolates.

"So far, things are looking good: We will be making over 2,000 pounds of chocolate-covered strawberries. The pre-orders have been strong, as we run out every year," he said.

Meltzer said Hoffman's is trying to boost sales by keeping prices steady and offering candy items in a variety of price ranges.

As for the rest of the year, well, Meltzer isn't taking anything for granted. "We take one holiday at a time," he said.

But the economy has forced a shift in plans to expand Hoffman's retail presence through franchised stores.

Blame the credit crunch: Meltzer said potential franchisees aren't able to secure financing.

Instead, Meltzer said Hoffman's will look to license the sale of its products to existing retail stores that want to offer chocolate to their customers.