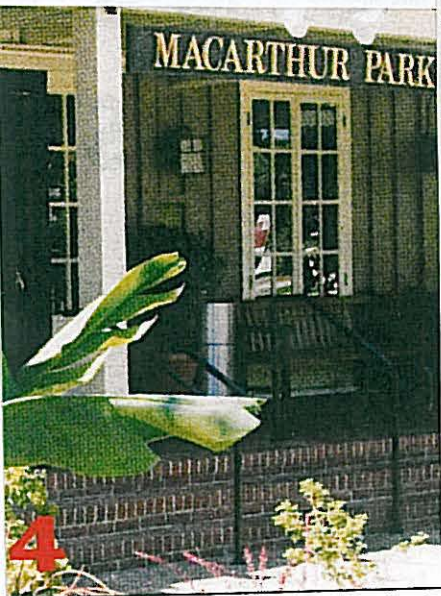


Spectrum sells off once-trendy concepts to Calif. group's vets



BY LISA JENNINGS

IRVINE, CALIF. — After years in Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the once-trend-setting Spectrum Restaurant Group is in the process of selling off the last of its core group of dining concepts, including MacArthur Park, Prego, Guaymas, and Harry's Bar & American Grill.

In a return to its roots, MacArthur Park in Palo Alto, Calif., for example, was bought by industry veteran and early Spectrum executive Chuck Frank and the 27-year-old restaurant's original chef, Faz Poursohi. Housed in a vintage building designed by Hearst Castle architect Julia Morgan, the

restaurant fetched \$500,000 in a deal that closed last month, according to court documents detailing the sale to Poursohi and Frank, whose 17-year tenure with Spectrum began in 1972.

More than 20 years ago, Irvine-based Spectrum, then headquartered in San Francisco and headed by co-founder Larry Mindel, held a reputation for developing trendy and popular upscale and casual concepts in Northern and Southern California. A noted aficionado of Italian gastronomy, Mindel later launched the Il Fornaio chain and now owns the restaurant Poggio in Sausalito, Calif.

Over the years, Spectrum morphed under subsequent corporate

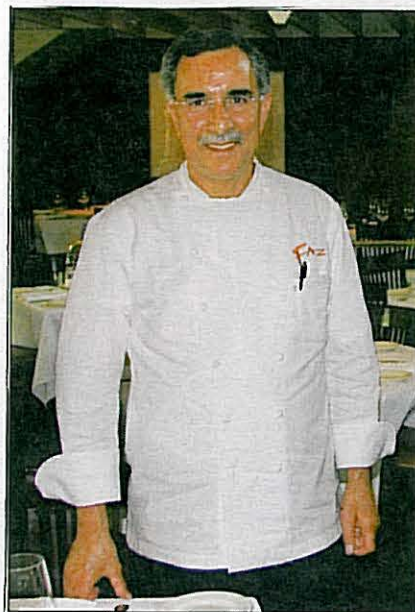
owners into a multiunit operator of nine brands controlled by Anwar Soliman, who resigned as chief executive before filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy for a second time in three years in 2006.

In 2007 the company sold the then-72-unit Grandy's chain to Souper Salad Inc., based in San Antonio.

Spectrum had two locations of the Crabby Bob's seafood restaurants as of 2006, but both are believed to have closed, as have two locations of the Italian seafood concept Tutto Mare.

According to court documents, the company in recent years has had trouble keeping up with debt repayments under its bankruptcy reorganization plan, including payments to BET Associates, which had furnished Spectrum with \$15 million to buy back Prego and Tutto Mare and acquire Grandy's, Spoons and National Sports Grill from American Restaurant Group Inc. in 2000. The Spectrum group later added the Crabby Bob's brand to its portfolio.

At the time, Soliman was American Restaurant Group's chief executive. After the sale, ARG was left to struggle with then-102-unit Stuart Anderson's Black Angus steakhouse chain, which later sought bankruptcy protection and changed its name to Black Angus Steakhouse. Earlier this year, Versa Capital Man-



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Faz Poursohi, a veteran of the old Spectrum group, is the new co-owner of a landmark MacArthur Park unit he launched in 1982.

the first mainstream Italian concepts to showcase hearth-baked contemporary pizzas and authentic regional dishes.

The late chef Ed LaDou, considered the father of the designer-pizza trend for his work with California Pizza Kitchen and before that at the original Spago in West Hollywood, was discovered by Wolfgang Puck while LaDou was cooking at the first Prego, which is now closed.

agement of Philadelphia bought the chain.

Spectrum Restaurant Group, however, was born in the 1970s as Spectrum Foods, which once had as many as 16 restaurant concepts, including MacArthur Park, Chianti/Cucina, Ciao, Spiedini and Prego. With original partner Jerry Magnin, Mindel launched the company with the historic Chianti restaurant on Los Angeles' Melrose Avenue as its foundation. Then from its Bay Area base Spectrum made the MacArthur Parks in San Francisco and Palo Alto leading examples of American cuisine restaurants. The company's original Prego in San Francisco was among

Frank, who worked for Spectrum Foods until 1989 and is now a consultant, said he and Mindel opened the first MacArthur Park, named for the Jimmy Webb song, in 1972. Early on, it was known as a classic 1970s "fern bar," but Frank, Mindel and Poursohi elevated the cooking while featuring Poursohi's wood-smoked baby back ribs.

Poursohi, who now also owns three restaurants called Faz offering Mediterranean fare, agreed to return to MacArthur Park as a partner before the deal closed last month.

"The restaurant needed a lot of TLC," Frank said. "We will evolve the concept. We're bringing it

physically up to code and bringing the quality back up on the menu."

Frank said he might be interested in reviving another, unidentified restaurant from the original Spectrum group, though "I'm not sure if it's available and I'm not chasing after it."

For similarly long-established Specialty Restaurants Corp., the acquisition of Guaymas is fitting, given the Anaheim company's specialization in destination locations on waterfronts, hilltops or in aviation-oriented venues. Specialty's 26 restaurants include brands such as The Reef, Castaway, Shanghai Red's, Baby Doe's Matchless Mine and 94th Aero Squadron.

Featuring regional Mexican cuisine, Guaymas boasts panoramic views of San Francisco and the Golden Gate and Bay bridges from the Tiburon waterfront.

The buyer group that has proposed the acquisition of Harry's Bar & American Grill includes the La Jolla operation's general manager, Adam Quick, and investors Daniel Miller and Byron Frisch, who've formed Harry's Bar Holdings LLC.

Under Spectrum, the first Harry's Bar, in Los Angeles' Century City, was a replica of the restaurant of the same name in Florence, Italy, which itself was spawned by the Cipriani original in Venice. ■