

Be my guest

MIKE ZISLIS
SHAKES UP THE LOCAL
HOSPITALITY SCENE

After launching two successful restaurants in Manhattan Beach, Mike Zislis took a leap of faith and opened a hotel there — with no previous hotel experience. Today, Zislis is gaining momentum on his second hotel.

Learn how this South Bay native started the food and hospitality revolution in the beach cities and beyond.

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Mike Zislis is driving to Redondo Beach, and he's excited. About concrete. After seemingly endless delays and disappointments, the cement is being poured at the site of what will be his second Shade Hotel property. Situated on the waterfront in King Harbor, the new hotel will boast ocean views and the same luxury boutique hotel amenities his guests at Shade Hotel Manhattan Beach have come to expect.

"This will be the biggest Shade Hotel ever built," Zislis says. "It will be twice the size of the Manhattan Beach hotel."

A Gardena native and a one-time USC student, Zislis never imagined he'd end up in the hotel business. Starting a new hotel "wasn't in the original plan," he explains. "After launching Rock'N Fish, I was trying to lease the spot where Junior's Deli went in at the Metlox development."

A hotel was part of the plan for the development of the old pottery factory, but no one seemed to want to take on a project of that scope. "I thought, 'I can do the hotel,'" recalls Zislis. "Dumb idea! I was in way over my head, it consumed my life for a few years to get it open, but it's the best thing I ever did."

A natural entrepreneur, Zislis, who learned to make beer for a science class at age 13, broke into the local restaurant scene more than 25 years ago when he opened Manhattan Beach Brewery. His interest in craft beer—long before it became trendy—enabled him to travel around the country, establishing new brew pubs.

"During those travels, I got to eat at some great restaurants," notes Zislis. "I always thought Manhattan Beach didn't quite make the mark like other cities including Seattle, San Francisco and Chicago. The South Bay was a wasteland."

Into that blank canvas he introduced Rock'N Fish in Manhattan Beach, which featured on one menu some of the dishes he enjoyed in some of the places he had visited. "It was a combination of New York, New Orleans, Seattle, San Francisco," he describes. "You could have cioppino, the halibut or the rib eye."

It was the success of Rock'N Fish that, according to Zislis, caught the attention of other restaurateurs and helped launch Manhattan Beach's foodie scene. "People saw the volume I was doing, and it brought other restaurants into town." He adds, "We don't really compete, we all know each other."

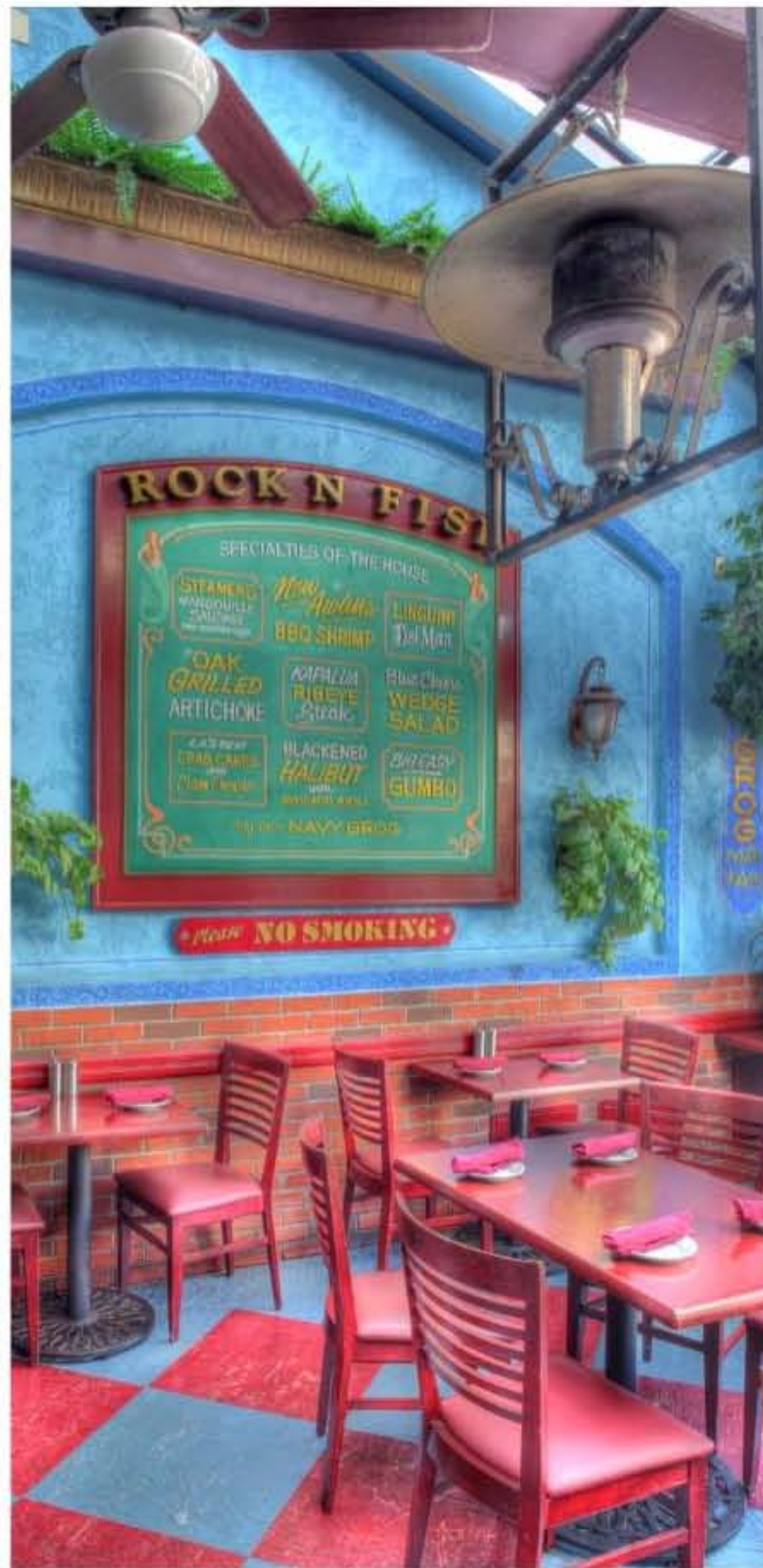
Zislis found he could transfer his knowledge of restaurant design to help find his way on the first Shade Hotel project. "When you think of design spaces, you look at a restaurant and design a kitchen, a bathroom, a dining room. A hotel is 60 different spaces, including laundry and a lobby."

Since it opened, Shade Manhattan Beach has garnered top spots on hot lists compiled by well-known travel websites and magazines. Zislis intends to duplicate the success at the Redondo Beach property, which sits on a two-and-a-half acre parcel and provides more space to work with than the Manhattan Beach site.



LOCAL TASTEMAKER





Renderings of the new hotel on the property's website show a sleek, minimalist design that complements the ocean backdrop. The hotel will include 54 rooms, conference and event space, a rooftop pool and a second Zinc@Shade restaurant and bar. The detailed room renderings offer a tantalizing preview of how a 'King Deluxe Spa Room' will look: natural wood and granite in a spacious room and separate sitting area, with a spa tub overlooking the harbor.

One of the more frustrating challenges Zislis faced with the Redondo Beach site was the quality of the soil. "The land at the harbor front is worse than any place in the world," Zislis remarks. "Remember the Marina earthquake in San Francisco? This is a similar situation. The sand is silt—it's like talcum powder."

Construction crews had to put 750 60-foot gravel columns into the ground, each eight feet wide, to reinforce the ground and provide a more solid foundation. The gravel alone cost \$1.5 million.

"The good news is all those crazy things are behind us," Zislis says. The steel structure is scheduled to go up in January, and at press time the sewage lines and infrastructure are in place. All of the furniture has been ordered, and Zislis expects to begin training employees in September of 2015, which would allow him to open in time for next year's holiday season.

In the meantime, Zislis is trying to limit opening new ventures, although he continues to work on expanding the Rock & Brews line of business. Described in the restaurant's press materials as a 'one-of-a-kind restaurant and entertainment concept,' Rock & Brews was established by Zislis and four business partners, including Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons of the iconic rock band, KISS. The first location opened two years ago in El Segundo, followed by a Redondo Beach restaurant on Pacific Coast Highway.

Zislis, who lives in Manhattan Beach with his wife and children, has turned the Rock & Brews expansion into an opportunity to spend quality time with his family. "We've been traveling around opening Rock & Brews all over," he notes. "We opened one in Hawaii, another in Albuquerque, one in Florida and one in Mexico."

In early December, Zislis and his partners will be opening a new Rock & Brews restaurant in Cabo San Lucas. "I'm bringing the family. My kids think Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley are their cousins," he quips.

It could be said that Zislis's formula for succeeding in the restaurant business can apply to the hotel industry as well. "The number one word you never see in a business plan but that I heard the most is consistency. Your customers will know what the rib eye will taste like and what the fish will taste like and the great service you'll get. People have a choice on where to spend their money. You don't want to take a risk and have it be great the first time, and the next time it's crap."