

Charles Woodsby

CO-FOUNDER OF RED LOBSTER AND FOUNDER/CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF TALK OF THE TOWN RESTAURANT GROUP

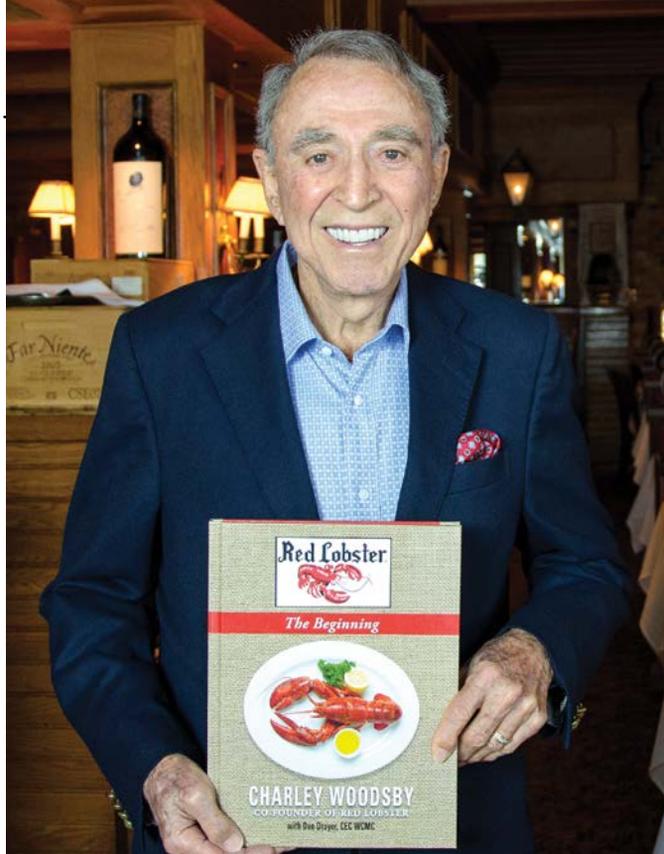
Charley Woodsby has been involved in the restaurant industry with a career spanning over 60 years. He began his career by attending culinary school in New York City and in 1954 opened his first restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia. He then moved to Jacksonville, Florida, in 1960 and formed a business partnership that would change the rest of his life. This partnership owned and operated numerous successful restaurants in Florida, and in 1968, they opened the very first Red Lobster in Lakeland. In two years the partnership sold all five of their Red Lobsters to General Mills. Charley stayed on with the company to open 72 Red Lobster Restaurants across the country.

At the age of 42, Charley left the General Mills organization to retire, but in just one year, Charley was back in business with his son, Ron. Together they opened the first Talk of the Town Restaurants in Lakeland, Florida. Over the next five years, they opened Talk of the Town Restaurants in Winter Haven, Clearwater, St. Petersburg and Orlando.

In 1984, they took their restaurants in a new direction and opened a high-end steakhouse using only the highest quality and standards. Talk of the Town Restaurant in Orlando became "Charley's Steak House," and the rest is history. In 2006, Woodsby was honored with the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association's Lifetime Achievement Award. While semi-retired, Charley stays active and formed a charitable foundation in 1992 that supports a multitude of programs designed to help the needy in the United States and Honduras.

How did you get started in the hospitality industry? After I married Jean in 1951, we decided to move to New York to find our future. My brother and his wife were living there and seemed to be doing really well. I took a job in the same diner where my brother worked. I seemed to enjoy the restaurant business and interacting with the people so I decided to attend culinary school at night. In 1955, after graduation, we took our savings of \$14,000 and moved to Atlanta where I purchased a tea room. I soon developed a passion for the restaurant business.

Early in your career, what was the most valuable lesson you learned? The most valuable lesson I learned is that the guest is always right. I had a customer who came in every week and ordered the fried shrimp. One night he called me over and said, "Charley, these shrimp are not right." I explained to him that we had run out of Florida East Coast shrimp and had ordered Honduran white shrimp that were just as sweet. I defended my decision to do that and got a little combative with him. Well, I did not see him the next week or the week after that. I had lost a valuable customer. No matter what the issue is, the customer is always right. I have carried this throughout my career.



Do you have any mentors who were instrumental in helping you achieve your goals?

I came from a family of nine where we all had to pitch in to make ends meet. We often had relatives living with us who could not find work. My parents worked hard to keep a roof over our heads and our bellies full, which taught me a valuable lesson. So, I'd have to say it was living through these hard times that motivated me to strive for a better way of life.

What is the single greatest factor in the success of your career?

My motto has always been quality, value, service and integrity; be honest, be truthful and treat people with respect. My faith has also always been very important to me. I believe God guided me in all directions of my life, putting the right opportunities and the right people before me at the right time.

Please explain to readers how you decided to diversify Talk of the Town Restaurant Group?

We wanted the location of all the restaurants to be in Central Florida not too far from the corporate office. At the time, the population of Orlando could not support just one brand, so we decided to open multiple brands. We tried multiple concepts before the first Charley's Steak House opened. With the success of Charley's, we realized that fine dining restaurants were the way to go. From there, we developed FishBones, Vito's Italian Chop House, MoonFish and Johnnie's Hideaway.

Is there anything you would like to share with Florida's hospitality industry members?

I truly believe nothing comes easy. Anything is possible if you are willing to work hard. Embrace your dreams with passion. One person with passion is better than a hundred with only an interest. Believe you can and you will.