

Tellers Chophouse relies on retaining staff, watching costs

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Never underestimate the "Cheers" factor.

Being that place, "where everybody knows your name," is just one piece of the equation that has carried the upscale Islip restaurant known as Tellers Chophouse through to its 10th anniversary.

As the restaurant celebrates this week, Michael Bohlsen, who owns and operates Tellers with his family, reflected on the strategies and innovations they have

adopted to keep the eatery relevant during some of the toughest conditions restaurants have seen in decades.

"We're lucky to be in that niche where people treat themselves - maybe not as often and maybe they don't spend as much," said Bohlsen, who runs the business with his brother, Kurt. "We are the place . . . where everybody knows your name."

For starters, that means retaining employees and keeping morale high. The staff has health benefits as well as a 401(k) plan and the Bohlsens' company, which includes three other restaurants in [Suffolk](#), pays for additional employee training or education. Low turnover also keeps costs down, he noted.

"When times are tough and not going so well outside, [we] give them some reassuring sense of stability," he said.

The restaurant's strategy is focused on customer traffic rather than check average, he said. The prices of top menu items climbed about 10 percent in the last decade, while the restaurant's costs for those items rose almost 35 percent.

So Tellers has expanded its menu, catering to both changing tastes and changing spending habits. In addition to the top tier [USDA](#) prime 21-day, dry-aged steaks, the restaurant also offers lower-priced steaks from grass-fed, hormone- and steroid-free steer on boutique ranches, Bohlsen said.

Moving with customers' broadening tastes, its menu includes seafood, pasta, chicken and sushi. The restaurant also has added lower-priced bottles of wine.

Tellers will soon filter and carbonate its own water, eliminating waste, the costs associated with transporting and recycling bottles and an added cost for the customer, he said. The family also is exploring a system used in [Europe](#) to deliver high-quality imported and domestic wines on tap.

"We are trying to think of ways to save money on the wholesale end so we can give people a break on the retail end," Bohlsen said.

Traffic in the fine-dining category was down by 14 percent for the March-through- May period, said Bonnie Riggs, restaurant industry analyst with the NPD Group, a Port Washington-based market research firm. In the [New York](#) market, the number of fine-dining independents dropped by 1.2 percent, she said.

Traffic for the overall industry fell 2.6 percent -- the worst in 28 years. Bohlsen declined to say how much Tellers' revenues are down this year but did say the restaurant is making a profit.

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