

The Final Course

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
May 2019

Royal Bavarian Schnitzel Haus closure explained



or 15 years, until the locks were changed February 2, Royal Bavarian Schnitzel Haus won raves for the recipes owner Alex Richter attributed to his mother’s kitchen and his childhood in Munich.

Richter, 68 years old, had built up the establishment at 1085 NE 79th St. with drive, skill, obsession, and sheer cussedness. He opened Schnitzel Haus in 2004, after closing its predecessor, Edelweis, after an eight-year run at Biscayne Boulevard and 26th Street. Tall and slim, with close-cropped white hair and a light goatee, he greeted customers right up to the end with a smile and his signature black T-shirt.

Visit YouTube, and you’ll see the 2011 broadcast of chef Michelle Bernstein’s *Check Please! South Florida* with guest reviewers singing praises for Richter’s subtly realized schnitzels, wursts, apple fritters, and potato pancakes, and comments on the friendly vibe, prompt service, and “kitschy but cool” ambiance (a disco ball hangs incongruously from the ceiling).

But over the past few years, Richter has had to battle rent increases, Hurricane Irma, two strokes, a mild heart attack, dizzy spells, sudden seizures, and changing tastes.

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In his last Facebook entry dating from June 2018, Richter posted a picture of himself with record producer Frank Farian, flashing a smile and wearing a black T-shirt inscribed: “Rule 1: Never Quit. Rule 2: Never Forget Rule 1.”



As his fortunes took a turn, Richter tried to tighten his grip. He had to let go of staff and did all the cooking himself from March 2018. He gave up his black 2000 Pontiac Firebird. Then last October came an eviction complaint, and in February the actual eviction.

Richter has battled the distress with willpower. He first tried to get his restaurant back, then refined plans for a catering business. He wanted to take out an ad thanking his customers. He was showing signs of stress but resisted entreaties to check himself into a hospital.

“When you go to a hospital, who’s going to run the restaurant?” he said April 22, just before catching a ride to the restaurant with a reporter from the *BT*, to check his mail. “Tight margins are part of this business, and you have to reinvent, reinvent. We brought in music videos. I could direct catering, cook for people, go to houses.”

Just after pulling his mail from the box, Richter suddenly called, “Help!” as he fell face-first onto the pavement in a sudden seizure, scattering his mail. Although his face was bloodied and bruised, he refused an ambulance or the seven-mile drive to Jackson Memorial Hospital, but ultimately relented and stayed there four days under observation. When he was discharged, it was with instructions to avoid further stress.

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When Richter first signed his lease on the Schnitzel Haus property, he was paying \$2000 a month and agreed to pay half the annual property taxes. In March 2014, he signed a five-year lease with rent increases from \$3354 for 2014-15 to \$4077 for the year ended this March 31, followed by three ten-year options.

“That was to be my retirement,” says Richter, who says he put \$120,000 into the property to twice repair the roof of the 1940 building, install new toilets, floors, and the Biergarten in back, and remove the forbidding iron gates from the stretch that was dark and crime-ridden in 2004.

“The neighborhood went from horrible to nice in the past 15 years,” he says. “It’s residential and pretty safe, with new people moving in. But German food is not trendy food. Models don’t ask other models if they want to go out for sausage.”

The property rental is now listed at \$8000 a month, marked down from \$9500, with 40 seats in front, 60 in the outdoor Biergarten in the rear, and 22 parking spaces behind it. The menu for \$26 schnitzel dishes is still posted by the locked Biergarten entrance. Richter’s equipment, artwork, wine and beer, and mementos remain inside, and he wants it all back.

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Richter has a green card but no Medicare, no Social Security, no income anymore, and dwindling savings. He lives alone in an apartment that costs \$1500 per month. The real signs of home are inside the locked Schnitzel Haus premises.

Agent of record for the new listing: Sins of South Beach Realty and Alex Daoud, Miami Beach mayor from 1985-91, ex-lawyer, ex-felon, and author of the 2006 book *Sins of South Beach: The True Story of Corruption, Violence, Murder, and the Making of Miami Beach*. Call the number on the sign, and there's a good chance that Alex Daoud himself will answer.

Richter says Daoud drove him out so he could double or triple the rent in the fast-rising neighborhood. As real estate has boomed in the area, so have property taxes, which have risen 65 percent in five years to \$8153. The assessed value is listed as \$571,420, more than double that of a year earlier.

Says Alex Daoud: "I like Alex and tried to do everything I could to keep him afloat. He'd been there 15 years, but he owed \$30,000 in back rent and back taxes. I had to borrow to pay the taxes and couldn't carry him anymore."

"It was just downhill," explains Jerrold W. Engelman, the Miami Beach attorney who filed the eviction complaint last fall. "Alex [Daoud] just wanted to carry him. He'd been a tenant for 15 years. So we worked out plans. For the last one, we saw the handwriting on the wall. Everybody knew it was just a Band-Aid to carry him through the end of the year."

Richter says Daoud would sometimes hold on to his checks for months and deposit them all at once, causing cash-flow crises. When such a series of deposits landed shortly before the eviction and bounced, Richter said, he could only manage a \$9600 cashier's check of the \$12,000 owed. By then it couldn't save him.

Since his release in 1995, after 17 months in federal prison following a conviction on bribery and other corruption charges, Daoud has not stayed far from controversy. He has yet to take down a website with venomous attacks on his daughter, Kelly Daoud Hyman, an attorney, who sued to evict her father from the three-bedroom house in the 1700 block of Michigan Avenue. In late 2014, a judge upheld Daoud's right to live out his days in the house. Daoud is about to turn 76, says he is in poor health, has difficulty walking, and lives almost entirely on Social Security.

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That house was purchased in 2005 through Bouganvilla Investments Inc., a corporation registered in his daughter's name, because, Daoud has acknowledged, he had little income and no credit at the time. He is a partner in the corporation. Bouganvilla sued the seller for changing his mind about the sale; that case was settled for \$637,500, and Alex Daoud moved from the one-bedroom apartment across the street into the house.

Real estate consultant Michael Maxwell, a longtime Schnitzel Haus customer, says Richter's restaurant was one of a kind but was hobbled by its location, an ever-more competitive restaurant market, and the grueling challenges of the business.

"The location was a problem," Maxwell says of the site on the north side of 79th, just west of the John F. Kennedy Causeway. "It's really secondary, even tertiary, right in the path of traffic coming right off the causeway.

"Alex has been a South Florida staple for 20, 30 years," says Maxwell. "My kids grew up there. He was actually flying beer over here from Germany. He had the best damn beer in town.

"There was no German food like it in South Florida," he adds. "Alex is a sweetheart and we love him to death."

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com