

The Choura Family Legacy: Growing Businesses For More Than 80 Years

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Long Beach Business Journal

With ownership of The Grand at Willow Street Centre, the Long Beach Airport Prop Room Restaurant, El Dorado Country Club Restaurant, The Galley Catering Company (a division of which produces hummus for local health food stores), A-Superior Construction Company, eight residential care food service operations and three Long Beach Unified School District in-school food service operations, Jim Choura is a busy man, leading a productive life in the service of others.

This is proven by the fact that, in addition to overseeing all of these business ventures, Choura still finds time to stay involved with several non-profit and community-based organizations, as well as professional associations.

The legacy began in 1919, when Jim Choura's grandfather opened 26th Street Market, a butcher shop that grew to be a small chain in Chicago. (Grandfather Choura used to deliver meat to the infamous Al Capone!) Choura's grandfather moved to California in 1948 to start a family, and by the mid-1950s, the family business had expanded into produce, creating full-service food stores known as the McCoy's Market chain.

Jim Choura became the youngest journeyman meat cutter in all of Southern California, at age 16, in 1964. He said, I was a meat cutter all the way through college and, in my senior year, we started The Galley Sandwich Shop, at 4500 Los Coyotes Diagonal. That was in 1969.

Although the Galley Sandwich Shop closed in 1987, Choura said, "Even today, people remember it. We'd do up to 400 lunches there, everyday. There'd be a line all the way out the door and we had a guarantee that you'd get your sandwich in seven minutes or less, or else it was free. It became kind of a phenomenon."

By 1975, booming business encouraged the Chouras to open The Galley Catering Company, near Long Beach City College. What started as a 5,000-square-foot catering service with a 200-person capacity banquet hall has since given Choura the experience and reputation that enabled him to develop a 40,000-square-foot, 1,870-person capacity conference center, known as "The Grand," today.

Choura took over the El Dorado Country Club Restaurant in 1983. "At the time," he said, "it was one of those snack bar "get-a-hot-dog-and-go" type places." After extensive remodeling, the snack bar became an elegant restaurant befitting the country club environment. Choura said, "After about eight or 10 years, it was busier than all the other golf course restaurants combined, in the City of Long Beach."

In the mid-1990s, local airport management approached Jim Choura about the possibility of taking over The Long Beach Airport Prop Room, an authentic Art Deco-style restaurant/cocktail bar located upstairs, in the terminal building of the historic local airport. Under Choura's management, The Prop Room's attendance levels took off.

"We ended up having 70 percent of our business coming from non-travel clients," he said. "That was when the [flight allocation] was lowered [to 41 flights per day]. Can you imagine building up business at an airport that doesn't have travellers? It's a bit of a contradiction, but it worked. In fact, we've received, over the years, three "Best Brunch of the Year Awards" from the Reader's Choice [survey conducted by] The Press Telegram. We still do a great brunch over there. We serve 200 to 300 people on Sundays.

(Choura also handles the airport gift shop, the snack bar and vending machines.)

In 1996, local businessman Don Temple purchased the former Elk's Lodge, located at 4101 E. Willow St., which now houses The Grand. Choura and Temple entered into a business partnership whereby Choura brought The Galley Catering Company to that location. The catering service, combined with an extensively remodeled facility, became the perfect vehicle for operating a multi-room banquet/conference center.

The Grand encompasses six different rooms totaling more than 40,000 square feet. It's conveniently located next to several hotels and has a 450-car parking structure, for greater customer convenience. The Grand's largest room seats 600. The other rooms range from 125 to 200 persons, in capacity.

Now entering its third year of operations, Choura said that one-third of The Grand's business comes from weddings, another third accommodates non-profits and community-based organizations, while the final third serves corporate clientele, providing space for seminars and conferences.

According to Choura, The Galley's catering menu reflects the diversity of the Long Beach community. He said, "The cultural diversity here is just amazing. We've always been interested in meeting cultural variances, so our cooking is broad, across the spectrum. There are lots of Latino functions here. There are Arabic functions and Cambodian functions. We've been able to serve other Asian variances, too, creating Japanese and Chinese menus. It's really neat and we're open to all of that."

Many vegetarian entrees are available, as well as one aspect of the menu that is fairly rare, according to Choura. That's the Glott Kosher menu of "rabbinnically-supervised cooking," said Choura. "It brings something special to Long Beach, because it's regionally unique. Orange County and Beverly Hills are the only other places where you'll find Glott Kosher [available at conference] centers."

Choura hand-picks the menu ingredients. He said, "Our real expertise comes from our background in the meat and produce industry. It's a really good augment because, when I see any of the chefs at any of our locations, I can look them in the eye and know what they've been cooking. It comes down to quality. You need to serve really good food. There's just no substitute."

With regard to planning special events and providing decor, as well as technological resources, Choura said, "We operate just like all the hotels. The only difference is that we're about 30 percent under hotel pricing."

The Grand also provides a comprehensive Internet presence allowing clients to move through the process of event planning online. Choura said, "As far as I know, this is unique. We have a Web site, www.thegrand.net, so you can design your own party on the net. And we actually include our prices. That's unheard of. Most of the time, people want to find out how much you can afford before they give you a budget. We've also put in [web] links to people we'd recommend as DJs, florists or photographers. That's really working well for us."

Choura employs 60 people at The Grand, alone, and estimates that he employs 190 people total, including all of his other ventures. Choura noted, "The first person I ever hired still works for us. It's kind of a family atmosphere. We promote from within. Staff is a big deal, because it's not just what you serve, it's how you serve it. With a wedding, it's nice to have 150 people here, all partying, but we're still serving one guest at a time. That's our philosophy, because those guests could be our next customers."

Choura's latest project-in-progress is planning food service for a major development happening in the City of Bellflower. This development takes several acres of municipal golf course and turns it into a multi-faceted recreation center including a paintball gaming facility, a mountain-climbing wall, go-carts, a BMX bicycle course, a skate park and 12 acres of corporate picnic grounds. "It's really exciting," he said. "It will put Bellflower on the map. That should be opening in June of 2001."

Choura has certainly become a part of the Long Beach community since his family arrived more than 50 years ago. According to Choura, 11 percent of his gross sales goes back into non-profit organizations. He serves as an executive board member for ChildNet, a youth services organization, and is a governor of the Long Beach Education Foundation board. Choura also helps out at the Los Alamitos Youth Home.

Choura was selected as business person of the month by the Long Beach Area Chamber of Commerce last month. (He also belongs to 10 other chambers of commerce in cities where he conducts business.) He is a life member of the Optimists Club. Choura noted, "Last year, we were selected for an "Ethics of America" business award by Chapman College. It was presented to me by Governor Davis and I'm very proud of that. You don't do things to get things, but it is nice when you get recognition."

Call The Grand at 562/426-0555 for more information.

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