

Southern Gem

Table 301 Restaurant Group brings southern hospitality to the forefront in Greenville, South Carolina

BY LAURA PELNER



For entrepreneur Carl Sobocinski, providing top-notch hospitality and a great guest experience are the key factors to running a successful restaurant. Food and beverage are important, of course, and design and ambiance make a difference, but proper service and respect for guests is critical. "Great service can overcome mediocre food and beverage, but great food and drinks don't overcome mediocre service," Sobocinski says. As the founder and president of Greenville, South Carolina's Table 301 Restaurant Group—which celebrates 25 years in business this year—Sobocinski knows a thing or two about operating restaurants and bars for the long haul. And he keeps coming back to customers service as the critical piece that holds it all together and has helped his company survive and flourish for a quarter century.

"We hope when folks walk into our restaurants that they notice the level of hospitality and the way we treat our guests," Sobocinski says. "That's the one element of the restaurant that is critical. People have tons of choices for dining out, but not every restaurant looks and feels like ours, and not everyone takes care of guests the way we do."

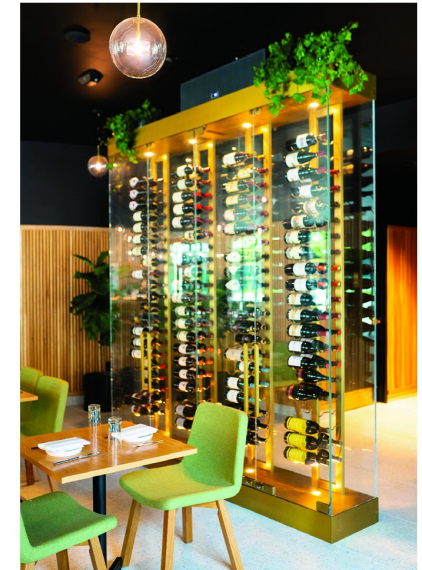


Table 301 Restaurant Group operates four venues in Greenville, South Carolina. Its Camp concept (bar and wine display pictured) has a bustling bar program with creative mixologists who make their own syrups, shrubs, and bitters. Beverage sales equal food sales at Camp, where the bar is a high priority.



Table 301 founder and president Carl Sobocinski (left) says that drinks are equally important to food at his company's restaurants. Specialty cocktails like the Rose Colored Glasses (center) and Morning Glory (right) at Camp attract consumer attention.

TABLE 301 RESTAURANT GROUP AT A GLANCE

Founded	1997 with the opening of Soby's New South Cuisine
Key Executives	Founder and president Carl Sobocinski, vice president and COO Steve Seitz, director of operations Brian Crossan, beverage director Joe Crossan, corporate chef Rodney Freidank
Headquarters	Greenville, South Carolina
Number of Units	Four full-service restaurants, plus a juice bar and a catering arm
Annual Revenue	More than \$20 million this year
Sales Breakdown	65% food to 35% beverage. Wine dominates drinks sales, comprising 50% of the total beverage component, followed by spirits at 40% and beer at 10%.
Website	Table301.com
Future Plans	The company is working on a new concept—a locally minded seafood eatery that will replace its former breakfast spot, which closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and never reopened. In addition, executives are continuing to expand the wine program at Soby's by adding on to its cellar to more than double its capacity.

Table 301 Restaurant Group is a dominant player in Greenville, an urban city in the northwestern part of South Carolina that's situated along the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and roughly equidistant between Charlotte, North Carolina and Atlanta. It's a destination for both tourists and business travelers, boasting a thriving downtown area where Table 301 has set its home base. Table 301 operates four full-service restaurants, along with a juice bar and a catering business, and has ties to a few other venues with plans to open more. All of the company's operations are located near each other in the heart of downtown—within a three-block radius—and each offers a unique experience.

The company's concepts are varied and there's little overlap among them, save for prioritizing hospitality and a few key design elements. Table 301 operates its flagship Lowcountry Southern-focused Soby's New South Cuisine along with the Mediterranean-infused The Lazy Goat, the gastropub Nose Dive, and the modern American eatery Camp. Total company revenue is expected to top \$20 million this year, with beverage alcohol making up 35% of that total company-wide.

Because they're so close to each other geographically, Sobocinski says the company's venues have to be distinct. "They're different in concept, design, and menu, but the common element is our philosophy and passion for hospitality," he explains, adding that each of his restaurants also has an open kitchen and an outdoor seating area, as well as a vibrant bar. "We like to have the bar close to the street, where people can see it. Having a bar visible from the street makes the place feel like it's full and energetic."



Soby's New South Cuisine (top) is Table 301's flagship concept and a destination for guests in Greenville, South Carolina. Wine is huge at Soby's (wine cellar shown left), though cocktails like the Bourbon-based Basil Bullet (above right) also do well.

A Man With A Plan

Sobocinski graduated from Clemson University in the early '90s with a degree in architecture but realized pretty quickly that he preferred hospitality work. He opened Soby's New South Cuisine in 1997 in downtown Greenville, cementing his place in the city's on-premise scene. In the 25 years since, Greenville has benefited from revitalization and renewal, and Sobocinski and his restaurants have been key players in that effort. "Soby's was here while downtown was being revitalized, we grew up with Greenville," Sobocinski says. "Soby's is usually one of the two or

three places people say to visit when you're here. It represents what the South is about and what Greenville is about."

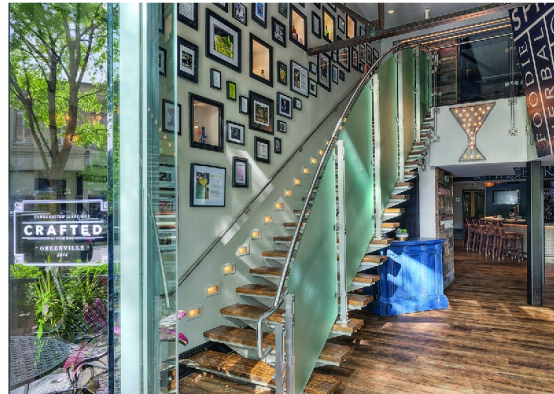
The menu at Soby's highlights Southern comfort food but also includes some adventurous fare. Entrées range from staples like shrimp and grits and fried chicken with mac and cheese to modern southern interpretations of duck confit, ponzu-marinated tofu, and seared striped bass served over creole spiced crawfish and andouille sausage rice (starters are \$7-\$16; entrées are \$21-\$42). Soby's offers brunch on the weekends, serving a variety of sweet and savory breakfast and lunch items complemented



by specialty Mimosas and Bloody Mary's (brunch food is \$6-\$25; drinks are \$3.01—for the company's name—to \$20). The signature Soby's Classic Bloody Mary mixes Tito's vodka with house-made bloody mary mix and lemon and lime juices, garnished with a blue cheese-stuffed olive and a slice of bacon, and the venue also offers a Kentucky Bloody Mary that swaps in Maker's Mark Bourbon for the vodka.

American whiskies do well at Soby's. The venue's bar offers several Bourbon- and rye-based drinks, like the specialty Midnight Train to Georgia, made with Rittenhouse rye, Aperol, Ramazzotti amaro, Blended Family Peach liqueur, and lemon juice, and such classics as a Knob Creek rye-based Boulevardier and Elijah Craig Small Batch Bourbon-based Kentucky Mule (cocktails are \$10-\$15). Soby's most popular mixed drink, though, is its Signature Old Fashioned, made with the restaurant's own private barrel of Maker's Mark Bourbon, Fee Brothers Black Walnut bitters, and demerara syrup, served over a big cube of ice.

"The Old Fashioned at Soby's is our top-selling drink and probably outsells every other drink on the menu by four times," says Joe Crossan, Table 301's beverage director. "It seems like a lot of the classics are coming back with a twist and we're putting our spins on them." Crossan adds that Bourbon is always popular at Table 301 bars due to the company's Southern slant, and that tequila is also doing well, and consumers are showing interest in amaros and sherries, too.



The gastropub Nose Dive (top) serves Southern comfort food with craft cocktails and beers. The restaurant houses a separate bar concept, called Craft, upstairs (entry shows above) in its mezzanine that focuses on bespoke drinks, along with classic and new cocktails, and has its own unique menu.

Even with this bustling bar program and a creative cocktail menu, Soby's top beverage mover is wine. Crossan says wine is "extraordinarily important" at Soby's and boasts that the restaurant reportedly has the largest wine cellar in South Carolina. Currently, Soby's cellars roughly 7,500 bottles of wine spanning 1,500 labels, and the company has plans to more than double that capacity this year as it expands the venue's cellar. The wine

list is global in reach, offering myriad labels from Old World and New World winemaking regions (\$9-\$20 a glass; \$25-\$225 a 375-ml.; \$35-\$8,995 a 750-ml.).

"When I got to Soby's, the wine list was 11 pages and now it's 50 pages," Crossan says. "We offer a pretty expansive list of wines by the glass, but we also sell a lot of bottled wine. Every one of our restaurants has a substantial bottle list." He notes that classics from Bordeaux and Rioja do well but adds that high tone and natural wines are also gaining ground at Table 301 venues, led currently by on-trend *petillant-naturel*, or *pét-nat*, sparkling offerings. Company-wide, wine makes up



Sobocinski (standing and addressing staff) is committed to the guest experience and emphasizes hospitality at each of his restaurants. He looks at trends in larger markets and adapts them to his Greenville, South Carolina, clientele.

50% of total beverage sales, followed by spirits at 40% and beer at 10%.

Soby's has won MARKET WATCH sister publication Wine Spectator's Best of Award of Excellence for many years, and Sobocinski says the company is now setting its sights on the Wine Spectator Grand Award to further prove its commitment to fine wine. "We're really driven to get that Grand Award at Soby's and we're expanding our cellar there," Sobocinski says. "We're doubling the size of our cellar and our next investment will be financial to build up our bottle supply. Beverage will always play an equally important role to food in our company."

Always Looking Ahead

Sobocinski knew from the start that he wanted to run a restaurant company as opposed to managing a single venue. He wrote a business plan before opening Soby's that included a five-year forecast, in which were details for future restaurants. That planning has been a contributing factor to Table 301's success, Sobocinski says, noting that having multiple different

concepts in one city is more appealing to him than replicating the same concept many times over.

Table 301's portfolio also includes The Lazy Goat, a Mediterranean eatery that takes inspiration from Spain, Morocco, Italy, France, Greece, Africa, and the Middle East. The Lazy Goat offers, charcuterie, falafel, pasta, and flatbreads, as well as larger entrées like paella and Tavuk Shish, alongside a ribeye and a pork tenderloin (food is \$8-\$45). The venue's wine and cocktail lists have roots in the same countries. The Lazy Goat lists wines from Italy, France, and Spain with offerings from Greece, Lebanon, and Israel (\$9-\$13 a glass; \$34-\$185 a 750-ml.). The restaurant also offers a variety of big name and local craft beers (\$4-\$7 a bottle or can), and cocktails like the Milan Manhattan, made with Rittenhouse rye, Fernet Branca, Dolin Rouge vermouth, orange juice, and sugar, and the Marrakech Garden, blending New Amsterdam gin, simple syrup, and cold-pressed kale and arugula juice from the company's sister concept Southern Pressed Juicery (cocktails are \$9-\$15).

Nose Dive is Table 301's casual gastropub concept, emphasizing urban comfort food with craft cocktails and beers. Burgers, sandwiches, and mac and cheese are joined by fried chicken and waffles and Pabst Blue Ribbon-battered fish and chips (\$9-\$22). Along with a bar in its main dining area, Nose Dive houses a second bar—called Craft—on its mezzanine level that serves bespoke cocktails. Nose Dive's drinks menu includes seasonal offerings (\$9-\$12) and myriad whiskies (\$7-\$19 a 2-ounce pour), along with roughly 30 beers (\$4-\$10 a draft pour, bottle, or can) and approachable wines (\$7.50-\$11.50 a glass; \$28-\$42 a 750-ml.). Meanwhile, the upstairs Craft bar has its own lengthy list of classic cocktails and new signatures (\$11-\$14), as well as beers (\$4-\$8 a draft pour, bottle, or can) and wine (\$7.50-\$13 a glass; \$28-\$42 a 750-ml.).

Rounding out Table 301's portfolio of full-service restaurants, the modern American venue Camp boasts the company's most expansive beverage program, and drinks and food split sales equally here. Bartenders at Camp make their own syrups, shrubs, and bitters and offer both traditional and draft cocktails. Standouts include the GQ, mixing Dewars White Label Scotch with Chinola liqueur, John D. Taylor's Velvet Falernum liqueur, Hilton Head Distillery's Toasted Coconut rum, and lemon juice, and the Wannabe, a draft pour made with Mi Campo Blanco Tequila, St-Germain liqueur, lime juice, and cucumber-jalapeno syrup (cocktails are \$12-\$16). Wine is also on high-display at Camp, as the venue features a floor-to-ceiling wine wall showcasing its selections (\$9-\$20 a glass; \$35-\$575 a 750-ml.). Staying locally minded, Camp lists several beers made in both South Carolina and North Carolina, too (\$4-\$9 a bottle or can).

"All our restaurants are super different, which makes the beverage program fun," Crossan says. "We support smaller brands as much as possible on the beverage side, with local beers, wines from family-owned producers, and more artisan products from



Table 301's Mediterranean venue The Lazy Goat (patio left, bar right) boasts a beverage program with specialty cocktails, wines, and well-known and local craft beers. The venue highlights drinks and food from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.



restaurants have a unique, fun design. And we always seek out a space that has a sidewalk dining component or an outdoor patio. Three of our restaurants have doors that open fully so we can bring the outside in."

The clientele at Table 301 venues is split between locals and business travelers. Sobocinski says there are more than 2,000 hotel rooms in downtown Greenville, South Carolina, noting that business clientele dominates the restaurants Monday through Thursday and locals are more prevalent on weekends and for brunch. The local community is important to Sobocinski and he makes an effort to support local groups and charities.

smaller distributors. We market our bars actively. The beverage menus change quarterly, but we make small changes all the time and when we do we put it on social media. Our bar business is better than ever." Crossan adds that during this spring, three of the company's restaurants had their best months ever in bar sales, including the 25-year-old Soby's, which is a testament to how vibrant the bar business is at Table 301.

In addition to these restaurants, Table 301 manages Southern Pressed Juicery, a juice bar and café that offers snacks, energy bowls, wraps, and salads. The company also runs a catering business, for which it often uses its Highway 301 food truck. Table 301 is working on a new concept too, a seafood-focused lunch and dinner spot set to replace its former breakfast eatery that closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and never reopened.

High Style

While restaurants are his passion, Sobocinski calls on his architecture background regularly. The entrepreneur admits to having an eye for design and says that when he scouts new venue locations or looks at concept renderings, he immediately starts visualizing the possibilities. Open kitchens are important, he adds, likening chefs to celebrities that guests like to watch. "We have a 'no walls' dining experience," Sobocinski says. "All of our restau-

"The true measure of success is how you engage and involve yourself in your community," he says. To that end, Sobocinski created the city's Euphoria food, wine, and music festival in the early 2000s, working with singer and Greenville native Edwin McCain, and that has grown from a celebration that filled a day and a half with ten events to a four-day extravaganza with more than 50 events. This year's Euphoria, to be held in September, will include presentations from renowned chefs, winery owners, and spirits professionals, complemented by wine tastings, cocktail classes, dinners, and music performances.

Sobocinski is also committed to giving back to his staff. The restaurateur began a program in 2018 that allows for Table 301's restaurants to be sold to their managing partners or chefs, thereby creating future entrepreneurs. So far, he's sold three of his concepts to his former employees, maintaining a small partnership with each venue and offering support when needed.

"I subscribe to the fact that, to those who much is given, much is expected, and I love to give back," Sobocinski says. "We follow restaurant trends happening around the country. We look to New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, and we see what people are drinking and what they're doing in those cities, and we bring it here, with a focus on the guest experience." 