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CORAL GABLES

Gables club opens with a bubbly bang

BY TANIA VALDEMORO
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The superlatives from people's lips flowed as freely as the bubbly champagne they drank.

"Magnificent! Spectacular! Excellent!" people said as they roamed around the newly renovated Coral Gables Country Club.

The once-private club, built by Coral Gables founder George Merrick in 1923, reopened in grand style Tuesday night, an event that attracted local politicians and at least 1,000 people.

"Welcome back to our country club," Mayor Don Slesnick told the crowd before he cut a large red ribbon at the club's front entrance. "This is a great night. Nick. We want to let you know how happy we are with the restoration."

Nick is Nick Di Donato, the president of Toronto-based Liberty Entertainment Group, which took over the management of the country club in 2008 and spent \$3 million to renovate it.

The country club had closed in April 2008 after the Coral Gables City Commission learned that Granada LLC, the club's former operator, had stopped paying its monthly \$22,500 loan payment for more than a year.

In March, the commission paid nearly \$1.5 million to Granada to settle a lawsuit the company filed against the city in July 2007.



Junior's Band members perform during the grand reopening celebration of the Coral Gables Country Club, Tuesday, Nov. 30, 2010. Several hundred

IF YOU GO

What: A public art exhibit featuring works by Dali, Hart, MacDonald and Varo

When: Running through Sunday

Where: Coral Gables Country Club, 997 N. Greenway Dr.

For hours, call 305-392-0819

Admission: free

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Under Di Donato, the country club has a new look and feel.

"We made it into an event space," he said.

Changes were made to the reception area, the front entrance, the configuration of rooms and the floors. There are now granite and wood floors where there was once carpeting.

The outside entrance has new water features and landscaping as well.

"It's a public space where people can book events," Di Donato said.

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The club’s various rooms can accommodate from 40 to 1,000 people.

As they milled around the country club, guests snapped photos of crystal chandeliers or listened to Junior’s Band play in the reddish glow of the grand ballroom. Still others sampled a seemingly endless array of finger foods, from lamb chops to tacos and sushi.

More than anything, there is a new ethos to the place, a desire to welcome the community and make it an “epicenter,” as Di Donato put it, where people come to meet friends and celebrate milestones.

To that end, Liberty Entertainment Group enlisted Reed Horth, of Robin Rile Fine Art, to curate an art exhibit to coincide with Art Basel Miami Beach. The free event, which is open to the public, runs through Sunday night.

Horth has showcased the sculpture, photography, drawings and prints of emerging artists and so-called “masters,” including Salvador Dali, Richard MacDonald, Frederick Hart and Marton Varo. There are 174 pieces in the exhibit.

Horth said he was inspired by the fact the club was built in 1923 and it was recently updated.

“The concept of the show is a modern play on classical work,” he said.

He showed a bronze sculpture of Venus de Milo by Dali to prove his point.

“Dali updated the Venus de Milo. It has drawers. This was done in 1964,” Horth said.

John Forte, of Coral Gables, admired “Joie de Vivre,” a sculpture by MacDonald that Horth said was one of the artist’s best works.

“This is a happening,” Forte said as he looked around the packed gallery. “I think we’ve been waiting for a long time for the country club to reopen.”

He approved of the makeover.

“It’s magnificent. It fits the times,” Forte said.



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