

Casual Dining Pioneer Mike Nahkunst Dies at 63

Wellington Group Marketing & PR

Austin, TX — Mike Nahkunst, one of the original seven employees that started Chili's in the mid 1970s, died Friday. He was 63 years old. As one of the all-stars that helped create the multi-billion dollar casual dining sector, Mike enjoyed a very successful career in the restaurant industry starting with his first restaurant job at Pelican's Wharf in Austin. Mike became one of the first employees of Chili's Restaurants in Dallas, which later grew into Brinker International. He spent more than 17 years with Brinker International as Senior Vice President. Soon after departing Brinker, Mike moved his family to California to accept the Chief Operating Officer position at The Cheesecake Factory, and later accepted the position of Chief Operating Officer of BJ's Restaurants.

In 2011, Mike secured the top spot as CEO of Kona Grill based in Scottsdale. Mike and his wife, Susan later returned to Austin when he co-founded Austin Restaurant Partners, closing the loop from where he started in the restaurant business stating, "I feel like I have finally come back to the roots of my restaurant passion...the one and only Austin."

Mike had a natural ability to reach people in a deep and positive way as a leader, team builder, mentor, and good friend. From hourly employees to CEOs at many of the leading national restaurant chains, Mike impacted thousands of people in the restaurant industry.

"Mike was a hard working restaurateur, executive and mentor to many. He loved life with the Aloha spirit" says Michael L. Atkinson, Mike's friend and business partner at Austin Restaurant Partners." Mike was a true leader and restaurant business visionary."

"Mike's spirit and love for our industry will greatly be missed. Knowing and working with Mike since the early 1970s at Pelican's Wharf and then at Chili's, we made a lot of memories together," says Creed Ford, CEO of Fired Up Inc., and another member of original seven founding of members of Chili's. "He understood hospitality and that guest satisfaction is the most important driver of a restaurant's success."

For more information please visit mikenahkunst.wordpress.com [1] which includes information about Mike and the memorial service and how to donate to their family's favorite nonprofit "[Keep Austin Fed](#) [2]."

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