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## Mel's Diner going gourmet

By Mark S. Krzos

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Mel's Diner, a staple of Southwest Florida eateries since 1989, is going upscale.

By the end of this year, three more Mel's Diners will open — only they won't be known as Mel's Diner. According to Ralph Desiano, chief executive officer of Mel's Diner, the restaurants will have a new name, new look and new menu.

One of those new diners — in Cape Coral — will have a groundbreaking ceremony at 11 a.m. Thursday near the intersection of Pine Island Road and Del Prado Boulevard.

"The goal by the end of 2006 is to be converted to Mel's Gourmet Diner," Desiano said.

In addition to the name change, all 10 of the area restaurants will be redesigned.

"We're going to warm it up a bit with some earth tones, some plants and bring (the look) up a generation or two," Desiano said. "We want to make it fresh and right for the next 15 years."

Despite remodeling the Mel's Diner in Fort Myers just three years ago, Desiano said with the competition increasing, the time for a change is now.

"We've got to keep the concept fresh," he said.

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Remodeling the 10 existing restaurants is expected to cost \$1 to \$2 million, Desiano said.

Desiano added that another Mel's Gourmet Diner will be built and completed in Naples in early 2007. That restaurant will be built on Tamiami Trail, east of downtown Naples. Two more are planned for Sarasota.

As with any restaurant remodeling, Desiano said some changes to Mel's menu will reflect the addition of the word "gourmet" to its name.

"We're taking some creative license with the word gourmet," he said. "But we do want to upgrade the food. We want to bring it up a notch or two. There's going to be some completely new items that back up that gourmet name. We're happy with our food now, but we want to be able to gloat about it."

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