



**FLORIDA
RESTAURANT &
LODGING
ASSOCIATION**

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Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association Names Hospitality Stars of the Industry at Annual Gala

~Hotelier, Supplier, and Restaurateur of the Year Icons Honored; Rare Lifetime Achievement Award Presented~

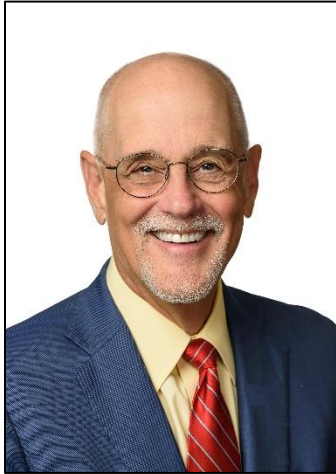


(L-R: Lifetime Achievement Award Winner Don Fox; Supplier of the Year Topher Jensen of Gas South; Restaurateur of the Year Horace Dawson; Hotelier of the Year Diane Schmidt)

CHARLOTTE HARBOR, FL – On Saturday evening, the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) honored its 2024 Hospitality Stars of the Industry Hall of Fame Winners during an evening gala at the Sunseeker Resort. The 2025 FRLA Board Executive Committee and new Chairman of the Board, Nick Sarra of Destin, were also sworn in at the event.

“Recognizing the exceptional achievements of our Hospitality Stars of the Industry is a true honor,” **said Carol Dover, President and CEO of the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association.** “The FRLA Hall of Fame celebrates distinguished leaders whose legacies have left an enduring mark on Florida’s vibrant hospitality landscape, and we are incredibly proud of the 2024 inductees. With more than 140 combined years of service, their unwavering commitment to excellence and innovation has not only elevated our industry but has set the standard that will continue to shape our industry for generations.”

2024 FRLA HALL OF FAME WINNERS



Lifetime Achievement Award: Don Fox, Firehouse Subs (*Retired*), Jacksonville

Don M. Fox is an inspirational leader and engaged advocate with over 50 years in the restaurant industry. He has a proven track record in executive, operational, and staff roles, excelling in building critical franchisee-franchisor relationships. His accolades include the 2011 Operator of the Year from Nation's Restaurant News and the 2013 Silver Plate Award from IFMA. In early 2024, he retired from day-to-day executive management. At Firehouse of America, LLC (2003–2023), Don served as President and CEO, guiding the brand to become one of America's favorite restaurant chains with record sales of \$1.1 billion in 2021, leading to its acquisition by Restaurant Brands International.

His earlier roles included Chief Operating Officer and Director of Franchise Compliance. Prior to Firehouse, he spent 23 years at Burger King Corporation, rising through various management positions. Don is also an accomplished author and public speaker, with over 250 engagements and several published works. He actively serves on various boards –including FRLA, for which he was Chairman in 2017– contributing to industry advancement and community initiatives at both the state and federal levels.

Supplier of the Year: Gas South – Topher Jensen, Gainesville



Gas South's strives to be a Fuel for Good® by caring for customers and employees while uplifting communities. They are known for delivering exceptional value and service, while upholding strong values of integrity and accountability. Since 2006, Gas South has been the largest retail natural gas company in the Southeast, serving 470,000 plus customers. They donate 5% of all profits to help children in need, striving to make a positive impact every day.

Chris "Topher" Jensen is the Director of Commercial and Industrial Sales for Gas South, bringing 15 years of experience in the energy sector. He joined Gas South in 2020 through its merger with Infinite Energy where he spent a decade in various roles, including sales coordinator and commercial sales manager. In 2012, he founded the Infinite Olympics, an initiative that continues to thrive today. Previously, Topher worked in the hospitality industry and earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Florida. He is active in FRLA's Northeast Chapter and Chairs the state Marketing & Allied Member Council. Believing in hard work and a positive attitude, Topher has found success in both his professional and personal life. He has been married to his wife Suzanne for 16 years and they share a talented and funny 13-year-old son, Max.

Restaurateur of the Year: Horace Dawson, Red Lobster (*Retired*), Orlando



Horace Dawson recently retired as CEO of Red Lobster, the world's largest seafood restaurant chain, which has over 700 locations and nearly 35,000 employees. Prior to becoming CEO, he served as Executive Vice President and General Counsel from 2014 to 2023. Before joining Red Lobster, Horace was Vice President and Division General Counsel for Darden Restaurants, where he focused on litigation, employment, intellectual property, and more for over 11 years.

He also gained private practice experience at Akerman LLP, handling corporate and securities matters. From 1996 to 2001, he was VP of Business Affairs and General Counsel for Hard Rock Café International, overseeing rapid expansion from 37 to 104 restaurants and three hotels. His earlier career includes roles in the entertainment and corporate sectors for Telemundo and various New York law firms. Horace achieved his undergraduate, law, and Master of Business Administration degrees all from Harvard University, and has served on multiple boards, including FRLA, the National Restaurant Association, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Florida.

Hotelier of the Year: Diane Schmidt, Ocean Properties, Key West



Diane Schmidt has over 50 years of experience in the hospitality industry, with nearly 35 years in Key West, FL. She began her career at the Miami International Airport Marriott and quickly rose to Director of Catering at the Omni International Hotel. In 1982, Diane moved to Key West and worked at the Casa Marina Resort, ultimately serving as General Manager of The Reach. After a successful tenure with Interstate Hotels Corporation, Diane became Senior Vice President of Sales and Revenue Management for Boykin Management Company, overseeing 16 properties across multiple states. In 2006, she returned to Key West as General Manager of the Opal Key West Resort & Marina, a role she held for 17 years before semi-retiring along with her husband Mark. Active in her community, Diane serves on several boards, including the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association and the Key West

Chamber of Commerce. She has received numerous awards for her contributions to hospitality and community service.

About FRLA: *The Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association is Florida's premier non-profit hospitality industry trade association. Founded in 1946 as the Florida Restaurant Association, FRLA merged with the Florida Hotel and Motel Association in 2006. FRLA's more than 10,000 members include independent hoteliers and restaurateurs, household name franchises, theme parks, and suppliers. The association's mission is to protect, educate, and promote Florida's nearly \$112 billion hospitality industry which represents two million employees. Dedicated to safeguarding the needs of the membership, FRLA provides legislative advocacy to ensure the voices of its members are heard and their interests are protected. The association offers regulatory compliance and food safety training through [Safe Staff](#) and FRLA's subsidiary, [RCS Training](#). The FRLA [Educational Foundation](#) provides industry-developed, career-building high school programs throughout the state.*