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COVER STORY

Litigator preserves coffee ritual with eatery purchase



Alexandra Schwappach / Daily Journal

Steven A. Nichols of Rutan & Tucker LLP bought Cyrano's Caffé in Orange after the recession hit.

By Alexandra Schwappach / Daily Journal Staff Writer

ORANGE — When Steven A. Nichols discovered several years ago that his favorite coffee house and breakfast shop was on the verge of shutting its doors, he couldn't bear the thought. So he bought it.

A litigator with Rutan & Tucker LLP for the past 30 years, Nichols found he benefited from an early morning cup of coffee and often a plate of scrambled eggs, fruit and toast. Nearly every day he would stop at Cyrano's Caffé, a charming coffee bar and eatery tucked into the hills of Orange not far from his home. There, he met friends and co-workers and developed rapport with the business's owners.

When the recession hit, the little-known bistro didn't fare well. Not wanting to see the demise of his favorite morning destination, Nichols negotiated with the owners to take it over.

"It had become such an important part of my morning," he said. "It just couldn't be closed."

Five years later, the cafe is still the same quaint coffee shop with a European flair, but with more

menu options, fun décor and a wine bar set to open next year. Besides owning the shop, Nichols oversees management, hiring, finances and most importantly, taste-testing.

"In terms of the menu, whenever there is something new we are thinking about adding, it's brought to my attention for tasting," he said.

Nichols juggles his restaurant work with his legal duties at Rutan, where he focuses on construction and commercial law and litigation and co-chairs the firm's construction law group. Working as a manager at Rutan translates well into the many roles he's taken on at Cyrano's.

In his human resources role, Nichols oversees the staff of about 14, mostly comprised of college-age students. Nichols' wife covers the purchasing of new foods and coffees, while he oversees furniture

and décor. And of course, he likes to see where the money is going, so he manages the bistro's finances.

Since taking over, Nichols has remained a fixture at Cyrano's. He can typically be found at a table in the back, eating the "Greek Scrambler" — it's low in calories — while working on his laptop and sipping a Kona coffee. Having a presence at the shop allows him to keep an eye on the business as well as cultivate relationships that have benefited his attorney job.

It was at Cyrano's that Nichols met Kurk Van Matre, owner of a lumber and fabrication company who has since become Nichols' client. He said such introductions have paid off for him personally and professionally.

Steven J. Goon, a litigation partner at Rutan who has worked with

learned all the things that go with operating a business that I don't see as a trial lawyer. That kind of education pays dividends with clients."

Nichols didn't initially start his career thinking he would be a lawyer and business owner, but said if he is ever approached by a young attorney looking for advice about starting or running a business, he'd recommend the notion.

"Generally I think it's a good idea for lawyers to be part of a business," he said. "But being a practicing lawyer is a very consuming job. You want to make sure you have the proper support and are careful about your time."

Nichols' support comes in the form of family members, almost all of whom have at some point worked at the cafe. When Nichols took over, he put his daughter Kaitlyn in charge of marketing and drawing the attention of new customers. His daughter Shannon currently works there as a barista.

On the online review site Yelp, Cyrano's has been referred to as a "hidden gem." Reviewers rave about the California Burrito — scrambled eggs, bacon bits, diced tomatoes, potatoes, cheese, avocados and fresh salsa served on the side.

"We try and pay some attention to customers' interest in having [a] reasonably healthy breakfast," Nichols said. "Our food is freshly made. A bit expensive, but worth it."

The cafe even got a beer and wine license about two-and-a-half years ago, but after about nine months, interest in the alcoholic offerings waned. Nichols is now working to revamp the menu so the restaurant can offer an evening wine bar sometime in 2014.

Nichols also hopes to open more Cyrano's locations one day but has yet to set those plans in motion. For now, he'll continue litigating, managing and enjoying a plate of eggs benedict.



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Rutan & Tucker litigator Steven A. Nichols at his coffee shop in Orange.

Nichols for about 20 years, said Nichols balances his dual duties quite well.

"It's neat that he has this opportunity to have a side business," Goon said. "He can often work from the cafe so he keeps one eye on the day job and one eye on his business."

While running his own eatery keeps him plenty busy, Nichols said it also helps him become a better lawyer. Beyond meeting clients, fellow attorneys and others in the legal community, it's given him an inside view into running a business — a central feature of his law practice.

"It really is my first foray into business ownership," he said. "I've