

January 11, 2012

Crain's Chicago Business

'Solid guys with no attitude' have 2 new eateries in works

By: Ryan Ori

(Crain's) — The owners of Sweetwater Tavern & Grille and other restaurants have two new Chicago eateries in the works.

Bottleneck Management Group announced Wednesday that it has signed a lease to move into the ground floor of Tribune Tower on Michigan Avenue, and it already is reconfiguring an Old Town building where it plans to open the doors in the spring.

"I think our hands are pretty full right now," says Chris Bisailon, one of three partners in Bottleneck, a Chicago restaurant company. "We've always had a goal of growing by one store every 18 months or so, and we've continued to do that since 2007. With Old Town and Tribune Tower, we have our plate full for the time being."

Mr. Bisailon and partners Nathan Hilding and Jason Akemann played football together at Illinois Wesleyan University in the early 1990s. While playing for the Titans in Bloomington, Mr. Bisailon broke Jerry Rice's NCAA all-divisions record for career touchdown receptions.

Now, their game is restaurants. They operate Sweetwater Tavern & Grille, 225 N. Michigan Ave. in the East Loop; the Boundary, 1932 W. Division St. in Wicker Park, and South Branch Tavern & Grille, 100 S. Wacker Drive in the West Loop. It also owns the bar Trace, 3714 N. Clark St. in Lakeview.

The company has about 350 employees and is likely to add another 230 when the two new, yet-to-be-named restaurants open, Mr. Bisailon says.

The next Bottleneck establishment will be at 1419 N. Wells St. in Old Town, where it has an 11-year lease for 10,080 square feet. That site is expected to seat about 190 people.

Unlike other Bottleneck ventures, the former 33 Club site is unlikely to have a large amount of outdoor seating. But it will be on a stretch of Wells Street packed with bars, restaurants and passersby.

"I think they're the right kind of operators for the neighborhood," says Chris Irwin, a senior vice-president for Jameson Commercial Real Estate who represented Bottleneck in the lease. "They're proven operators and some of the best guys in the business."

The Tribune Tower lease, first reported by the Chicago Tribune, is for 14,000 square feet in the southeast part of the building, as well as an outdoor seating area on adjacent Pioneer Court, east of the Marilyn Monroe statue.

A Tribune Co. spokesman says WGN Radio will move most of its studio workers to about 20,000 square feet on the seventh floor. Tribune Co. has been seeking office tenants to take up about 150,000 square feet of Class B office space in the iconic tower, and it still has about 100,000 square feet of retail space to lease up, the spokesman says.

That is about a third of the total space in the 34-story building, which was built in 1925.

David Stone, founder and principal of Chicago-based Stone Real Estate Corp. who represented Bottleneck in the most recent lease, says Bottleneck first approached Tribune Co. to inquire about the space. Mr. Bisailon had often admired the Pioneer Court space when walking across the Michigan Avenue bridge over the Chicago River.

"What really attracted us is the high visibility and high pedestrian traffic," Mr. Bisailon says. "That's what we've always looked at. It fit perfectly for what our bread and butter is."

The Tribune Tower location is expected to open in the first half of 2013. Because of its close proximity to Sweetwater, new corporate executive chef Paul Katz — formerly of Harry Caray's Restaurant Group — will be tasked with creating a unique menu there, Mr. Bisailon says.

"We don't want to carbon-copy what we've done before," he says. "This will allow us to be creative."

Mr. Stone says Bottleneck has thrived through a recession by taking advantage of populated areas, outdoor seating and well-priced meals and drinks.

"They have food that's not cheap and not expensive, which is a tough balance," Mr. Stone says. "They always design a sense of place where you feel like you're in a happening restaurant or bar.

"Plus, they're solid guys with no attitude. Restaurant people often have tremendous egos, especially successful ones — and these guys don't."