

Owners breathe easy as crowds like smoke-free establishments

The Virginian-Pilot

© July 2, 2007

Last updated: 6:57 PM



THERE'S A GOOD LINE about the cigar club Kal Habr runs at his restaurant Croc's Street Bistro, a few blocks down from the new convention center in Virginia Beach.

It's a cigar club at a smoke-free restaurant.

On the last Wednesday of each month, Habr and his buddies taste ports or bourbons or scotch. While they're at it, they puff away on cigars. Some months, they enjoy a hookah.

And they do it outside.

It didn't used to be that way. For years, the cigar club met inside the restaurant. Croc's was the kind of place where people would go home and realize every bit of clothing stank of cigarette smoke. When there were bands, there were rolling clouds of smoke that rubbed singers' voices raw.

Then, the governor and the General Assembly bickered about a bill to ban smoking in the commonwealth's restaurants and bars. Matt Falvey, a friend of the Habrs and a Virginia Beach restaurateur, had gone before the General Assembly and supported the ban.

But lawmakers backed off, saying the market should dictate whether restaurants should be smoke-free.

Kal and Laura Habr decided they were part of that market. They decided to go smoke-free.

"At some point, the whole country's going to be non-smoking," Kal said. "Why wait? Just go for it."

"It's the right thing to do for our staff and for our customers," Laura Habr added.

Their friends told them they were crazy. Heck, their customers told them they were crazy.

Chris Castle had been going to Croc's and smoking cigars there for years. Some nights the smoke would grow so thick, his wife would leave early. But he feared cigar smokers were being "marginalized in the name of political correctness," he told me Wednesday night. He didn't like the idea of the government legislating morality.

But a funny thing's happened at Croc's since May 1, when the restaurant went smoke-free. Business keeps billowing their way. Customers who had long ago sworn off the place have started filtering back in. Employees are happier. And on band night, the singers swear their voices sound better.

This is a trend at the Beach. Falvey's places - Peabody's Nightclub, Hot Tuna Bar & Grill and Shorebreak Pizza - have banned smoking indoors. So have more than a half dozen other Beach restaurants like Waterman's Beachwood Grill and Abbey Road.

In Norfolk, Councilwoman Theresa Whibley has said she wants to make the city one of the first in Virginia to ban smoking in restaurants, and she's pushing city leaders to put the issue to a vote.

A smoke-free environment's not just good for health. It's good for business.

Smoking or non? I'll take non every time. If the state doesn't want to order it up, I'm glad restaurants will.

Wednesday night, a half-dozen guys, Castle among them, sat outside on a private smoking porch, sampling cigars under blue umbrellas on a perfect 80-degree night just six blocks from the ocean.

For their part, the Habrs donated a portion of Wednesday's proceeds to the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and the March of Dimes. A perfect way to cap the evening for the smoke-free place with cigar night.