

RANAZUL

TAPAS ■ WINE ■ BISTRO

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS

By Teddy Durgin

In 2007, some didn't give much of a chance to Ranazul ~ a then-new eatery in the then-new Maple Lawn mixed-use development near Fulton, Md. First, there was the name. Ranazul? It sounded like an ancient demon the Ghostbusters might have once fought off to save Manhattan. Then, people who didn't speak Spanish found out what the name meant. Blue frog. Blue frog?! It didn't exactly have the same ring as, say, the Capital Grille.

Then, folks took notice of the full name. Ranazul Tapas and Wine Bistro. The place started coming together in the potentially hot location just off of Routes 216 and 29 in Howard County. And, finally, Ranazul opened its doors, and customers were quickly wowed by the small plates menu and the outstanding selection of wine and cocktails.

Ten years later, Ranazul's management, staff, and now long-time clientele are still glowing after the bistro celebrated its 10th anniversary with a mid-September gala. Hal Kenny was there at the beginning as general manager, left in 2009, and returned this past January when a possible partnership opportunity was presented to him.

During a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*, he recalled, "That opening in

2007 couldn't have gone any better. We had a great team in place, a great concept, a great menu. We were blessed with positive write-ups. One of the main objectives early on was to establish a local clientele. They would be the ones who would continue frequenting Ranazul and referring us. We had to have them."

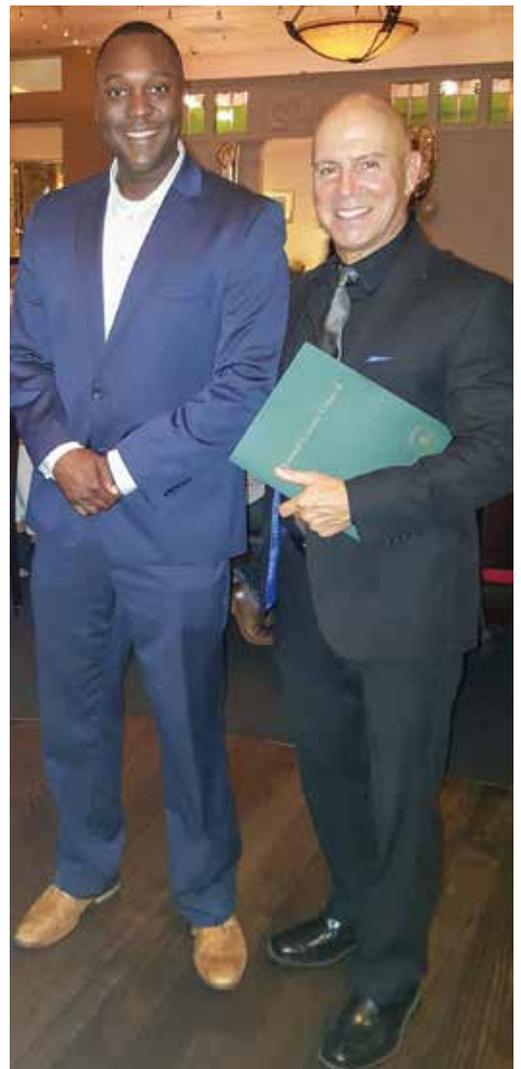
And have the locals stayed with Ranazul? In a big way! Kenny stated, "When I returned in late January, it was like déjà vu! I came back and saw many of the exact same people from 2009. And that local clientele had since brought new friends and guests with them. They did a double take looking at me! They were like, 'Wow, you're back! Did you go away? Wait, you have returned, right?' It was really flattering to be so welcomed back by all of those regular customers we had established years earlier.

Many of them now refer to Ranazul as their 'Go-to Place.'"

Kenny says there have been two main ingredients that has made Ranazul a decade-long success. Consistency and quality. "We concentrate heavily on making sure every guest, every day, has a positive experience at Ranazul," he commented. "Chad Price, one of the owners, managed Ranazul for the eight years I was away and continued to deliver that consistent, quality experience."

Kenny continued, "In many cases, it's

"One of the main objectives early on was to establish a local clientele"



CALVIN BALL, VICE CHAIR HOWARD COUNTY COUNCIL; AND HAL KENNY, RANAZUL.

not difficult to become a champion. But it's VERY difficult to stay a champion. That's our challenge now. How do we stay a success? I think if we can continue to fine-tune and innovate the systems in place, we'll continue to be successful for another ten years. We have to always be good at troubleshooting. When something's not right, give us an opportunity to make it right. That's an opportunity! And always ask new guests, 'How did you find out about us? Give me a highlight and a lowlight of your first experience with Ranazul.' That gives you feedback on what you're doing right and how we can improve."

Since Kenny has returned, he's tried to foster an even greater camaraderie among the staff. He illustrated, "We had this sort of pre-meal shift meeting in which we discussed specials and reservations and so forth. I guess this is the teacher in me. But we also did this activity on one Friday in which I asked staff to identify the keys to Ranazul's 10 years. I had each staff member rattle off what they thought have been the keys to Ranazul's success and what they should be. Then, on Saturday night, we identified what our strengths and weaknesses were. So, when the staff members mentioned a weakness, they also had to have a solution. 'How can we resolve that?' The most interesting part was when we identified our strengths. What it did was made them realize who we are and what our niche is. The staff left that meeting with a sense of identity and pride. It was wonderful to experience that."

One thing that has distinguished Ranazul this past decade has been its approach to beverage service. The eatery's wine list offers



ENJOYING THE RANAZUL ANNIVERSARY ARE CUSTOMERS PHYLLIS AND PHIL PUCCIO, AND IGAL AND HIBA ELMI.

more than 150 labels with 25 by the glass. Food pairings, meanwhile, have been especially important. Ranazul's menu doesn't just consist of tapas from Spain. Chef Jaime Ayala has infused ingredients from all around the world to deliver an eclectic and diverse menu.

"Now we have a little something for everyone," Kenny said, "and we've wanted to make sure our beverages complement that. We have a wide range of wine and spirits. We've recently launched a new wine list that we're so proud of, because we sat down, did three months of research, tastings, and achieved everything we set out to accomplish. That was: one, have a very eclectic wine list; two, take our guests on an adventure throughout the world; and, three, get our guests just a little out of their comfort zones of the typical Cabernets and Chardonnays. Now, we're delving into small wineries from South Africa, Australia, Italy, and Spain. We also have seasonal cocktail specials we've developed and have done some promotions where we've paired wines with different menu items. Our staff is not just order takers. They're people who are genuinely excited to introduce new beverage choices to their guests."

Meanwhile, the accolades keep pouring in. *The Washington Post* recently touted Ranazul as "undoubtedly the most stylish gathering spot in the Maryland suburbs." So, with success, might expansion finally be on the horizon? Kenny doesn't rule it out. He concluded, "We must first make sure that Ranazul is a fine-tuned machine and well-established before we even consider a second location. But I do think we have a good opportunity with this concept to do just that!"



HAL KENNY, CHEF JAIME AYALA, AND CHAD PRICE, ALL WITH RANAZUL TAPAS WINE AND BISTRO; ADDRESS THE CROWD AT THE ANNIVERSARY PARTY.

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