

USF assumes Viking space

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by: Josh Siegel | Staff Writer

LAKEWOOD RANCH — In a partnership that boosts the visibility of both sides, the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee has signed a lease to occupy the former Viking Space on Lakewood Ranch Main Street.

USF Sarasota-Manatee, which signed the lease Oct. 17, will use the space to hold classes for students enrolled in the school's College of Hospitality and Technology Leadership — and to host classes for the general public.

"We like that there will be a connection between Lakewood Ranch and a major university," said Julia DeCastro, director of leasing for Lakewood Ranch Commercial Realty. "It will bring people to the Ranch who aren't normally here."

The school does not have a culinary school, but it has been looking for a steady place to teach students the art of the kitchen.

For the last two years, students have taken cooking classes at Manatee Technical Institute; before that, they worked out of the Publix Aprons Cooking School on University Parkway.

Dr. Cihan Cobanoglu, dean of the College of Hospitality and Technology Leadership, said enrollment in the school has increased from 87 three years ago to more than 200 today.

Cobanoglu said the school would like to ultimately build a kitchen on its own property, but, in the interim, the old Viking space could bring outside interest to the program.

"Our students are learning about the back of the house, but we also want them to be able to produce a product that happens at the front of the house," Cobanoglu said. "We want to see some burns on their arms and some stains on their shirt pocket to show they can walk the talk. This also serves as a gateway into the Lakewood Ranch area. We want to be a part of that growth."

The signing, with negotiations taking close to a year, comes after the former tenant went bankrupt. Lakewood Ranch Commercial Realty, a subsidiary of Lakewood Ranch developer Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, reached an agreement in January with the trustee for the bankruptcy case of Extreme Remodelers of Sarasota, the parent company of the Viking Culinary Center.

LWR Main Street LLC purchased the furniture, fixtures and equipment in the center to ensure the space would be used for the same purpose.

Extreme Remodelers, which did business as Paradise Homes, invested more than \$1 million in high-end cabinetry, furnishings, Viking appliances and other design details for the school, which opened in September 2011 as one of 19 Viking cooking schools nationwide and the second school in Florida; it closed suddenly Oct. 24, 2012.

SMR had moved to recover possession of the Viking culinary space, after Paradise Homes missed its September and October rent payments.

For now, the space will be called the USFSM Culinary Center, but Cobanoglu wants a catchier name; the school may take suggestions from the public in the form of a competition.

The school will add green awnings and green-and-gold artwork on the windows.

The center can still host special events, like it did before.

Public cooking courses, taught by school faculty and guest chefs from around the world, will teach people how to cook dishes from China, Taiwan, Brazil, Italy and others.

Any surplus earned from cooking classes will go directly into the school's hospitality program.

Student classes begin with the start of the spring semester Jan. 6.

Public classes will begin soon after.

USF Sarasota-Manatee leased the 4,098-square-foot unit turnkey.

"They have everything they need," DeCastro said. "All they need is to bring in their food."

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