

Looking downturn in the eye

BRAVE or silly, Simon and Jill Wallace and Andrew and Cheryl Powell will not die wondering if opening a restaurant in the midst of difficult trading conditions was a wise move or not.

The Wallaces opened Benchmark Restaurant and Wine Bar at Peregrine Springs last week and the Powells took over Fratellini Ristorante Italiano at Sunshine Beach last December with an official opening last month.

Simon Wallace is a qualified chef who has worked in large chain hotels for a decade and has now branched into restaurant ownership for the first time.

"Peregrine Springs is not as much of a strong touristy area," he said. "So if I can do the right product that is consistent and offers good value, I should be able to fight the downturn."

"If I can deliver the right product, I've got the upper hand and I can get a strong portion of the market up here. It's a growing community."

Benchmark is an 80-seat restaurant near the golf club overlooking a lake. It was formerly Chez Andre and will be Mediterranean with an Asian twist and family-friendly.

"It won't be easy, but you've got



STAR CLIENTS: Andrew and Cheryl Powell have welcomed many celebrities to their restaurant Fratellini.

PHOTO: GEGAN POTTER/SCN03031FRATELLINI

to ride out the hard times. I've got a strong, supportive team with me and I couldn't do it without my wife and our families."

Andrew Powell has three decades of clothing industry experience under his designer belt, with a background running merchandise divisions of Country Road, Rodd & Gunn, Mares and Morrissey.

He and wife Cheryl traded in life spent travelling the world being

wined and dined by some of the finest Italian fabric houses to run Cafe Kokomo in Hastings Street which they bought in 1997 and sold in 2001 - for a profit.

"We always wanted to move back to the Coast and buy a proper restaurant and the opportunity came about with Fratellini," Mr Powell said.

"It had been trading for two-and-a-half years, but we bought it in December. It's been a baptism of



AIMING HIGH: Jill and Simon Wallace at their new restaurant, Benchmark, in Peregrine Springs.

PHOTO: WARREN LYNAM/SCN03031BENCH

fire, but already we have a number of celebrities that dine with us... Kevin Rudd is a regular, we had to turn Greg Norman away because we were full but he came back the next day.

"Kerry O'Brien called on New Year's Eve for a table, Taj Burrow comes in and Daniel MacPherson was in yesterday.

"It's got a real bohemian flavour. People come in off the beach in their bikinis with sand between

their toes for breakfast, lunch or coffee and cake, and at night it turns into this rustic trattoria."

The Powells spent \$20,000 "sprucing up" the space, but retained its original character. It has a staff of 18 and aims to be a world-class family and pet-friendly casual dining destination.

"Businesses that work hard at promoting their business and give excellent customer service all the time will always attract people."