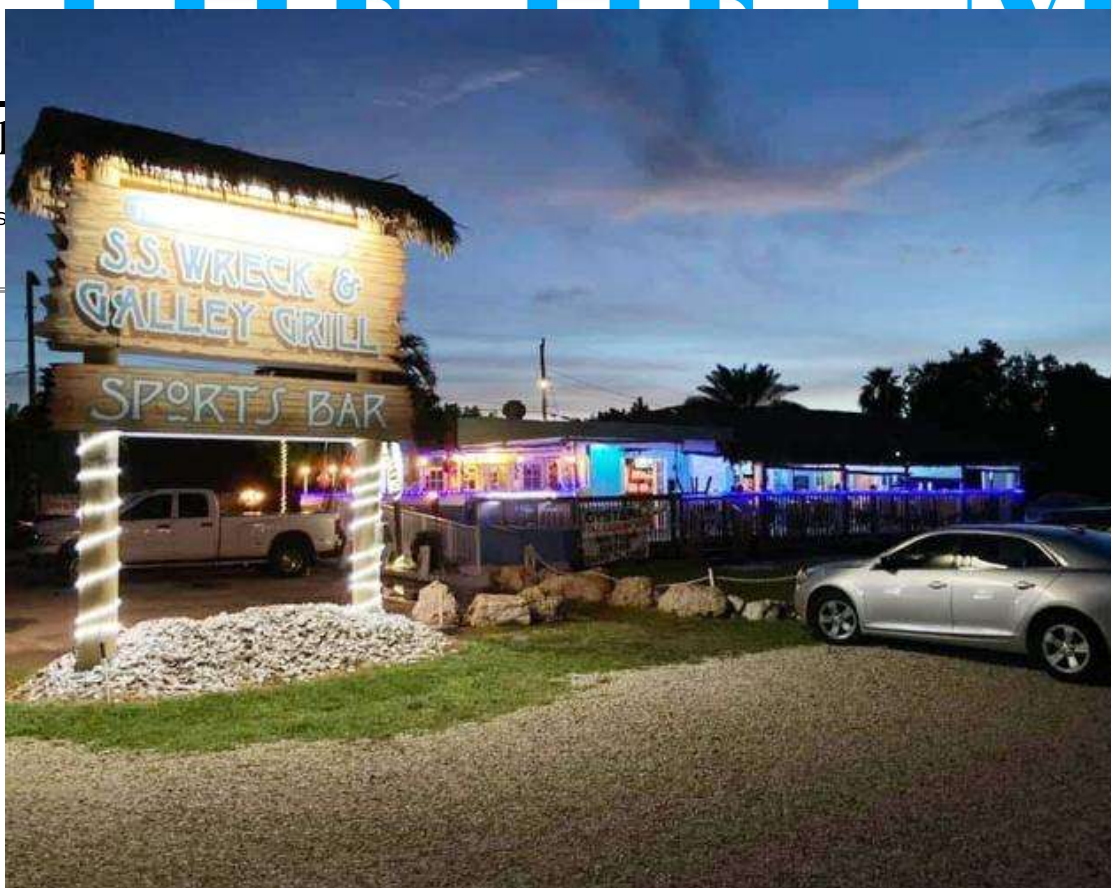


FEATURED

# AT THE HELM

## California couple

By ELLIOT WELD Key West  
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California couple Omar and Nicole Maldonado have purchased the S.S. Wreck and Galley Grill for \$1.375 million.  
OMAR MALDONADO/Contributed

Omar and Nicole Maldonado met years ago while Nicole was waiting tables in Tampa. Now married, they always talked about opening a restaurant, and the dream is finally coming true. The couple closed a deal to purchase Grassy Key's S.S. Wreck and Galley Grill for \$1.375 million in July.

Prior to being a restaurateur, Omar was a sales director where the couple lived in Redondo Beach, outside Los Angeles. Nicole is an attorney, but her firm is still fully remote amidst the pandemic.

Nicole's family moved to the Marathon area from upstate New York in the 1970s, where her father opened a bike shop in Key Colony Beach and taught scuba diving. She is a graduate of Marathon High School. Omar said he is "cashing out and leaving corporate America."

They began searching for a restaurant to purchase in the Keys and happened upon the Wreck and Galley property after looking at a few other businesses that didn't quite feel right. When they went to have lunch there, it seemed like a good fit. Omar is from Michigan, as are the previous owners, and the Michigan memorabilia drew him in.

"I saw all these signs that said 'Go Blue' and I thought this has to be a sign," he said, referencing the slogan of the University of Michigan basketball team.

The new owners said they do not plan on making any major changes to the restaurant that has been open since 1999, aside from some small updates. The menu will mostly remain the same, but they might upgrade kitchen equipment to increase efficiency. They may add new drink items that are more popular these days, add air conditioning to the dining room and upgrade the restrooms. They also plan to offer a "catch and cook" option for guests and make the business more environmentally friendly by removing some single-use plastics and high-fructose corn syrup condiments.

The Maldonados have been relishing in the coziness of their new community, although they said they prefer the weather in Southern California, citing the intense summer humidity of the Keys.

"It's that small-town feel. We've got a lot of locals in the restaurant that we know already. It feels like a family-oriented business," Nicole Maldonado said.

They hope to become involved in the community. Omar is a military veteran and hopes to do work with local veterans and plans to offer veteran discounts at the restaurant. They also hope to work with the Dolphin Research Center next door.

The sale of the restaurant was brokered by Re/Max All Keys Real Estate. Curtis Skomp, co-owner of the firm, said there has recently been a lot of interest in Keys commercial real estate from people in the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast. He said this could be because of high taxes in those regions and with COVID "people are waking up and realizing life is short and if there's a time to make a move now is it."

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