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CHICAGO, May 22-- Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI), the world's largest casual dining company, awarded Liberty Mutual Group, the leading provider of workers compensation insurance, programs and services in the United States, with its top award for vendor excellence today -- recognizing the company's attention to small details in guest service. Liberty Mutual provides Darden with workers compensation, general liability, automobile liability, property, and long-term disability insurance coverage.

Darden, which owns and operates more than 1,100 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones BBQ & Sports Bar restaurants presented the Boston-based company with its William B. Darden Distinguished Vendor Award. The award is named after the founder of the Orlando-based company.

"This is an example of two major companies that act more like small business partners," said Joe Lee, chief executive officer of Darden. "We work very well together to serve our restaurant guests a great dining experience in the safest possible environment."

Working closely with each Darden Restaurant company -- and even focusing efforts down to the individual restaurant level -- Liberty Mutual and Darden are committed to maintaining the safest restaurants in the industry. For example, Liberty Mutual created a loss prevention program where five dedicated Liberty Mutual "Safety Consultants" work with Darden quality assurance managers to improve prevention of injuries to employees and guests.

"We are very proud to be recognized by Darden for our commitment to outstanding customer service," said David H. Long, executive vice president and manager of the National Market at Liberty Mutual. "Darden shares our belief that good partnerships develop over time and help both parties achieve superior outcomes together. Liberty Mutual's partnership with Darden shares a mutual commitment to strong goals, to constantly challenging each other to excel, and to readily exchanging good ideas and best practices."

"Darden is committed to insuring the safety of our employees and guests," said John Reiker, vice president of compensation and benefits. "Liberty Mutual embraces that commitment and works ceaselessly with our operations teams to maintain our high standards."

The William B. Darden Distinguished Vendor Award salutes world-class vendors for outstanding quality, service, innovation and value. Darden purchasing, marketing and culinary experts chose Liberty Mutual from more than 1,200 vendors that did business with the restaurant company during fiscal 2000, which ends May 31.

Boston-based Liberty Mutual Group is a diversified international financial services group of companies and one of the largest multi-line insurers in the property and casualty industry.

The Group has more than $54 billion in consolidated assets, more than $65 billion in assets under management, $13.6 billion in consolidated revenue, and ranks 111th among the Fortune 500 largest corporations in the United States.

Liberty Mutual has an A+ ("Superior") rating from A.M. Best. Liberty Mutual Group has been the leading provider of workers compensation insurance, programs and services in the United States for nearly 65 years. It also offers a wide range of products and services; including group life and disability; general liability, commercial auto; commercial property; private passenger auto and homeowners insurance; individual life and annuities; international programs; and financial services. Liberty Mutual Group employs 37,000 people in more than 900 offices throughout the world.