ORLANDO, Fla., April 1 /PRNewswire-FirstCall/ -- Darden Restaurants, Inc., (NYSE: DRI) today reported same-restaurant sales results for the five-week March fiscal month ended March 30, 2003. This period is the first month of Darden's fiscal 2003 fourth quarter.

Same-restaurant sales at Red Lobster were up 4% to 5% for fiscal March, which reflected a 3% to 4% increase in check average and an approximate 1% increase in guest counts. The check average increase was a result of a 1% to 2% increase in pricing and a 1% to 2% increase from menu mix changes. Last year, Red Lobster had a 1% to 2% increase in same-restaurant sales during fiscal March.

Same-restaurant sales at Olive Garden were up 1% to 2% for fiscal March, which reflected a 4% to 5% increase in check average and a 3% to 4% decline in guest counts. The check average increase was a result of a 2% to 3% increase in pricing and a 1% to 2% increase from menu mix changes. Last year, Olive Garden had flat same-restaurant sales during fiscal March.

This year's shift of the Easter holiday from fiscal March to fiscal April favorably impacted March same-restaurant sales at both Red Lobster and Olive Garden. However, the benefit from the holiday shift was more than offset by the adverse affect of the war in Iraq and more severe winter weather this year.

Darden Restaurants, Inc., headquartered in Orlando, FL, owns and operates over 1,250 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones restaurants with annual sales of $4.4 billion.

Forward-looking statements in this news release, if any, are made under the Safe Harbor provisions of the Private Securities Litigation Reform Act of 1995. Certain important factors could cause results to differ materially from those anticipated by the forward-looking statements, including the impact of changing economic or business conditions, the impact of competition, the availability of favorable credit and trade terms, the impact of changes in the cost or availability of food and real estate, government regulation, construction costs, weather conditions and other factors discussed from time to time in reports filed by the company with the Securities and Exchange Commission.