

EIGHT NEW RESTAURANTS EMERGE IN WHITTIER'S UPTOWN WHILE ECONOMY SHRINKS

By Ryan Carter, Staff Writer

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Chef Hugo Molina greets the Borregos of Pico Rivera, Monica, Jorge and Sasha, 5, at his restaurant Seta. Seta is one of eight restaurants that have opened in the past 18 months in Uptown Whittier which, to the surprise of many, is experiencing a restaurant resurgence despite a bad economy. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Eric Reed)

WHITTIER - There's a restaurant renaissance going on in Uptown.

Despite a sputtering economy, eight new businesses have opened on a stretch of Greenleaf Avenue and nearby in the last 18 months.

The recent surge has several local business people optimistic about the area's future. And it has city officials touting a silver lining to the local economy at a time when they didn't really expect it.

"Things are happening in the area ... the city needs it, business wants it, and so does the citizen," said Tony Alcazar, a chef who along with his business partners - two Los Angeles City firefighters - opened his restaurant 10 months ago.

Along with Alcazar's The Bottle Room, new restaurants include Seta, Alan's Take Out, Spin Lounge, Vintage Cafe, Golden Ox, Zi Teresa and Fenix 5-4.

The cluster of openings comes at a time when the economy has put many restaurants out of business.

It was just over a year ago when the restaurant industry hit a record low in sales, outlook and foot traffic, as customers began to cut back on spending, according to the National Restaurant Association.

But the recession had other effects. People who were laid off or looking to make career changes decided to open their own businesses, even as others closed. And while rents were too high in certain areas, including Whittier, for some businesses to stay put, there were people like Alcazar who found rents in Uptown more attractive compared to other business districts in Monrovia and Pasadena.

"Pasadena was just way, way too expensive," Alcazar said.

Plus, for him Uptown, a place he always visited in younger years, simply had charm.

SWANKY UPTOWN

The new blood is also bringing a new look, different activities and a hipper, even more "upscale" touch. Bambooze, among the city's newest restaurants, wants to serve sushi - with karaoke. Over at The Bottle Room, Alcazar is carving out a fine-dining



Sandra Hahn, owner of Crepes and Grapes, talks about her new restaurant Amber Blu Taste that is under construction on Greenleaf Avenue in Whittier. (SGVN/Staff photo by Keith Durlinger) niche in his cozy space for clientele interested in a place that serves craft beer, wine and food.

There's the swanky Seta, on Philadelphia Street, with its hip but subtle fine-dining vibe.

It's the kind of new blood that can only help the area, said Sandra Hahn, owner of Crepes & Grapes.

While she's owned her business for six years, she, too, is planning a new business - Amber Blu Taste - to open in April or May, complete with dinner shows and servings such as wild game pheasant.

Something is working, she said, because the cluster of new businesses are even beginning to attract the East Whittier crowd.

"I'm meeting a lot of folks that used to dine in Pasadena who now come to Uptown," said Hahn, who has organized and worked with local restaurant owners to promote the area. "When you see that, you know something's right."

DECISIONS, DECISIONS ...

But making it right has forced city officials to accommodate restaurant merchants while balancing it with the needs of the community.

The last year or so has brought a flurry of decisions trying to strike that balance. In a town that has traditionally closed up early, new restaurants want to stay open later. They want to serve alcohol.

In February of last year, the Planning Commission allowed Seta to stay open until 2 a.m., after much debate over whether it would essentially just become a bar. That came after the City Council in the year before refused to allow Steve's BBQ to stay open past midnight.

The goal is balancing business friendliness with family friendliness, said Jeff Collier, the city's community development director.

That's can be a challenge, especially when a prospective business owner sees an open retail space that perhaps once was a clothing store and wants to re-create the place into a restaurant, Collier said.

But city officials didn't make many friends when officials proposed an ordinance late last year proposing 23 provisions on new restaurants that serve alcohol or offer live entertainment.

A BOOST

Still, the upside to the surge of restaurants is worth making some business-friendly changes, Collier said.

Traditionally, restaurants in Uptown haven't exactly helped the city's finances. But that's changing.

Each restaurant's sales tax revenue to the city adds up to around \$10,000 annually, but if you include restaurants that are clearly drawing people in, that adds up, he said.

"It starts creating a synergy," he said.

It's a synergy that was somewhat unexpected.

Some city officials saw mixed-used development as the fuel to Uptown's development. That may still come, Collier said. But with the commercial real estate market still faltering, it's not going to happen soon.

The surge of restaurants, coupled with the development of a 106,500-square-foot medical office building in the neighborhood, could help pick up some slack, he said.

With the pending arrival of Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital's new building, 170 potential customers with good-paying jobs will instantly be spending their days in the area.

Hahn was excited about the prospect of "everybody getting prepared and ready" with to-go menus and take-out opportunities.

It's the "welcome wagon," she said.

Ultimately, with the businesses, people in the area think there's something to build on under the city's plans for the area.

"There's somewhat of an evolution in the area, and that's what we've been looking for," Collier said. "These folks have taken risks, and they appear to be paying off."

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