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## Five Years of Restaurant Life in Lamorinda

By Sophie Braccini



Table 24 opened in September 2010 Photo Ohlen Alexander

"When people think of dining east of the tunnel, they think of Walnut Creek and Danville but they need to add Lafayette to the mix," said Lifson.

According to Moraga Chamber's Kathe Nelson the restaurant scene in her town has matured. Over the past five years, solid establishments such as Terzetto, Pennini's, Chef Chao and Amoroma continue to do well.

"The last five years have required a lot of creativity," said Terzetto's owner Roos Pal. "We accommodate the whole family, involve local artists, do a lot of catering and reach out to the Saint Mary's students."

Pal is in the process of opening a new Indian restaurant in the Rheem Shopping Center.

"We've offered Indian food at the farmers' market and had a great response," she said. She plans to open the new place by the end of May.

Another spot of diversity in Moraga was created one year ago by the Erez family with Shish Kabab Show. Mikkie Erez said he was glad they opened a restaurant where they live, in Moraga.

"Customers are coming back again and again," said the restaurant owner. "Some people come from as far as Marin County or Sacramento." He believes his success comes from fresh food 'prepared with love,' and of course the weekend music and dancing that add life and fun to the experience.

What Nelson says people in Moraga want now is a good sit-down Mexican restaurant and a sports bar. "But we need people to support their local restaurants," she said.

In between the brilliant successes in Lafayette and the under-the-radar successes in Moraga, Orinda is transforming itself.

Keith Miller, President of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce is very positive. "Orinda's staple restaurants such as Casa Orinda, Serika, Europa Hofbrau, Hsiangs, or Siam Orchid have been able to weather the economic storm," he said. And then there are shining stars. "Table 24 that has been a smash success that has leveraged off Theater Square, added vibrancy to the ground floor, and benefited all the other restaurants there: Lava Pit, Shelby's, Bonfire Pizzeria."

The past five years have been quite tough for many retail businesses. Lamorinda, like the rest of the state and the country, has suffered the hardship of the recession.

Restaurants are often considered a good indicator of the state of a local retail climate, or as Jay Lifson, Executive Director of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, said: "Restaurants are the engine that drives customers to our retail areas and helps it to prosper."

The 'restaurant scene' of the three Lamorinda communities did show some positive signs over the past five years, with more diversity and general growth. Lafayette led the pack, with almost as many restaurants there as the two other cities combined.

According to Lifson, in spite of the recession, Lafayette has gained more restaurants than it has lost. "Some of our staple restaurants such as Postino, Chow, Pizza Antica, Metro, the Duck Club, Bo's Barbecue and Uncle Yu's are continuing to do very well," he said. "And most of those that opened recently are also meeting with great success."

Patxi Azpiroz and Bill Freeman opened their fifth Patxi's Pizza in Lafayette eight months ago.

"Our Lafayette restaurant is my favorite," Freeman said. "Our results have exceeded expectations. We focus on the quality of the food and on the customer service, and the local response has been excellent."

It's been a rockier road for the high-end French cuisine restaurant Chevalier that opened three and a half years ago. "We had two phenomenal months when we opened, but then the economy really hit and we had a very hard year and a half," said the young French chef Philippe Chevalier. "But since last summer our business has been growing."

Chevalier believes that the economy might be doing better and that people have decided to enjoy life "no matter what." He has also built a very solid base of loyal customers.

In fact the business for restaurant owners Victor Ivry and Michael Karp has been so good that they are planning to open a second one in the same shopping center this spring.

"We've been open for 17 months, and we've been absolutely thrilled with the response of the community to the restaurant," Ivry said. "We wanted to provide the community with a place to gather and enjoy good, quality family food. We met a need and we've been rewarded. Now we think that there is a call for a fresh sit-down Mexican restaurant."

They plan to open Barbacoa in Theater Square by the end of May.

Karp and Ivry think that there is always room for good concepts that match the need of the community, and that grouping restaurants together can benefit everyone by increasing people's choices.

Miller says investors are believing in Orinda. "This is a good sign of recovery."

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