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Think Inside the (Theatre) Square

By Sophie Braccini



Photo Andy Scheck

actors and/or directors.

The launch of the campaign coincides with the opening of the most recent brainchild of Table 24 owners Victor Ivry and Michael Karp in partnership with GLL, the Mexican grill Barbacoa, scheduled to open this week.

The creation of that restaurant illustrates the active role the property owner is taking, seeking and supporting businesses that fit the space and Orinda's lifestyle.

"When we presented the Table 24 concept to GLL, we asked them to co-invest in the project," remembers Ivry, "and they supported us when we made the investment to transform the place." The success of Table 24, a great family restaurant with high quality, innovative food, reinforced GLL's confidence in the Square, and showed that the right project could thrive there.

"Then there was the inside corner of the center, opposite to the elevator access," remembers GLL's Peter Wenzel. "Our first idea was to have a wine bar there, and I talked to Victor (Ivry) and Michael (Karp) about it."

"That was the starting point for Barbacoa," says Ivry with a smile, "but a wine bar was not really what we are about. We wanted something alive and fun, something that would attract families and lift the energy inside the Square."

Ivry and Karp say that they have always dreamed of a restaurant that would remind them of Cabo San Lucas, a real live authentic Mexican restaurant. They met their match for the kitchen with young star chef Jason Moniz who says he learned the lost art of Mexican cuisine in Mexico. "We will grind our own spices, take the time needed to do our own chili sauces, we will grill on the wood fire," says a passionate Moniz. "We will give our customers textures and big flavors."

Beyond the menu, the impact of the new restaurant will definitely be in balance with the energy inside the building. The restaurant will take over part of the inside plaza with an outdoor seating area; the inside will have a separate bar and dining space; the kitchen will be open and visible. The materials chosen blend rustic modern with authentic Mexican tiling and art for a colorful but clean and modern look.

Wenzel confirms that the strategy's working and that the occupancy rate of the property is now 95 percent. "The change of zoning that the City allowed in the Square helped," says Wenzel, referring to the rule that permitted retail only on the ground floor of Theatre Square. "The inside of the center had struggled historically; allowing financial or real estate businesses to occupy some of the empty space made sense."

Shelby's restaurant has been in the Square for seven years. "We've been here through the worst, but we've survived," says Shelby's Carlos Rangel. "We've managed to make it through and now people are coming down even more." Rangel believes that the Square is becoming a destination for food. "There is such a wide variety of options to choose from," he says, "from pizza, to modern Californian, Japanese, Middle-Eastern, Hawaiian, soon Mexican, and also dessert with Republic of Cake."

This change in dynamic is also welcomed by Anahid Raad who opened a new florist shop, Anahid Design and Flowers, across from Barbacoa in the beginning of May. "This is a very dynamic business environment," she says. Definitely a new kind of comment for Theatre Square!

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Someone new to Lamorinda strolling through Theatre Square might not believe that just five years ago the occupancy rate on the first floor was desperately low, restaurants located where Table 24 is now had been failing one after the other, and, in spite of half a dozen steady healthy businesses, the Square was falling into disuse. Today that first floor is vibrant, consolidating existing retailers and restaurants, some new, very successful businesses, and a few promising ones that could change the Lamorinda entertainment balance in favor of Orinda.

To support this growth, GLL Real Estate Partners, owner of the Square, has hired Marcom Group to launch an all-out marketing campaign with the tag line: "Think Inside the Square."

"We are launching a multi-media marketing campaign in Lamorinda and the Berkeley-Rockridge area," says Marcom Creative Director Heather McAllister. Live entertainment is scheduled to come to the Square this summer and, for the first time, GLL partnered with the California Shakespeare Theater to create "dine and play" packages, as well as live happenings in the Square with

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