

Published November 18th, 2015

Crossroads' Restaurant Scene Changing

By Victor Ryerson



Although a group of Orinda citizens is clamoring for more amenities and bigger changes to liven up the local nightlife, and the city is worrying about the parking to accommodate them (see related stories on page A6), the bar and restaurant scene on Orinda's Crossroads side is quietly evolving on a smaller scale right now. Several current events suggest that business owners are moving to meet changing demand in the short run as the community struggles to define its identity.

Barbacoa, a lively Mexican-themed restaurant that transformed the inner courtyard of Theatre Square over the past three and one half years, abruptly closed its doors and started remodeling on Nov. 7. It is expected to reopen Nov. 23 with all new furnishings as The Fourth Bore Tap Room and Grill, a totally different restaurant and bar concept under the same ownership. Plans are to offer 30 beers on tap, a classic cocktail program, an extensive wine list, and an American-style pub menu.

"Barbacoa had just run its course," explains owner Michael Karp. "We had this concept in mind for a very long time." The new restaurant will offer comfort food, such as hamburgers and salads, all made from scratch. Asked how it will differ from Table 24, his other Theatre Square restaurant around the corner, he responded that it will be similar, but not as upscale - "more comfortable." And fear not, dog lovers, The Fourth Bore, with outdoor seating, will be dog friendly.

Around the corner in a small space next to the Orinda Theatre, the finishing touches are just being made to a wine bar, Cine Cuvée, something the community has never seen. Cine Cuvée will have a special wine section with a celebrity Hollywood connection, such as Lasseter Wines, Vince Price Wines, Tippi Hedren Wines and Kamen Estates Wines, and food will be tapas style. The lighting is done and cabinetry was about to be added early last week, and it is scheduled to open in mid-December, adding a touch of sophistication to the space previously occupied by Kasper's Hot Dogs.

Down the street, changes are taking place at recently opened Taverna Pellegrini (see the Lamorinda Weekly article "Orinda's Taverna Pellegrini: A Place to Come Back To" in the online archives). In its second month of business, owner Dario Hadjian says he is happy with the way dinner is going, and hopes to start offering lunch within a week or so. He says there is a "lot of demand for lunch," and, as if on cue, a would-be patron walked in the front door during Hadjian's midafternoon interview, apparently looking for just that.

Asked about the inevitable comparison with La Piazza, his restaurant's popular Italian cuisine neighbor down the street, Hadjian pointed to his successful North Beach restaurant, Piazza Pellegrini, as an indication that people seem to gravitate to places that offer several Italian eateries. He wishes La Piazza only the best, he says, and offers his regionally varied menu, which "puts the best of all of Italy" in one place, as the distinction between their approaches to food.

Whether these relatively small developments are a bellwether for the bigger changes some Orinda residents seek, only time will tell. But there is no doubt that change is in the wind. Skeptics might well remember that the storefront occupied by La Piazza was previously home to a downscale burrito joint popular with weary soccer moms and dads and their young players, as Theatre Square

was just opening its first-floor retail spaces. When the new owner spent a prodigious sum to remodel the space and add a wood-fired pizza oven, the word was that he was crazy, and would go broke within a year. Try telling him that any Saturday night, if you can get in the door. And try finding a non-food retail space inside Theatre Square.

As reported elsewhere, it seems those little soccer players have grown up and returned to Orinda with their own families, and they aren't looking for burritos.

Reach the reporter at: victor@lamorindaweekly.com

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