

Think Inside the (Theatre) Square

By Sophie Braccini



Photo Andy Scheck

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 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 strat-

egy'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!

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

business briefs

Kabab.Burger Mediterranean Grill Opens in Lafayette

3647 Mount Diablo Boulevard, Lafayette (next to Trader Joe's)

This is Lafayette resident and former printing business owner Avi Ben-Ari's first restaurant. But Ben-Ari has the best partner to support him in this career change: his wife, Michaela, who's been managing a catering business in Walnut Creek for years. "We are cooking the food of our roots. This is what we love and want to share with the community," he says. Ben-Ari has lived in this country for more than 30 years. Originally from Israel, he brought in his suitcases the longing for the spices and tastes of the Mediterranean Sea. Kabab.Burger will



Avi Ben-Ari with daughter Leeron in the new family restaurant Kabab.Burger in Lafayette

Photo Sophie Braccini

recreate that taste, "all from scratch in our kitchen," promises Ben-Ari. But why add 'burger' to the 'kabab'? "Kabab is ground beef and lamb meat mixed with spices and grilled, not very far from a burger," says the restaurant owner. "We want to adapt to our clientele, so if some people just want a good beef burger, we can do it. If they want to try the real kabab, we will do that also." As we were talking with Ben-Ari at the beginning of the afternoon, several potential customers came by to check out the menu and enquire about take-out. The set-up is very informal; customers order and pick-up at the back counter and can sit at one of the inside tables. The menu offers a classic Middle-Eastern choice of dishes, with baba ganoush, hummus, salads, and a nice variety of grilled meats, including kababs and burgers, served as a sandwich, a wrap, or on skewers.

New Sales Associate at Coldwell Banker

5 Moraga Way, Orinda

Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage announced today that Tricia Young has joined the company as a sales associate in its Orinda office. In her new position, Young will specialize in residential sales in the East Bay. Young, a 40-year resident of the Lamorinda area, has extensive knowledge of local schools and neighborhoods, as well as a familiarity with the entire East Bay region. Prior to joining Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage, she served as director of a Lafayette preschool.

News from the three Chambers of Commerce Lafayette

The Summer Series begins every Friday night from June 15 through August 24 with free dancing, movies and rock & roll in downtown Lafayette at the Lafayette Plaza Park (Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Moraga Road). Every Friday is different and fun for all ages. On June 15, enjoy a '50s Sock Hop with a live band, then on June 22, square dance with a professional caller. For a complete event listing, visit www.trylafayettefirst.org/summer-2012-events/.

Moraga

Moraga Chamber Of Commerce Golf Tournament all day Saturday, June 23. For more info, visit Moragachamber.org.

Orinda

4th of July Events - Help Needed! Orinda Chamber's legendary Hot Dog Booth will start this year at 10 a.m. on July 4. The Orinda Chamber sells between 700 and 1,000 hot dogs in about three hours that day, so it takes a lot of volunteers to make it happen. "We have always been grateful for the help from Scouts, who have again volunteered to help this year," says Chamber Executive Director Candy Kattenburg. "Scouts will be wrapping up hot dogs, and will be grabbing sodas, chips, and candy and passing them off to the adult volunteers who are manning the cash boxes." This project requires older Scouts (eighth-grade and older). If you know a Scout who might be interested, please contact Steve Sernett at sernetmail@gmail.com.

WANTED

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