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Oakland's Restaurant Revitalization Part 3: Jack London Square

Posted by Keith Mizuguchi on Apr 4, 2012 | Comments (0)



Years ago, [Jack London Square](#) was filled with chain restaurants and shops, but little else. But with recent projects coming into the area, Jack London Square is slowly but surely turning into the destination spot many imagined.

The idea to redevelop Jack London Square has been in the works for years, as developer Ellis Partners, with the city's blessing, put forth a large-scale plan to turn the waterfront area into Oakland's own version of the Ferry Building in San Francisco or Pike Place Market in Seattle. There were plans for a wide, expansive marketplace, an array of locally-owned restaurants and businesses to fill in some of the otherwise vacant office space. But like the entire nation, Oakland was hit hard by the downturn in the economy and plans had to be adjusted accordingly.

A massive, six-story building was scheduled to be the centerpiece of the project. Originally dubbed California Harvest Hall, the ground floor of the building was scheduled to be a giant marketplace, with restaurants and other businesses filling in the extra space. But representatives for Jack London Square Ventures, which is now overseeing the project, said that the economy "hit a wall as soon as construction was completed." While the original vision has been put on hold, officials said they are moving forward with a "revised and refreshed vision for a public market." It is now being described as an "artisan food destination and hub" which will blend onsite artisan food production with retail and wholesale access.

From a restaurant perspective, gone are the Old Spaghetti Factory, T.G.I. Friday's and El Torito, as their leases weren't renewed when they were up. Among the new restaurants: a move across the Bay for Miss Pearl's Restaurant and Lounge, which took over the old T.G.I. Friday's spot and was opened in conjunction with the renovations at the Waterfront Hotel, now part of Joie de Vivre's collection of boutique hotels.



Photo Credit: Bocanova

Also opening in September of 2009 was [Bocanova](#), which showcases Pan-American cuisine. Owner Rick Hackett has a long history in the Bay Area, reopening Enrico's in North Beach in 1992, working as executive chef at Florio on Fillmore Street and opening MarketBar in the Ferry Building. "The idea for Bocanova came from my time at MarketBar. It was partly inspired by the 'family meals' our staff would make at the restaurant," Hackett said. "I told myself that my next restaurant was going to focus on Central and Southern American cuisines."

Hackett said moving into Jack London Square was fairly seamless, as both his building permits and liquor license were processed quickly. "Plus, I love the neighborhood: the architecture, the old buildings, the diversity in the people that live here. Oakland has really become a city that appreciates fine food and what we have to offer."

Even with the marketplace idea being revamped, Hackett said the neighborhood is turning into a vibrant spot, with more and more foot traffic everyday. "When we started Bocanova, I created a 10 year plan. We grew by almost 5 percent in 2011 and the numbers are already up in January and February of this year," Hackett said. "It's really encouraging that so many people are coming out and we expect even more once some of these other businesses open up in the area."

Among the new businesses that have signed on are solar energy provider Sungevity, which is expanding its office space from 19,000 to 68,000 square feet and Navis, a maritime logistics firm that is leasing 37,000 square feet of space and will be moving in this August. Officials with Jack London Square Ventures said there are also plenty of food ventures; Miette Patisserie and Confiserie has its main bakery at Jack London Square and next door will be Belcampo Meat Co., set to launch this July. Live Culture, the founders and organizers of Oakland's Eat Real Festival, pasta producer and retailer Baia Pasta and the Food Craft Institute, a new educational institute that will work to create and improve the viability of small and medium-scale value-added food businesses in rural and urban America (scheduled to open later this month) have also signed on.



Chefs at Haven

Along with Bocanova's ever-growing popularity, [Haven](#) opened late last year. The latest in the line of restaurants from the Daniel Patterson Group, they brought on Chef Kim Alter, formerly of Plate Shop in Sausalito, to lead the kitchen. Patterson said the restaurant already has a pretty clear identity. "There are plenty of family-style plates. It is quite a bit different from Plum. It is also going to be a different crowd with the location at Jack London Square," said Patterson. "But the restaurant has already seen a lot of repeat business and I was actually a little surprised with the number of people who live in that neighborhood."

Patterson said he is not really surprised with how long some of the developments have taken to come to fruition, but does see the bright light at the end of the tunnel. "It's all about creating density and getting more people into the area. There really seems to be a lot of energy and excitement, which is always good to see."

Officials with Jack London Square Ventures said office space within the Square is 90 percent leased. Along with the influx of new businesses, monthly and weekly events (the Sunday Farmer's Market, the annual outdoor concert series Sound Waves, the debut of Jack's Night Market and the [Eat Real Festival](#), just to name a few) are being offered in the coming months, just another way to attract Oakland residents and people from other cities in the Bay Area to the location.

Coming up on Thursday, Jack London Square and uptown are not the only neighborhoods that are seeing a successful revitalization in Oakland. We'll take a look at five neighborhood spots that epitomize the ever-growing food culture in the East Bay.

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