

Oakland Gets a Taste for Gourmet



Article

When Jeremy Umland was considering opening a second location of his popular San Francisco restaurant, Ozumo, he considered Napa and Walnut Creek. Instead, he decided to follow the money.

"Investors and developers, all with a lot more cash to risk than I had, were going to Oakland," said Umland. "So I figured if that's where they saw the future, it was a pretty good bet."

Perhaps known more for restaurant holdups than restaurant stars, Oakland might have been an odd choice to open an upscale sushi bar and sake lounge. But Umland was in good company. In the last year, top-notch restaurateurs - especially from San Francisco - have been expanding or completely moving into the East Bay city. The lures: lower rents, cheaper labor, an influx of residents with cash to burn, and the enthusiasm of a city hungering to change its image from grainy to groovy.

Not even the city's crime rate and last year's rash of armed restaurant robberies seem to deter them.

"I grew up in the Bronx, so the perception that Oakland is crime-ridden and full of unemployed people didn't scare me," Umland said. "The fact is, there's plenty of money here and plenty of people who appreciate good food and have been waiting for something local to support."

So Oakland is giving the people what they want.

The formerly prosaic Jack London Square is being remade. No more chain restaurants for the waterfront landmark. Developer Jim Ellis said he and his company, Ellis Partners, wanted to embrace Northern California's gourmet food scene.

"People in Oakland and the outer areas are starving for better-quality dining options," said Ellis. Their neighbor Berkeley started the farm-to-table movement, and Ellis says there is no reason that Oakland, with its same access to locally grown produce, artisan products and some of the most acclaimed wines in the world, shouldn't follow suit.

Lower overhead than S.F.

It's not like the city doesn't have a climate for innovation. More than a decade ago, Oakland's Oliveto and Bay Wolf were considered cutting edge. The city's diverse population - largely black, Latino and Asian - give cooks the perfect milieu to experiment with various ethnic styles, said San Francisco chef Rick Hackett. While the food may be every bit as creative as the dishes they are serving in San Francisco, the prices are often lower - the benefit of cheaper overhead.

For those reasons, Jack London Square is attracting such San Francisco culinary luminaries as four-star chef Daniel Patterson, whose third restaurant, Bracina, is scheduled to open at the end of the year, and Richard Corbo, whose Pizzeria Zanna Bianca is slated for 2010. Miss Pearl's Jam House, a

pioneering hot spot in San Francisco's Tenderloin, reopened last year in Jack London Square. Hackett and his wife followed with Boca Nova.

Just outside the square, Eric Tucker, chef of San Francisco's vegan mecca, Millennium, plans to open Encuentro Cafe and Wine Bar next month. At least three Chez Panisse graduates have started restaurants, and two of them are working on seconds. Nearby, in the Uptown district, Pican and Umland's Ozumo have joined Luka's Taproom and Lounge. "This reminds me a lot of when I moved to San Francisco, to the Mission, in 1989," said San Francisco's B44 chef-partner Daniel Olivella, who recently opened Barlata in Oakland's Temescal neighborhood. "Oakland is a confusing place, and depending on where you go, it can get rough. But I wanted to find a neighborhood that was just coming up, rather than go into a neighborhood like North Beach that already had so many restaurants."

"The time is definitely right," agreed Boca Nova's Hackett, who, like many Bay Area chefs, lives in Oakland. "I'm doing better customer counts - averaging about 300 people a night on Fridays and Saturdays - than I expected. Truthfully, Oakland restaurants seem busier than restaurants in the city."

The best part, Hackett said, is that doing business in Oakland is about a third of the price of San Francisco, where the minimum wage is \$1.79 more an hour. In addition, San Francisco businesses with more than 20 employees are required under the Health Care Security Ordinance to pay \$1.23 an hour extra per worker. That amount goes up 8 cents in January, and rises to \$1.96 for San Francisco restaurants with more than 100 employees. The city also requires restaurants to compensate full-time staff nine days of sick pay.

"San Francisco is an extraordinary marketplace, but an expensive place to do business," said Kevin Westlye, executive director of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association.

Beautifying neighborhoods

Across the bay, kitchen and dining space is a fraction of the cost. John Hurley says his rent per square foot is \$1.50 less at Marzano on Park Boulevard in Oakland than his Garibaldis in San Francisco's Presidio Heights. Oakland is also handing out incentives to entice tenants: Through a grant process, the city will pay half the cost of property improvements and has been encouraging landlords to start community funds to beautify neighborhoods.

There's also a free shuttle in the works that will link Oakland's newest dining districts. Funded largely by a \$1 million grant from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, the proposed shuttle would run along Broadway from Jack London Square to Grand Avenue, skirting Chinatown, Old Town, Civic Center and Lake Merritt. Project manager Zach Seal hopes to have the shuttle running early next spring, with weekday service available from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. every 10 to 15 minutes.

"It's about creating synergy and really building on the momentum that's already occurring with the surge of restaurant openings," Seal said.

Merritt's Lake Chalet

One of the city's biggest undertakings is at Lake Merritt, where roughly \$19 million in bond money restored the historic boathouse and spiffed up the surrounding walkways. The boathouse is now home to Lake Chalet, the gleaming sibling of Gar and Lara Trupelli's Beach Chalet and Park Chalet duo in San Francisco.

The Trupellis, who kicked in \$3 million for the restaurant's interior, say they were drawn by the chance to take part in another community revival.

"Beach Chalet was very similar. It was vacant, and there was activity on that end of Golden Gate Park that was less desirable," Lara Trupelli recalled. "But that's part of what restaurants are so good at doing. They can really go into neighborhoods that are maybe not getting as much attention and help bring areas up with foot traffic, city services" and renewed focus.

A recent boon in residential construction, particularly in the Lake Merritt Uptown District and Jack London Square, has brought in a new population of well-to-do home owners and renters. A third of Oakland households earn more than \$75,000 a year, according to Demographics Now, a private research company that the city uses to collect data.

"What we're seeing is a younger generation choosing to live in urban Oakland, where it's a little edgier," Ellis said. "For the restaurant industry it's a dynamic demographic."

"There is definitely a new energy and collection of people coming to the area," added Chip Conley of Joie de Vivre hotels and Miss Pearl's Jam House. "It probably couldn't have happened 10 years ago."