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Exciting New Eateries in the Island City

Written by GIL MICHAELS Published: THURSDAY, 17 MAY 2007

The normally placid Island City dining scene has been anything but in the past few weeks. A couple of brand new restaurants are currently the hottest eating spots in town, while several more established places have morphed into intriguing new formats and identities. Needless to say, Alameda's fearless foodies have been getting a serious culinary workout lately. Here's what's new:

On the East End, the aptly named Dragon Rouge (2304 Encinal Ave.) continues blazing new gastronomic trails with its eclectic, imaginative takes on nouvelle Vietnamese cuisine, receiving high marks for dishes like "The Dizzy Dragon Sampler," "Bouncing Beef," "Phantastic Roll" and drinks like their refreshing Saketinis.

Proceeding northward, Kelly's/Barcelona has closed and new management has opened The Hob Nob in its place (1313 Park St.). Over the decades, this site has been host to a number of radically divergent and interesting restaurant concepts. In the 1960s, it was the nautically-themed Original Driftwood, quite possibly the most dimly-lit restaurant in the world. The only light was provided by tiny candles on occupied tables, so one generally ate the continental cuisine there by feel rather than by sight. As my late father once said as he groped for his lamb chops, "Marrone! It's like eatin' in a coal mine!"

In the 1970s-80s, legendary restaurateur Joe Ung took over, and the Driftwood became a bright, homey Italian family-style eatery, serving forth large, estimable and economical meals of soup, salad, pasta and plates of roast veal and stuffing, Italian pot roast and prime rib. When Ung decided to move on, new management acquired the place and attempted to redefine it as an "alpine mountain lodge." That idea didn't work, and the site languished for several years. In 2003, after an exhaustive and elegant remodel, the old Driftwood became Kelly's, a jazz club featuring Kelly Park's unique musical talents accented by cool California tastes like a whole roast garlic head with cambazola, crostini and relish, with wines by Rosenblum.

This year, a very culinary-savvy, experienced and talented restaurant team acquired Kelly's and brought The Hob Nob concept to Alameda. It's a place to spend a casual evening of "hobnobbing" with friends, playing board games while enjoying snacks of American small plates and the multiplicities of pleasures of a full bar. We at Alameda Epicure are especially enamored of The Hob Nob's crab cakes, sliders, (mini-burgers), fries, mini-corn dogs, martinis and "cucitos" (cucumber mojitos). Plus, it's quite the friendly spot, indeed, a fine place to hang out.

There are those who believe that a person shouldn't be judged by their color, but instead by the color of the roux in their gumbo. Likewise, there are those who believe that faith, initiative and red beans and rice can surmount almost any problem. Folks of that persuasion are known as Cajun cuisine lovers, and they have been dreadfully



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underserved in the Island City since the demise of places like Chef Mario's Island Lighthouse, Louisiana Territory, The Four Hundred Club and Larry and Della's. Thankfully, it is now time for aficionados of Le Grande Cuisine Louisianne to laissez les bon temps rouler. The Whistling Cajun Café has recently opened at 2305 Alameda Ave., otherwise known as the Alameda Eagles Club, otherwise known as the zydeco music headquarters of the West Coast. On Friday nights, one may enjoy the rapturous rhythms of hot, live zydeco music while feasting on the spicy, soulful offerings of the Whistling Cajun himself, Chef Curtis Evans. Treats like succotash, authentic slow-cooked Southern barbecue, shrimp Creole and cast-iron skillet cornbread adorn a menu of classic Cajun/soul favorites. The Whistling Cajun Café is also open Sunday afternoons and evenings. And, of course, Chef Evans whistles while he works.

The long-awaited grand opening of the Central Vegetarian restaurant (1613 Park St.) has been of particular interest to patient local vegans, vegetarians and omnivores. Initial reports on Central Vegetarian's Vietnamese-inspired creations have been positive, especially regarding the meatless version of Pad Thai. Central Vegetarian currently shares the Alameda culinary hot-spot crown with Dragon Rouge.

This question was asked by an accomplished Alameda food nut: Does Alameda really need three Hawaiian barbecues?

My response: No, it needs 10! Of course, I speak as a chicken Katsu/Kahlua pork addict, and the new Ohana Hawaiian Barbeque in the Bridgeside shopping center satisfies all of my HB cravings

with lagniappe. Not only are the portions there appropriately humongous, but they also serve the Katsu and roast pork drenched in (harp music, please) "rich, brown gravy."

I, for one, feel that almost everything edible can benefit from a liberal dosing of one or more of the following: whipped cream, chocolate shavings, hot sauce, mayonnaise, Worcester-shire sauce, barbecue sauce, pesto, grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, Dijon mustard and/or "rich, brown gravy." Accordingly, from the minute I read Ohana's menu, it was love. There's also plenty of free parking there and they accept credit cards.

The West End has likewise been a whirlpool of culinary creativity. Over on 1930 Main St., at the site of the former Rosa's Garlic Garden, the venerable local barbecue chain, Everett and Jones, has set up shop with their famous menu of smoked brisket, links, ribs and soulful sides like potato salad, greens and beans. E and J has a sort of cult following in these parts, so Island City addicts of their style of 'Q need no longer drive to Oakland to get a fix.

The Tran's Restaurant (1531 Webster St.) has become the Le Café. Alameda Epicure's fearless foodies report that the "pho No.1" is as good as ever, as are the imperial rolls. However, we shall miss the Trans, some of the nicest pho slingers around.

The much-anticipated grand opening of Acquacotta, at the former site of Coffee for Thought (1544 Webster St.), will hopefully occur sometime in mid-June. This sophisticated enoteca, with its formidable yet affordable all-Italian wine list, will specialize in Italian small plates and stands to elevate the West End's dining scene to far grander heights. Look for special events and wine dinners here offered by the Island City's culinary cognoscenti.

Thai Place (1405 Webster St.) has remodeled and reopened to very favorable reviews. Alameda Epicure's legions of fearless foodies are especially enamored of Thai Place's various curries and lunch specials.

Rumors also abound of a Cuban-themed restaurant opening somewhere on the Island, as well as a continued influx of chain-type eateries. We at Alameda Epicure shall continue to keep Sun readers informed of changes to the local dining scene, but for right now, does anyone know where to get a nice stromboli?

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