

San Diego Business Journal

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Restaurant rows a magnet for economic activity

By - 7/24/2006

San Diego Business Journal Staff

BY JON HINDMAN

Hear the words “restaurant row,” and La Mesa, Oceanside, Hillcrest, Pacific Beach or Encinitas may not come to mind, even though they all have a restaurant row within their city limits.

In fact, John Wingate is willing to bet that most people will think of Old California Restaurant Row in San Marcos, one of the major reasons he decided to open La Playa Cantina & Grill in the city’s restaurant row in August 2005.

“What pulled me to restaurant row is the history of it. It’s famous,” he said. “Everyone has heard of restaurant row. You don’t even have to call it Old California Restaurant Row. You just say ‘restaurant row’ and most people know what you’re talking about.”

While Encinitas, for example, has a restaurant row with only six restaurants, San Marcos’ restaurant row has a whopping 20 and it has proven to draw crowds and also seems to be playing a large part in bringing new businesses to the immediate area. The first full-service restaurant at the San Marcos restaurant row was built in 1978 and further expansion is projected during the next 25 years.

“For economic development in the city, restaurant row is a big, big lure,” says Sandy Rees, the president and chief executive officer of the San Marcos Chamber of Commerce, who adds that a shopping center, with major tenants such as Nordstrom Rack and Petco Animal Supplies Inc., is being built close to restaurant row.

Economic benefits

There are other pluses, as well.

Rees says that the restaurant row brings in significant, although unspecified, tax revenue for San Marcos and has spurred some of the recent increase of residential development in the city.

Another reason Wingate was attracted to the region is that a lot of younger residents are moving to San Marcos. According to a Chamber of Commerce study, the average age in San Marcos is now 34 years old.

“That’s our demographic,” said Wingate, who has also owned En Fuego Cantina & Grill in Del Mar for the past 11 years.

According to Rees, because 34 is an active age, “(Restaurant row) is starting to become a happy-hour meeting place.”

This is music to Wingate’s ears.

“If anyone knows the En Fuego history, we kind of put night life on the map in Del Mar and we’re looking to do the same thing here. We’ve certainly seen an uptick recently in people coming (to La Playa) for live entertainment.”

Downtown San Diego’s Gaslamp Quarter, with an already booming night life, would seemingly be right in Wingate’s demographic range, too, but he says opening La Playa in Gaslamp was never an option.

“I feel that downtown San Diego is over-saturated. There are too many places to go.” Wingate doesn’t dispute that a restaurant can thrive downtown, but he thinks that it is becoming too corporate and wanted to be in an

environment that was friendlier to the “smaller, independent businesses.”

La Playa, which serves fresh seafood and specializes in cuisine from Baja California, has experienced some success in San Marcos. As with any startup venture, business started pretty slow, but Wingate admits that the restaurant’s sales have been climbing every month, culminating with a busy May and June. And he hopes that his own marketing — along with a current campaign that the Chamber of Commerce is spearheading to help further raise awareness of what Old California Restaurant Row has to offer — will equate to more fruitful months in 2006 and beyond.

Jon Hindman is a freelance writer based in Poway.

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