

East adds zest

Asian Village brings dining, shopping to downtown riverfront

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BY MOLLY ABRAHAM – SPECIAL TO THE DETROIT NEWS

DETROIT - Detroit's emerging riverfront development gets a huge boost next week when the long-awaited Asian Village opens on the ground floor of the Beaubien Place parking garage at 521 Atwater St., just east of the Renaissance Center.

The destination has three components: the Kawaiian Cafe, an artisan coffee/organic tea shop; the Marketplace, with made-to-order Asian street food dispensed at several stations, as well as ready-to-go sandwiches and salads; and Fusia, an elaborate restaurant.

The first two will be unveiled Monday, with Fusia scheduled for a July 23 opening.

Asian Village is more than a food emporium, however. It is designed to be a rallying point for the Asian community, as well as a draw to the general public.

"I think it's terrific to be able to have a continuation of the growth along the riverfront and to have the diversity," says Don Lindow, an investment counselor at Wilson, Kemp Associates in Tower 400 of the Renaissance Center. "It's terrific to look down and see the number of people walking the riverfront. Asian Village will add one more dimension. The city can be proud of what's happening on the river."

As the opening approaches, investor Dominic Pangborn, who envisioned the project, says he is "excited on one hand and very nervous on the other. You want everything to go perfect and you know there's no such a word.

"You have to be prepared to do the best you can. The key thing will be to keep the excitement going. Everyone is eager to see this thing open, and the staff has worked hard to make things happen."

From the hand-blown glass lotus pendant sculptures on light fixtures that continuously change color from red and purple to blue and green in the Marketplace, to the 1,600 gallon aquarium and waterfall that greet diners at the sushi lounge, and the lighted koi pond in the upscale restaurant Fusia, there's much to delight the eye and the palate.

The glitz and glamour will be backed up by substance, says managing partner Kevin Gawronski, a certified master chef and instructor at Schoolcraft College.

The kitchen, headed by executive chef David Koshizawa, will be responsible for everything from the Asian street food, including Vietnamese pho, Thai red curry, Korean barbecued pork lettuce wraps, Indonesian fried rice as well as Chinese, Indian, and Malaysian dishes, to the upscale and more expensive Fusia fare.

Ready-to-go salads and sandwiches will be in display cases in the Marketplace and so will traditional Japanese bento boxes, each packed with California rolls, Japanese pickles, salad and vegetable of the day, along with a main dish such as grilled lemongrass tofu, salted salmon or ginger pork and kimchi, in the price range of \$6-\$9.

Patrons entering the Marketplace will be given a card, similar to a credit card, to be used at the various food stations as each item is ordered. No money is exchanged until the card is turned in at the end of the visit and the amount tallied.

The system has been used successfully in other marketplaces, notably in Toronto and Chicago.

Gawronski says chef Koshizawa, 29, was the "first and only choice for the restaurant. "He was my sous chef at Schoolcraft and worked with the international class for three years," he says. "He brings a remarkable understanding of food and has the taste and the right profile for Asian Village." And, as a bonus, Koshizawa's father, Deka, formerly of Cherry Blossom in Novi and Izakaya Sanpei in Canton Township, will be executive sushi chef.

Fusia (pronounced Few-ja) will offer seating for just under 120, some at four outsized leather banquettes separated by tall bamboo stalks on a raised platform, as well as at tables.

The Japanese-inspired French fare will include such entrees as seared Alaskan halibut with green curry risotto, lobster tempura, edamame puree, and coconut lobster sauce; and duck three ways -- Peking-style breast with pomegranate molasses; seared foie gras, with sesame duck confit; and Chinese chive crepe. Dinner entrees on the a la carte menu will range from \$25-\$35. There will be a large selection of premium sakes -- the largest in Michigan, says David Koshizawa -- and an extensive international wine collection stored in a glass-enclosed wine room near the entrance to Fusia.

A chef's table will be available in the private Dragon Room, which seats 16.

Gleaming heavy stainless steel tableware and white china at Fusia is definitely not typical restaurant-supply issue. Chopsticks also are not the usual flimsy paper-wrapped kind but are sturdy dark wood.

General manager Ric Jewell, formerly of Tribute in Farmington Hills and Zingerman's Roadhouse in Ann Arbor, says the Kawaiian Cafe will offer pastries by pastry chef Brandon Taylor. He and sous chefs Ryan Esker and Whitney Smith are all Schoolcraft- trained.

French influenced but with an Asian spin, the cookies, tortes and cupcakes will be spiced with such ingredients as ginger, lemon grass and kaffir lime.

Handmade chocolates fashioned by Jewell's wife, Ruth, will also be featured.

"We'll offer a nice selection of artisan coffees and teas and yes, we'll even have bubble tea," says Jewell referring to the popular Asian drink made with hot or iced sweetened tea studded with tapioca balls.

Also in the Kawaiian Cafe, there will be china, crystal, sushi sets and teapots for sale.

While the original plan was to have a gourmet grocery to include fresh meats, seafood and produce, Jewell says right now only pantry staples such as vinegars, sushi rice and seasonings will be available. "We'll also offer the special white soy sauce that chef Koshizawa likes to use. But if a customer wants to purchase special fresh ingredients, we will find it for them."

Jewell is quick to credit the city of Detroit and GM for helping to make Asian Village a reality. "It's been a long time in the works," he says. "And they've bent over backwards to make this possible."

Gawronski, who at first signed on as a consultant on the project but remained to become managing partner for principal investors Pangborn and Andy Park, says he was attracted from the start to Pangborn's vision of the large shopping and dining complex along the Detroit River.

"The opportunity to develop something this unique downtown is so exciting and this resurgence is wonderful," he says. "I can't help but smile."

Detroit News Food Writer Kate Lawson contributed to this report.