

Change Coming to Vancouver's Restaurant Scene

By Nicholas Shannon Kulmac

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A restaurant version of the game of musical chairs is taking place in Vancouver.

In the coming months, at least three Vancouver eateries plan to relocate in the downtown and uptown area. Additionally, a new brewery will join them in late summer.

Thai Orchid kicked things off this week when owners Kat Saenguraiporn and Noom Boonkunchieng opened their new location (213 W 11th Street) on Monday, June 10. The restaurant was previously located at 1004 Washington Street.



"When Kat and Noom took over the business in 2009 it was struggling, but they have increased sales every year," said Coldwell Banker Commercial agent Jim West, who helped facilitate Thai Orchid's move. "They were in a position to be able to say, 'We're confident and we can handle [moving from a lease to owning our own building].'"

Planning to fill the former Thai Orchid spot is Jorge's Margarita Factory – a locally-owned Mexican restaurant located at 14415 Southeast Mill Plain Blvd. A manager at Jorge's said the downtown location should be open for business "in a couple of months."

Just north of downtown, Dulin's Café looks to be making a hop, skip and a jump – from its current location at 1708 Main Street, to the former Pop Culture space at 1929 Main.

"I have contractors working on giving me an estimate of what [the relocation] will cost," said café owner Pat Dulin. "If the price is within my range I think it would be a good move for us, yes."

Dulin, a restaurateur for more than 20 years, said that although the move isn't final, relocating a few blocks north of his current location would put him in an area with significantly more foot traffic.

"Right now I'm kind of isolated," he said. "I have a big space with a big parking lot, which is beneficial, but up there (at 1929 Main) I would be closer to the retailers... There are people shopping at the antique shops and the furniture store, and as a restaurant you get to tap into more of a market share in that environment than you do when you're by yourself."

New to the 'Couve

Coming soon to the corner of Evergreen Blvd. and Broadway Street is Dirty Hands Brewing – the brainchild of Phil Chou and Grant Merrill, business partners from the state of Texas.

Merrill, who moved his family to Southwest Washington so that he can run the business, said there were three main factors that led him and his business partner to choose Vancouver.

“The first factor was that the folks at the city of Vancouver – in particular, their economic division staff – really rolled out the red carpet,” said Merrill. “We had dealt with municipal jurisdictions (in other states) that clearly did not have their act together. But the people in that department, starting with Johnnie Hildreth (business assistance coordinator, city of Vancouver), really had their act together. They were looking for reasons why we should come here and how they could help us, as opposed to other municipalities in the U.S. that were always throwing up roadblocks and telling us why we couldn’t do things. That was a huge issue because we’re a heavily regulated industry and we didn’t want to have to fight with the city in terms of building, planning and regulations.”

Additionally, Merrill said he and Chou fell in love with the Pacific Northwest, and with Vancouver’s quality of life. A third factor, he said, was the opportunity to be located in a downtown environment that’s “on the upswing” – especially when it comes to breweries.

“We’re starting to achieve a critical mass now in Vancouver,” Merrill said. “When the only option was the Salmon Creek Brewery, people would say, ‘I don’t think I’m going to make the drive to downtown Vancouver because there’s only one thing.’ Now there are three or four of us within walking distance, so I think people are going to start looking at downtown Vancouver as the place to go to sample microbrews.”

Merrill expects Dirty Hands Brewing to open sometime in August.

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