

El Segundo News

New restaurateur hopes to up scale for downtown

by Brian Simon

Downtown El Segundo as a fine dining destination? Why not, asks Scott Reed. The long-time local resident has just opened an upscale steak and chop house on Richmond Street just south of Grand Avenue with a look and menu never before seen in these parts. Second City Bistro (a play on El Segundo's Spanish translation—'the second') made its debut two weeks ago after more than a year of painstaking interior and exterior preparation. A grand opening always seemed two to three weeks away, but design issues continually delayed the process.



Richmond Street's new Second City Bistro ushers in what could be a new wave of upscale eateries in the traditionally fast food confines of Downtown El Segundo

"Not a day went by for months where at least 10 people didn't walk by and ask when we would be open," said Reed, 39, who took over the space formerly occupied for 18 years by the Mexican eatery Casa Rafael. "It took a bit longer than we first expected."

The restaurant was originally slated to open its doors last October, but Reed, who toiled nights with a crew renovating the property while managing the Sportsman's Lodge in Studio City by day, encountered unexpected architectural challenges. "For instance, we sandblasted the walls to expose the original brick and found archways we hadn't counted on," he said. "In many ways we had to improvise; naturally the costs escalated." By the time Reed was finished, there were no traces of Casa Rafael left in the 1922 building. Besides the vintage brick, Second City features wood beam ceilings, skylights, dramatic light fixtures, naugahyde/wrought iron armchairs, original paintings, custom tile and two outdoor patios.

The menu is also a far cry from standard fare for the area, emphasizing high end cuts such as filet mignon, chops, chicken, seafood and pasta, with select appetizers, rich desserts and an extensive wine list. A gourmet chef from New Zealand heads the kitchen. Meanwhile, pricing ranges from \$13 to \$24 for most entrees—reasonable by fine dining standards, but a notch above the norm for downtown.

Several weeks before officially opening, Reed hosted an open house to introduce local officials and residents to the restaurant. Thanks to the buzz about the venue, close to 150 diners (capacity is 90) packed the place on the first night. The early reviews have been overwhelmingly positive, said Reed, who believes that despite downtown's fast food/casual reputation, it can support multiple upscale operations. "El Segundo is changing," he stated. "The success of Chef Hannes (the popular Main Street eatery that is the only other fine dining spot downtown) proves that if the food is good, the diners will come."

Hannes Kraschitzer, owner of Chef Hannes, agreed with the assessment and welcomed the new arrival. "I think it's great," he said of Second City. "The more good restaurants we have, the more people will think of El Segundo as a destination. It can only help my business."

Others could be following suit. According to a local realtor, two major South Bay fine dining restaurateurs, one from Manhattan Beach and another from Hermosa Beach, have been scoping locations on Main Street in recent weeks. Downtown, once retail-heavy, has become dominated by restaurants and professional service companies over the last five years. In the '80s there were fewer than 10 restaurants downtown. At least that many have opened there in the last two years alone, with more than two dozen establishments overall. The huge influx of El Segundo corporate and aerospace employees is a key reason for the shift.

"Though we only have 16,000 residents in town, we have as many as 85,000 who work here during the week and go downtown to have lunch," explained El Segundo City Councilman Kelly McDowell, who devised a shuttle bus system to tote employees from their offices to downtown and back during lunch hours. "Many downtown restaurants rely on these folks for a large chunk of their business." Reed has tapped into this target audience by offering a ten-minute express lunch.

But there are also increasing numbers of younger, single professionals and couples moving into El Segundo. That market intrigues Reed. "These people go out to dinner all the time, but would typically go to Manhattan Beach because that's where all the nicer spots have been in one general area," he said. "I think they will be much more apt to stay in town to eat if they have me, Hannes and a couple of others to choose from. And with the renovation work downtown and the new market opening in a few months, there will be a lot more foot traffic here."
