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Inside Scoop on Outliers Eatery

Since the Ice House melted at 231 York Street, a new venture is on final approach to a November opening.

BY MEAGAN SAVILLE RIEDMANN



Eyes are popping at the gravesite of Popeye's Ice House on 231 York Street. The legendary roughneck hangout with the Piper Aztec crashing into its roof, perpetually jostling with nearby Ruski's for neighborhood street cred, has given way to a glassy wood and frame restaurant hurtling toward a rumored November opening.

Jeff Wilkinson at The Blue Hydrangea, a new boutique (in the former Polly Peters building) on the same block, has enjoyed watching it take shape. "We just opened in April. One of the big draws for our coming here was this big restaurant that would open up beside it. We're looking forward to it."

He's not the only one waiting with bated breath. This is a dramatic slice of Portland, with romantic views of the bridge for diners.

In 2008, post-Popeye's Ice House, which finally succumbed to battles with the City, the property was purchased by Tod Dana (El Rayo Taqueria, Asia West) and Alex Fisher (Planet Dog) for \$360,000. With snappy designs by Lee Hulst of Leland Hulst Architectural Services, the building started to rise.

Regarding the view, Hulst says, "We had an outdoor party when Alex and Tod

closed on the building, and they'd cleared all the old stuff from inside the old Popeye's. A rainstorm came in and you could see the headlights and gorgeous views of the bridge. There are so few public restaurant views like this in Portland. The views from the dining level and outdoor porch are going to be spectacular."

NUTS & BOLTS

"The city granted variances about parking and the fact that the conditional use of a restaurant would be approved," Hulst says. "In other words, the colorful reputation of Popeye's wouldn't prejudice the approval of a future neighborhood restaurant that would be open to families and that sort of thing."

Whether or not the location was considered as an alternate location for El Rayo Taqueria matters little now, because El Rayo took off in its present location and early this summer, Peter Verrill Jr., renowned for his successes at Grace and Foreside Tavern, jumped in.

"I looked at a few other places, but when



I saw this, I fell in love," Verrill says. "I wanted something in the West End with a water view. I didn't think I could get both things. But here, there's a park across the street that gives us an unobstructed view of the harbor



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HUNGRY EYE

and the bridge, and that will never go away because it's protected land that can't be developed on."

Meanwhile, with Verrill at the helm, the interior phase has shifted gears, added additional talent, and is being fine-tuned "for appearance and function," Hulst says, when asked why the restaurant won't open this summer. "There's also the Thaxter Co.'s schedule; they've done all the construction so far."

NEIGHBORHOOD GABLES

Considering what we see today, "The City was definite about building to the sidewalks to emphasize it's an urban building," Hulst

POPEYE'S, R.I.P.

"Popeye's closed 5 years ago—liquor license stuff," says city councilor and West End resident John Anton. "We reviewed the license because of repeated run-ins with the neighborhood—people spilling out late at night and waking people up." Supporters for the liquor license argued complaints were "in the name of gentrification," pitting [new people from away] against the 'real' Mainers. "Those against said, no, you just can't go out at 1 a.m. and pee on people's doors and scream at them [when they catch you]."

says. "It was important to me to knit it into the fabric of the rest of the neighborhood, so we have multiple gables," matching The Blue Hydrangea roofline and others. "We used the little old cottage that was part of Popeye's and built around it, so it still exists as part of the new structure."

Verrill says, "Since Hulst was the original architect, he made sure it had a real Maine cottage feel. For the interior, we're working with Tivi Design out of Denver [the same company who worked on the award-winning bar design at Grace]. The inside will be very contemporary, and lighting will play a huge role in the ambience—we're going to have a lighted, textured wall behind the bar so when people look through the wall of windows in the front they'll want to come in. It's going to have a neighborhood feel. I

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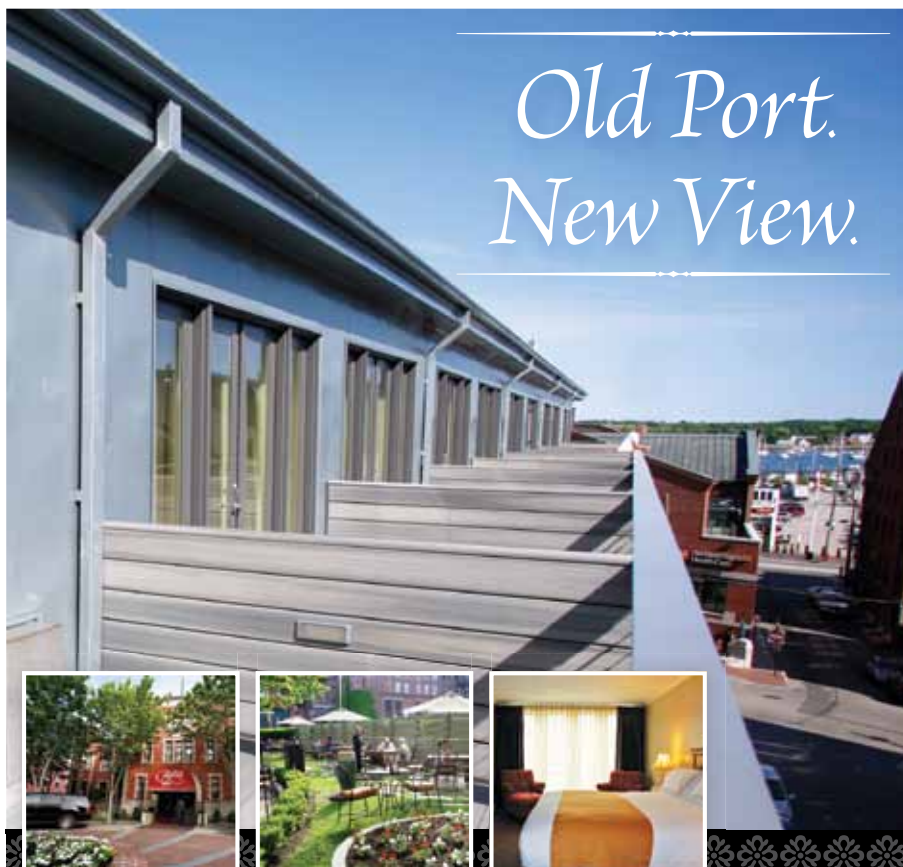
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HUNGRY EYE

want this to be a comfortable, casual bistro with a design that will 'wow' people."

WHERE'S THE CRASHED PLANE?

The signature Piper Aztec deco-wrecking the roof "was removed before Tod and Alex purchased the building, so they didn't get it," Hulst says. "The bar with all the initials carved in it was salvaged from the old Popeye's, so [who knows where that will land]."

CATCH OF THE DAY

Meanwhile, diners, neighbors, and neighboring businesses are hopeful. "Peter Verrill introduced himself a few weeks ago and said, 'I just bought it,' Jeff Wilkinson says. "He told me the chef he'd like to have is up in Bar Harbor, and that he's booked through October with weddings, so he won't be available until then."

The word is, look for fish and salads, with no particular ethnic direction.

Though the chef still remains a mystery, Verrill has fresh ideas on the brain for Outliers Eatery, the name he's chosen. "We'll offer an ever-changing seasonal menu. We don't have the exact details nailed down until I can sign the chef I want, but you can expect a few fish dishes, meat dishes, and several vegetarian options. We'll also offer small plates for happy hour and only the best local ingredients." And as far as the bar is concerned, "We'll only be serving the finest small craft beers. I'll work with the chef for beer and wine pairings. We'll also have a very extensive and affordable wine list. I don't want people to think they can only drink great wine for a special occasion."

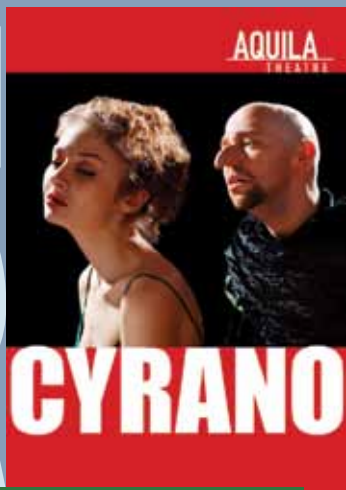
Verrill doesn't hesitate to give a nod to some locals who've played a hand in the culinary inspiration. "I really admire what Masa Miyake has brought to Portland. It's really off the charts. Though what we are doing is going to be completely different, his dedication to using the finest ingredients is something I aspire to emulate."

Even to insiders like Hulst, "Peter hasn't told me what the theme of the restaurant is going to be because it's so critical," the architect says. Besides, a dash of suspense makes for a splashy opening.

Portland needs every fresh seafood restaurant we can get. Let's hope this one is strong to the finish. ■

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