

Too big a feast famine?

By [Alexandra Zayas](#), Times Staff Writer

Published Wednesday, February 18, 2009

SEMINOLE HEIGHTS — The cliches about Florida, Hillsborough and Nebraska avenues still abound — the used car lots, the cheap motels, the colorful grit. But new life is breaking through cracks in Seminole Heights' ugly urban corridors.

It's all supposed to happen this year:

A onetime auto repair shop will become a Spanish tapas restaurant, a British pub and a sushi bar.

An old gas station will serve international brews on draft.

And two vacant lots will give way to al fresco dining and a sports bar.

As residents clamor to City Council wet-zoning meetings, voicing just how desperate they've been for neighborhood dining, Mike Merino thinks back on his own deli, which closed just a few months ago.

And he wonders: Will the neighborhood be able to support *six* new establishments?

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Every morning he drives along Florida Avenue, the vacant Merino's Deli storefront stares him in the face.

It started off strong.

He opened it in January 2007, wanting to capitalize on the influx of new residents in the neighborhood. He hung photos of his Italian family on the wall and invited his customers to do the same.

Merino's Deli became what he wanted it to be, a neighborhood lunch spot with character, where regulars ordered "the usual" from a sandwichmaker named "Mama."

But parking became a problem in the lot Merino shared with an auto repair shop.

Its original owner had worked out a schedule that offered Merino the spaces he needed. But a year later, when that owner sold the building to someone else, a tow truck moved in, and the deli lost its parking.

People then had to park a block away and walk, Merino said. His business started to decline.

When he canvassed the neighborhood with fliers, he got a new influx of customers who said they didn't know his place existed. Business increased, but only for a short time. Wall Street tanked and people just stopped coming. On Nov. 1, 2008, Merino's Deli closed.

These days, Merino is looking for a job. He says he could re-open his deli in one day, but not in Seminole Heights.

"I'd be scared to," he said. "The pie is only so big."

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Let's talk about this idea of the proverbial pie being sliced too thin. Will the restaurants all be starved for little pieces of the same neighborhood?

California-based restaurant consultant Ron Santibanez, whose national client list includes Disneyland and A&W Restaurants, doesn't see a pie. He sees a magnet.

"They're strengthening their marketing through numbers," he said. "They feel like they're trying to create a destination location."

People like choices, he said. Sometimes, they'll go to a food destination and then decide where to eat. Variety is good. Competition is good.

His only concern with Seminole Heights is whether the neighborhoods alone can support the restaurants.

Census data from a decade ago showed that residents in Seminole Heights neighborhoods earned lower than the city's average of \$22,010 at the time. The community has undergone somewhat of a makeover since then with increased home values that indicate higher-earning neighbors. Still, Santibanez urges the new restaurants to reach outside the neighborhoods for clients and to include price points that will fit everyone's budgets.

Cheaper options are keeping restaurants afloat in this tough economic climate, he says. People want to feel like they're getting a bargain, but they still want the luxury of eating out. Mid-priced is the way to go.

The neighborhood is already home to a few restaurants. On Fridays, Cappy's Pizza is packed. And on Saturday mornings, people line up at the Three Coins diner just to get a table.

"Sometimes people will sit around the dinner table figuring out how to pay their bills," Santibanez says. "Then they'll get up and say, 'What the heck? Let's go out to eat.' "

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At first, Melissa Deming admits she was a little nervous about six places opening at the same time in a neighborhood not used to supporting that many. But the owner of Ella's, an upcoming Americana folk art cafe on Nebraska, thought, "I think it'll be great. There are going to be a variety of things. It will make the neighborhood a destination."

It helps that some of the restaurants have already established themselves in other neighborhoods.

The Independent, an international brew pub, has a popular location in St. Petersburg. And people still remember

Sangria's, the tapas restaurant formerly in SoHo now set to open next to the Hillsborough Avenue Starbucks.

Sangria's owner John Obediente actually wants to mimic his restaurant's last home by creating a small version of its old corner, complete with a pub and a sushi bar. Obediente is counting on both neighbors and non-neighbors to frequent his restaurants.

The Independent will specifically be a neighborhood pub, owner Veronica Vellines says. Others will, of course, come. But she decided on this location because residents are starved for a cool place to hang out.

"We're going there for Seminole Heights," she says.

And if the neighborhood turnout to support her pub at a recent City Council meeting is any indication, the Independent's bar will be lined with residents.

Ingrid Smith, who lives a few blocks away, says she'll walk there. And another resident, Ben Mills, says the bar is what he has been waiting for. "It's so long coming," he said at the hearing.

With each of the six restaurants receiving the same kind of support from the neighborhood, Merino just hopes those people step up to sustain them.

"Maybe what happened to me is a good thing," Merino says. "You've got to support things. You've got to go to them. You've got to put your money where your mouth is."

Alexandra Zayas can be reached at azayas@sptimes.com or (813) 226-3354.

Six new spots for Seminole Heights

Sangria's

What: Spanish tapas bar and restaurant

Where: 512 E Hillsborough Ave.

Also at this location:

- Myoumi sushi bar
- LeRoy's Gastro Pub

Status: Ready to break ground

Ella's

What: Americana folk art cafe, from comfort food to pasta to vegetarian selections

Where: 5119 N Nebraska Ave.

Status: Under construction

The Independent

What: Pub that will serve food

Where: 5016 N Florida Ave.

Status: Ready to close on property

Richy's Themes

What: Sports bar with beer, wine and food

Where: 6401 N Nebraska Ave.

Status: Under construction

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