

## Landmark Pittsburg spot back in business

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The newest offering on the ever-growing menu of downtown Pittsburg restaurants is also one of its oldest.

The Liberty Hotel Restaurant, which dates to the early 1920s, is back in business. City officials are confident the eatery on East Third Street will further downtown's appeal, as was the case in its heyday.

The man hoping to write the storied building's next chapter is Gabriel Oviedo, a restaurateur who also owns the Union Hotel in Benicia. Oviedo has worked in many facets of the restaurant business since age 17.

"I feel very strongly that the Liberty Hotel is going to be successful," Oviedo, 41, said, noting that his experience, new menu and business partnership with Meredith Ladich, operations director for the Pittsburg Chamber of Commerce, bode well.

During a grand opening earlier this week, hundreds checked out the place and the new ownership. The event was held in conjunction with the weekly downtown car show.

"The turnout was amazing; it's really an exciting time," Ladich said.

The building, which Oviedo purchased for more than \$200,000 from its previous owner, includes new hardwood floors in the dining area and bar, tile flooring in the banquet room, and heavy drapery on the windows and to partition the dining room.

"I wanted to divide the room" to make it more quaint, he said. The building still has its old characteristics, including stained-glass windows, chandeliers, antique pull-chain toilets and wooden walls. The big addition is his "European style" dishes, Oviedo said.

The Victorian-era structure, built by G.E. Seeno, has a long and colorful history. It was originally built as a bar and restaurant with 16 upstairs hotel rooms.

Albert Affinito, a former Pittsburg mayor and 75-year resident, said the Liberty Hotel was a boarding house for single men who worked in industries, mostly at the steel mill, along Third Street during that era.

He said workers would stop in on their way to work to get "coffee or a morning shot." At one time, the hotel was also a brothel and probably a speakeasy, said Marti Aiello, a Pittsburg historian.

The Liberty Hotel was a swinging nightspot in the 1940s, as Pittsburg became a major disembarking point for troops headed to the war from Camp Stoneman. During this time, downtown was a major shopping destination and included stores such as Woolworth, JCPenney, Montgomery Ward and Pittsburg Motor Co.

During quieter times, the Liberty Hotel was known as "top of the line" in the area for holding events, Aiello said.

Economic Development Director Brad Nail said the revamped eatery will help downtown become a "destination place," featuring a unique assortment of restaurants.

"Typically, downtowns being revitalized are always led by restaurants because they lead to foot traffic," he said, noting the Liberty is particularly important because it fits the city's Old Town theme and efforts to preserve the past.

Like many downtowns, Pittsburg lost its luster in the 1950s and '60s as neighborhoods sprawled and strip malls opened in surrounding areas. As a result, business at the Liberty suffered.

However, fond memories of the Liberty Hotel remain. Oviedo said many older residents, including a couple celebrating the wife's 92nd birthday, have thanked him for "surviving the Liberty Hotel."

"She was very excited and gave me a hug as she left," he said.

The Liberty closed its doors in the 1970s and was eventually abandoned and boarded up. After the city attempted to condemn the place, investor Gordon Fisk convinced the city to allow him to restore the building to its original condition.

Fisk rebuilt the restaurant's features using old pictures and period pieces from bars in Colorado and Sonora. The restoration was completed in 1983. Hotel rooms on the second floor were converted to offices.

"He deserves all the credit for keeping that building around and taking the risk," said James Carey, grandson of G.E. Seeno and co-host of the syndicated radio talk show "On The House with the Carey Bros." Carey and his brother Morris used the upstairs of the Liberty Hotel for three years.

Fisk's portrait graces the wall of the restaurant's lobby.

Two years ago, Oviedo was approached by Caryn Wegerbauer, a consultant with Strategic Real Estate Services hired by Pittsburg to market downtown, about creating a new place in Old Town. Oviedo was hesitant.

"I was kind of scared about Pittsburg's reputation of being dangerous," he said. "I quickly found out it had changed."

The improvements are not done. Oviedo hopes to create a wine-tasting room featuring 500 wines and other additions. Ladich said they are also asking the redevelopment agency for \$300,000 for exterior improvements, including patio dining, lighting and facade repairs.

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