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Cooking Up New Business in the Palisades

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Linda Renaud , News Editor

Imagine a store in the Palisades dedicated to the home chef, a place for children and adults that would offer cooking classes, feature celebrity chefs and sell quality kitchen ware.

"I thought the idea was great," said Palisadian Richard Klein, a CPA consultant who has had many corporate clients. "I was surprised there wasn't already a store like that in the village. I wondered why."

The concept first came to Klein, himself a home chef, last Memorial Day weekend when he was celebrating his eighth wedding anniversary with his wife Barbara and their two young children, Jacquelyn, 6, and Joseph, 2. Not sure if he had come up with the greatest kitchen idea since sliced bread, he spent a month trying to talk himself out of the possibilities. The demographics of the area, as well as some informal polling he did with his wife, convinced him otherwise.

"This area is all about families," Klein, who lives in the Marquez area, told the Palisadian-Post this week. "I believe the village is ready for this, a place where children can come and learn to cook, along with their parents. This is not a professional trade school. It is designed for the community to enjoy. Just look at the success of cooking shows in the last 10 years. Even my young son knows who Emeril is!"

After looking at several possible village locations, including the former Kids' Universe on Sunset (which ended up being leased to Jiva Yoga Studio) and the former Emerson-LeMay Cleaners site on Swarthmore, Klein settled on a storefront on Via de la Paz. And just last week he received tentative approval of his plans from the Palisades Design Review Board.

"It's been a whirlwind of planning and raising funds," said Klein, who is not exactly sure when his multi-use kitchen store will open. His priority now is to renovate the former site of Sheila May Permanent Makeup Studio at 872 Via de la Paz. Plans call for a complete overhaul of the 1,650-sq.-ft. space, to be called Chefmakers. Klein is in the process of registering the trademark.

"Chefmakers is a new retailing concept offering a wide variety of what I call edu-tainment activities," Klein explained in his presentation to the DRB. "Products and services are oriented to the home chef, both adults and children, and is designed to meet the family-oriented needs of the Palisades community."

Exterior improvements include installing floor-to-ceiling windows, new front doors and awnings, and re-stuccoing the facade. A parapet wall will be built on the roof to give the signage, which is red, some depth. Although the Chefmakers store represents only two-thirds of the building frontage (the adjacent space, at 874, is occupied by Carpets West), the landlord is allowing an upgrading of the entire building, which will provide a "new unified look."

"I am very pleased with what they have proposed, and particularly with the quality of the project," said Don Hecker, who owns the building.

The DRB felt the same way.

"I think it's a tremendous improvement over what exists now," said member Murray Levy.

"I agree," said chairman Rick Mills. While no formal vote was taken (as there was not a quorum at the meeting) the DRB gave conditional approval to the project.

Plans also call for new signage for Carpets West as well as the Chefmakers logo (a chef's cap) to be placed on the side of the existing tower so it is visible from Sunset. Colors for the design range from light to dark gray. Awnings will be soft green and act as a sun shield. Exterior concrete planters will be filled with seasonal flowers.

"My intention was to simplify the building," said architect Stanley Felderman, who has been involved in the design of several restaurants (Il Forno, La Vecchia Cucina) as well as the design of the MTV headquarters in Santa Monica. He and Klein met at a Daddy and Me class at the Village Arts and Enrichment Center on Sunset. They became friends, and Felderman is now an investor in the project.

"Richard is so compelling, so passionate about this idea that I could not help but become involved," said Felderman, who lives in the El Medio bluffs area with his wife Nancy Keating and their 3-year-old twin daughters, Kate and Sara. "This project is all about bringing families together, and giving something back to this wonderful community we live in."

Klein, 48, has also leased two smaller storefronts from Hecker to use as office space and storage. Both are located next to Amazing Music, behind the Via de la Paz location. He is pleased that several of the investors in the project, as well as some of his advisors, are Palisadians.

"We hope to create a renewed interest in Via de la Paz with this project," said Klein, who taught himself how to cook when he went off to study business at USC. He wrote about his first disastrous attempt for the student newspaper, the Daily Trojan.

"My mother sent me off with a pot and some Hamburger Helper. I soon found out that the pot wasn't big enough for what I was making!"

So what does the home chef cook when he has guests?

"Homemade fettuccine with Roquefort cheese sauce, paired with a French Sauterne," Klein said.

Possibility a recipe for a Chefmakers food demonstration?

"Maybe."

To follow the progress of Chefmakers, go to: www.chefmakers.com.

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