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End Nigh in Huntington Beach

Popular Pier Cafe Destroyed by '83 Storms to Reopen

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Article Text:

It's the beginning of the End, again.

The End Cafe, the landmark **Huntington Beach** restaurant destroyed two years ago by treacherous winter rainstorms, will reopen with a splash on Saturday. Although under the same ownership, the cafe at the end of the city's 1,830-foot **pier** will be a far different diner from its 44-year-old predecessor, which sold hot soup to chilled fishermen and hot dogs to hungry surfers.

But the End Cafe is more than an end in itself.

To many Huntington Beach merchants, it represents a municipal tourist attraction, second only to the sand and sea. Not all visitors eat at the cafe, but over the years its presence has evolved into a focal point that gives tourists a reason to visit the city. At night, when tourist traffic commonly nose-dives, hundreds of people still parade to the end of the pier.

So important is this tiny cafe to the city that some merchants call it the key link to the city's ambitious redevelopment plans. City fathers, too, realize the restaurant's impact and spent months bitterly debating its redesign.

As the clearest signal of its popularity, restaurant operator John Gustafson said that within two years, he expects the facility to post annual revenues of \$1 million--nearly 10 times that of the former End Cafe.

Sure, a customer will still be able to get a cup of coffee for four bits and a burger for about three bucks, but in the hopes of enlarging its eating audience, the End's operators have not only added the likes of salads and seafood, but also quadrupled the restaurant's capacity to 120 and even laid ocean-blue carpeting in the second level Offshore Room.

That's right, the Offshore Room. (For \$115, it can be rented for birthdays, banquets or even bat

mitzvahs.)

"Eventually," said Gustafson, 56, who operated the former End Cafe, "we think visitors to Southern California will want to see Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm and the End Cafe."

He did not specify the order.

"Tourists have told me they come here specifically because airplane pilots pointed out the End Cafe when they flew over Huntington Beach," said Abdul Memon, president of the Huntington Beach Downtown Merchant's Guild and owner of Sunline surf shop.

Under a long-term lease agreement with the city, Gustafson has made bold plans for the stucco facility with a copper-top roof. A separate dinner menu may be added in a year or two. And there is even talk of applying for a liquor license someday in the Queen Elizabeth.

Although the decor remains simple, and a relaxed dress code will still allow customers to dine in swim suits (shoes and shirts, please), video games have been given the ax and mellow music will be piped into the ship-shaped restaurant.

The cafe, which will be open seven days weekly from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m. could serve 2,000 take-out and sit-down customers on busy summer days, Gustafson said.

Competition Impressed

The competition is impressed.

"They'll do very well. It's a fantastic location and a great view," said Doug Cavanaugh, co-owner of Ruby's, a 1940s-themed restaurant at the end of the Balboa pier. Cavanaugh said that Huntington Beach city officials approached him to build a Ruby's on the pier shortly after the End Cafe collapsed. "They asked us a lot of questions, but they blew us out of the water before we got a chance to bid on it," he said.

Instead, Gustafson got the go-ahead from the city, which is sharing the \$600,000 rebuilding costs. Gustafson, who did not carry wave damage insurance, said that the storm's aftermath left his restaurant with nearly \$250,000 in interior structural damage and lost business. He now carries more than \$200,000 in various forms of insurance, but high costs still prohibit him from carrying crucial wave-damage insurance, he said.

Hounded by Collectors

Gustafson operated the restaurant for nine years until the wrecker's ball leveled it into the wind-swept surf after 1983's winter storms.

Souvenir collectors hounded him to sell restaurant scraps, but he refused. "I had a tender feeling about the place. I just didn't want to sell it off," he said. The original End Cafe sign hangs in a garage at his son's Huntington Beach business, he said.

But when the End Cafe sank, Gustafson didn't. He negotiated with Maxwell's, an upscale restaurant located at the front end of the pier, for a small retail space on the side of the restaurant. He continued to sell take-out burgers and pizza there. Gustafson affectionately named the eatery Maxie's Other End

Cafe, and business has been so good that he'll continue to operate the stand even after he reopens the End Cafe.

Caption:

PHOTO: The End Cafe closed with a splash, and John Gustafson plans to reopen the same way Saturday.

PHOTOGRAPHER: COLIN CRAWFORD

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