



Move from Shipoke to riverside Harrisburg lets Char's expand

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SUE GLEITER, The Patriot-News
By

It was not the way Char Magaro intended to leave Shipoke.

Fifty-eight inches of **water from the remnants of Tropical Storm Lee** in September spilled into Char's Bella Mundo, her small 10-year-old bistro on Race Street in Harrisburg's riverside neighborhood. At the highest mark, flood water rose about a foot above the restaurant's bar.

Re-opening was not an option. Regulars were upset, but Magaro assured them it was not the end of a dining era.

"We're just saying, 'Wait,' " she said.

As fate would have it, Magaro already had a plan set in motion to move the restaurant to the Tracy Mansion along North Front Street in Midtown.

Char's at Tracy Mansion will open in the first-floor of the historic brick building as early as June. The restaurant will be three times bigger than the one in Shipoke with eclectic decor and views of the Susquehanna River.

"When you walk in you are going to feel like you are in a grand space," Magaro said.



Enlarge

CHRISTINE BAKER, The Patriot-News

Char Magaro walks in front of the Tracy Mansion on North Front Street in Harrisburg where her new restaurant Char's at Tracy Mansion is due to open in June. CHRISTINE BAKER, The Patriot-News

Char's at Tracy Mansion gallery (5 photos)

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Plans for the move surfaced about five years ago when Magaro was approached by Jack Kay and Tim Fulton of Susquehanna Real Estate Group. They wanted to know if she wanted to relocate the restaurant to the historic mansion the company was developing.

The \$22 million project would convert the property into a restaurant and offices as well as an adjacent Riverview Condominiums with 32 suites affording river views.

It was no secret Magaro was looking to move.

The 46-seat restaurant in the riverfront community attracted politicians, state workers and wine lovers. It was quaint and regulars liked how beverage manager Salvatore Pantano memorized their favorite cocktails and executive chef Ron Canady prepared specials and regular menu items like grilled duck breast and Chesapeake encrusted sea scallops.

But, at times it was hard to nab a seat without a reservation. Sometimes people had to stand in the dining room aisle waiting for a table. Magaro and her staff were finding it hard to expand the business in such cramped quarters.

Char's at Tracy Mansion

Char Magaro, owned Char's Bella Mundo in Shipoke for many years, and is now opening a new restaurant in Harrisburg on Front Street called Char's at Tracy Mansion. In this video Magaro takes us on a tour of her work in progress which is slated to open in June 2012.

"I couldn't elevate anyone else's income because there was no place to grow," she said.

Magaro looked at properties in Gettysburg and York. People in Lancaster begged her to move that direction and she entertained the idea of building on an empty lot in Hampden Twp.

She was sold on the mansion the first time she saw it.

"It was a perfect location. The only restaurant on the river. I have this terrace, and I knew I was going to have a sculpture garden. I could totally envision it," she said.

The Tudor Revival manor was completed in 1918 and is named after David Edward Tracy, a Harrisburg philanthropist who served as vice president of Harrisburg Hospital and assisted in the planning and construction of St. Patrick Cathedral.

It operated as an osteopathic hospital for 20 years before Goodwill Industries became a tenant followed by a mental health facility. Susquehanna Real Estate purchased it in 2004.

Commercial space is available for lease or sale in the building. Fulton, who is vice president of the real estate company, said the opening of the restaurant is likely to spark interest in the project, which slowed down a couple of years ago when the economy took a hit.

For now, the first-floor 4,100-square-foot restaurant is an empty shell. Construction is expected to start in the next couple of weeks.

The restaurant will be built with green elements such as bamboo, following Magaro's longtime philosophy of being environmentally conscious. It will function on 100 percent wind power for electricity and geothermal for gas heat.

One entrance will take diners into a reception area where they'll be greeted by a 16-foot bar with archways.

The main dining room, with mirrors and banquette seating, will boast floor-to-ceiling windows with views of the river. Seating will be available outdoors on a terrace, and diners will be able to walk through the sculpture garden.

A library will house books and board games and is designed as a place to enjoy small plates of food and sip cocktails. Another room will be devoted to a gallery displaying and selling Magaro's custom jewelry as well as blown glass and bronze pieces by her daughter, Ona Magaro.

The room will serve as a private dining and overflow room with long inlaid wood tables, a fireplace, credenza with light shelving, audio visual equipment and private terrace.

Magaro said it was important the restaurant offer options for diners and groups like the Harrisburg Young Professionals to commune and meet. Diners will have the option of stopping in for cocktails and small plates of food, dessert or full course entrees.

"I think this is going to be a gift to the community," she said.

With the additional space — the kitchen is equivalent in size to the Shipoke restaurant — Canady is planning to expand the brassiere menu. The restaurant will be open for dinner only. He will incorporate more Asian influences and small plates of foods in a French tavern tradition.

Pantano will experiment with more infused vodkas and flavored syrups and add draft beers via a hand-drawn beer engine.

"I think we had something great. Now that it's gone, I can't wait to do it again," Pantano said.

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