

Wednesday, October 9, 2019

¡Puesto change-o!



Mark Armao/The Daily Transcript

San Diego-based Mexican restaurant chain Puesto will open a new 10,000-square-foot location later this year in Mission Valley.

By Mark Armao

A longtime fixture on the local brewery landscape will transform later this year, when the recently shuttered Gordon Biersch brewpub in Mission Valley gives way to Puesto, a locally based restaurant chain.

Known for their gourmet tacos and margaritas, Puesto's latest enterprise will include the company's first brewery operation, which will focus on Mexican-style lagers that will be sold at the restaurant and distributed to the six other locations throughout the state.

"San Diego is the craft beer capital of the country, and we've always embraced local beers, but we didn't feel like IPAs and what San Diego brewers were doing was necessarily the best fit for our food," said Eric Adler, managing partner of Puesto. "So we always thought it would be great if we could do a fresher version of the classic Mexican beers."

When brewer Doug Hasker takes the helm of Puesto Cervecería, it won't take long for him to adjust to the new space. He's been working there for 20 years.

Hasker led the Gordon Biersch brewing program for more than two decades before the brewpub closed its Mission Valley location, which he said contains "the best-working lager brewery in San Diego."

And while Hasker spent his time with Gordon Biersch brewing German-style ales and lagers, the beermaker will now turn his attention toward the classic Mexican-style lager. Hasker said he is still developing the brewery's initial offerings, a process that began following a much-needed vacation.

"I asked for a year off; they gave me two months," he said with a laugh. "So I'm back in the thick of it."

He had to get back to work for good reason: Puesto plans to open the restaurant less than six months after initiating the \$8 million project. Working with San Diego-based design-build firm Basile Studio, the company is

overhauling the 8,000-square-foot interior into a custom, contemporary space that would not be out of place in Mexico's capital, Adler said.

"We're going for a modern, Mexico City vibe," he said.

Along with Puesto's signature tacos — which were initially created by founding chef Luisteen Gonzalez — the menu at the Mission Valley location will feature new additions from newly appointed executive creative chef Marco Arreguin and San Diego executive chef Edgar Chong.

The two will collaborate on a lineup of "wood-fired and hearth-roasted dishes" offered alongside Puesto's established set of recipes, which are made with handmade tortillas and locally sourced ingredients, according to a news release.

The 400-plus-seat restaurant will feature an expansive bar, where guests can order from an array of margaritas, tequilas and other agave-derived delights.

The bar will be backed by an innovative liquor-shelf system designed by Basile Studio, which fabricates nearly every feature in its projects, from furniture to lighting equipment. Powered by a mechanical winch system, the shelves can be automatically raised and lowered by bartenders with the push of a button.

The company developed a similar shelving system at Puesto's Santa Clara location, said studio principal Paul Basile, who first witnessed the winch in action at that restaurant's grand opening.

"When you see 3,000 pounds of liquor coming down from the ceiling, that's pretty awesome," Basile said.

Other architectural features include a pivoting, one-way mirror shielding a private dining room from the main volume, and a feature wall above a secondary bar that includes thousands of color-changing LED lights, Basile said.

The property also features about 3,100 square feet of patio space along with the brewhouse, which will be untouched except for a minor "tune-up," Adler said.

Describing the improvements being made to the 20-year-old brewing equipment, Hasker extended on the metaphor: "It's bringing your BMW into the shop and giving it a little tune-up. You change the oil and it's good to go."

Hasker said the transition to the new company has been seamless, not only because of the familiar surroundings.

"They've welcomed me with open arms," he said. "I feel like family already."

Family isn't a foreign concept to the company, which is led by multiple members of a family whose origins can be traced mostly to the Guadalajara region of Mexico. In 2010, Adler met Gonzalez, the chef, who was running an upscale taco catering business.

Despite the fact none of them planned on opening a restaurant, they decided to capitalize on the potential they saw in the primo tacos, said Adler, who grew up eating tacos that usually consisted of leftover meat folded into a tortilla.

The family opened the restaurant in 2012 alongside Gonzalez, and now have successful operations in San Diego, Irvine and the San Francisco Bay area, with plans for at least two more locations in the future.

Straining to recall the number of family members he's in business with, Adler playfully listed the rest of the leadership team.

"It's like two brothers, two cousins, three chickens, a cat, a dog and I think there's a tiger somewhere," he said. "It's definitely a family thing, and we're glad Doug feels like he's a part of the family, because he definitely is."

mark_armao@sdtranscript.com