

## Restaurant, theater/cafe planned for East Liberty

Thursday, October 06, 2011

By China Millman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Kevin Sousa, chef and co-owner of Salt of the Earth in Garfield, will open a modern barbecue restaurant, Union Pig and Chicken, on North Highland Avenue in East Liberty.

His announcement, expected today, comes on the heels of another East Liberty development prize planned two blocks away, a state-of-the-art movie theater and cafe that will occupy the first two floors of a new building at the corner of Penn and Highland avenues.



The planned Odeon building in East Liberty

The six-story Odeon Building, which will have office space on the upper floors, is a partnership between East Liberty Development Inc. and the commercial real estate brokerage Blasier Urban, which helped develop the Eastside retail center that includes Whole Foods.

"Our general approach to the core of East Liberty is as an entertainment district," said Nate Cunningham, ELDI director of real estate. He sees the Odeon Building, a ground-up construction that is scheduled for occupancy in the fall of 2013, as the anchor to this entertainment district.

"The first floor will house five [movie theater] screens and a cafe, and the second will offer a more elaborate restaurant, a full bar and luxury-style seating," said Molly Blasier, president of Blasier Urban. "The top four floors of the building will be office space."

The theater, designed by JKR Partners in Philadelphia and run by Spotlight Theaters, will feature all-digital projection. "Auditoriums can be programmed for any sort of event from corporate meetings to internal office presentations to parties," she said.

The downstairs eatery will serve standard movie theater concession food, as well as pre-prepared take-out foods such as wraps. Upstairs, The Odeon Cafe, a more elaborate restaurant, will offer table service and a tapas-style menu, as well as a full-service bar. Andrew Moss of Moss Architects, located just a block away on Penn Avenue, is designing the restaurant, which will be open to the general public.

Moviegoers will be able to buy food from either section and take it into the theaters.

Mr. Cunningham said he was thrilled to learn of the plans for Union Pig and Chicken, which is exactly the kind of restaurant he hoped would be drawn into the neighborhood.

"I think Kevin's track record -- of bringing higher-end dining to locations people didn't think were quite ready for it -- speaks for itself," Mr. Cunningham said. "Having [him] go into that Highland Avenue location is awesome."

The building at 200 N. Highland Ave. that will house Union Pig and Chicken, as well as a stretch of properties on Broad Street, are owned by the Wedgwood Group, which has been holding them empty until it found the right tenants.

"The community's being developed quite effectively on the perimeter [with Whole Foods, Target and Bakery Square]," said Eddie Lesoon, managing partner of Wedgwood. "We felt for East Liberty to really become nurtured, we would have to go right into the core, develop it early and positively, and not only would it come in from the circle, it would develop out from the center."

After visiting Salt of the Earth, Mr. Lesoon was convinced that Mr. Sousa was right for the space.

The 200 N. Highland Ave. property has a history as a barbecue restaurant -- the Steel City Rib House was its last occupant. Born and raised in southwestern Pennsylvania, Mr. Sousa said he was somewhat nervous about staking a claim to a cuisine with such a strong cultural identity.

"We're not calling ourselves a soul food restaurant; we don't want to be Carolina barbecue," he said. "It will be an amalgamation of barbecue styles but all with a Western Pennsylvania spin."

The restaurant, which will have communal tables, will be open seven days a week for lunch and dinner. The menu will be short, probably 10 items or fewer, with fried and barbecued chicken, pork ribs and shoulder.

"We're going to stick with two animals," said Mr. Sousa, who will purchase whole hogs from a local farmer and "beautiful chickens" from Heritage Farms in Ridgway, Elk County, which supplies chicken to Salt of the Earth. Side dishes, such as grits, greens and corn bread, will be sourced locally.

In a departure for Mr. Sousa, the restaurant will not offer vegetarian items. He is planning on a liquor license, and the bar will focus on bourbon and beer.

Unlike Salt of the Earth, which is co-owned by its landlords, Liza and Doug Cruze, this restaurant will be a solo project for Mr. Sousa. Because of anticipated renovation, he expects the restaurant to open in early 2012.

Mr. Sousa didn't have his heart set on a second restaurant, but the location and the opportunity to play an early role in East Liberty development convinced him.

"I want to be part of the neighborhood," Mr. Sousa said, "Like Soba and Casbah [in Shadyside], those are the restaurants that really last."

In addition to The Odeon Building, Mr. Cunningham of ELDI confirmed continued plans to put a boutique Ace hotel in the former YMCA building on Whitfield Street, saying a deal could be closed in early 2012. Meanwhile, Walnut Capital has cleared a major hurdle in its plan to transform the Highland Building into more than 100 apartments, having secured an essential \$4.5 million grant from the state for a new parking garage.

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**First published on October 6, 2011 at 12:00 am**