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Spicy addition

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After sitting vacant more than three years following fire damage, Wilmette's historic train depot building is about to take on a new life as a Latin-American restaurant.

A project to remodel the original 1873 structure and build an addition on the rear of the building, at 1135 Wilmette Ave., are nearing completion this week, said Robert Garrison, who has leased the property from the village to open Depot Nuevo.

Work began in October. Most of the remaining work involves finishing touches and fixtures.

"It's looking good. I think we'll probably be opening right around the first of June," Garrison said. "It's really on the finishing end of things."

The old depot building was moved to a village-owned lot in the mid-1970s as a historic preservation project. It was leased later to a cable television company before being turned into the Old Ouilmette Depot restaurant by the Falzer family that runs C.J. Arthur's.

A phoenix of sorts

A fire in November 2004 caused extensive smoke and water damage, and the village ultimately leased the property to Garrison, who has run The Noodle restaurants in downtown Wilmette and Glenview.

Garrison said he chose the location because of its appearance and charm, but found the building, by itself, was too small to be viable for almost any restaurant owner. The old building had about 1,000 square feet, with nearly a third of it taken up by bathrooms and a kitchen squeezed into the basement. Garrison said the new addition almost doubles the space, allowing the original building to be used entirely as a dining room, with the kitchen and bathrooms in the back, and storage areas in both the old basement and a new one under the addition.

Indoor seating will accomodate 60 to 70 people with a similar number on the deck, Garrison said.

"I think it's just a gorgeous building. The deck is probably the nicest outdoor dining deck anywhere on the North Shore," Garrison said. "The restaurant as it existed before had a few challenges, and we've taken steps that I think overcome those challenges."

Variety of regions

As he did with The Noodle, Garrison said he's trying to put a new spin on traditional ethnic cuisine. With Depot Nuevo, that means cherry picking some of the best dishes from all over Central and South America. The restaurant also will include a full bar with premium tequilas and aged rums.

"Our goal is to make real delicious restaurant food that people want to go eat at regularly, more so than to replicate a historically accurate restaurant for a single country," Garrison said. "The main ingredient that I think makes The Noodle special and the same thing we're going to be doing at Depot Nuevo really boils down to procuring particularly fresh, quality foods, making them in a fresh healthy manner and serving them with some prompt, efficient, friendly staff."

The opening of the new restaurant comes as the family closes the Glenview Noodle location, a decision Garrison said was driven by waning business in the wake of The Glen's opening three years ago. All of the staff from that location has accepted jobs at Depot Nuevo, he said.

In crafting the 10-year lease, village officials hoped a larger restaurant would bring long-term use of the property and add vitality to the downtown area. Wilmette agreed to share more than half of the estimated \$500,000 construction cost.

The lease rate of \$31 per square foot is higher than the previous tenant's rate of \$23.63 per foot, and the annual \$16,000 property tax bill will now be paid by the tenant rather than the village.

In addition, studies in recent years found that Wilmette's downtown area was losing much of its potential restaurant traffic to Evanston, a situation consultants said could be reversed by more destinations in Wilmette.

"It's going to be a nice feature to our Village Center, said Village Manager Mike Earl.