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A Renewed Appetite For Splashy Restaurants

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by Carol Ness

Doors are flying open at new high-profile restaurants around the Bay Area at a pace not seen since the dot-com boom.

This summer's arrival of elegant, expensive Restaurant Michael Mina on Union Square, followed by renowned chef George Morrone's Tartare near Jackson Square, provide the clearest evidence to date that local restaurants are finally shaking off their post-dot-com, post-Sept. 11 blues.

While restaurants opened and closed throughout the last three years, the clank of places being shuttered drowned out the whoosh of doors opening. Now, with Mina and Morrone heading a pack of openings, the balance has shifted.

"There's a change in energy," said Ed Levine, an attorney for Bay Area restaurants as well as a partner in five Left Bank restaurants.

Kevin Westlye, executive director of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association trade group, pointed out that Mina and Morrone's new places were substantial investments.

He said, "We haven't had many large restaurant openings in the last four years. So it's encouraging to see someone going after large openings again."

With the economy throttling up, if fitfully, people say they're eating out more often than a year ago, according to diners who responded to a survey by the online reservation service OpenTable. Fancy bottlings are starting to sell again.

And not all the action is in San Francisco. From Poggio in Sausalito to Va de Vi in Walnut Creek to destinations up and down Santana Row in San Jose, restaurants are drawing crowds and stealing some of the big city's thunder.

"I don't think all these restaurants opening is a coincidence," said Mitch Rosenthal, chef at both the jam-packed Town Hall and at the still- bouncing-back Postrio. "People really needed a place to go and have fun. For two years it was really bleak.

"God forbid (anything) happens to shake it all up again."

Town Hall, Quince, A16 and Cortez signaled the trend when they fired up their saute lines last winter and started selling out nightly. The sizzling new Slanted Door took things up a notch. Then last month, Mina opened with his high-concept, \$4 million restaurant in the Westin St. Francis on Union Square, and Morrone made a splash with his fresh, pretty Tartare.

Frisson, a high-end DJ supper club, followed; five more notable restaurants jumped in within the last week. Another half-dozen or more are polishing their stemware and getting ready to start taking reservations. And that doesn't even count the spate of inexpensive spin-offs from fancy chefs, including Traci Des Jardins' Mijita taqueria, which opened this week, and Gerald Hirigoyen's Bocado. While there have been some notable closings, too -- most recently Roxanne's in Larkspur -- the trend is up.

Business is up at all Kimpton's 13 Bay Area restaurants, and the increase is about half locals and half visitors, Leondakis said.

Westlye, of the restaurant association, and Levine, the restaurant attorney, said prospects aren't brightening for all restaurants equally, and that the overall change has been steady and incremental to a point where "this year feels really different," as Westlye put it.

Levine said all the buzz about the openings, and the popularity of new places like Town Hall, demonstrates a renewed optimism

more than a "clear, across-the-board indication that everybody's doing better."

The Bay Area restaurant scene has been late to recover from the disasters of 2001. New York, Chicago and Miami suffered only briefly and have been booming, according to National Restaurant Association spokesman Hudson Riehle. Nationally, restaurants are doing very well. Americans will eat out to the tune of a record \$400 billion this year, according to association figures.

To try to quantify the extent of the Bay Area comeback, The Chronicle collaborated with the online reservations company OpenTable to survey diners who use its Web site to book tables at 390 restaurants in the greater Bay Area, plus 1,800 elsewhere. The survey isn't scientific, but offers insights based on some of the area's most dedicated eaters.

More than 1,300 local OpenTable users answered the online survey, and 38 percent said they're eating out more often now than a year ago. Another 50 percent said they are eating out just as much, and only a few said they are eating out less.

The biggest reason for eating out more often: because "there are exciting new restaurants to try."

About a third of those responding said they're eating in more expensive restaurants, more small-plates restaurants and more ethnic restaurants.

One change is that diners from the Peninsula and Silicon Valley aren't coming to San Francisco as often to eat as they did a year ago, compared to people from the North and East Bay. Almost two-thirds of the South Bay contingent said they are eating in San Francisco less, perhaps because there are so many top-notch new options close to home -- Santana Row in San Jose, Tamarine in Palo Alto and Manresa in Los Gatos, to name a few.

People are excited by the new -- especially Michael Mina, Tartare, Town Hall, Quince, A16 and Cortez in San Francisco. Established favorites like Gary Danko, Boulevard and Delfina haven't lost their luster, either, according to comments volunteered in the survey.

"The past year, new restaurants are popping up everywhere, so I just try to indulge in all the hot spots, or what I can afford," said Courtney Chatalas, 24, who answered the survey and agreed to a follow-up interview.

"It's a fun way to socialize," Chatalas said.

Jimmy Owens, a 55-year-old SBC systems manager who lives in Berkeley, says he eats out four times a month now, up from twice a year ago. He and his partner like trying "the latest and the greatest."

"I have more disposable income," he explained.

The blinding glare of the new restaurants tends to obscure the fact that the good, or better, times aren't spread out evenly. Many fine, established restaurants are still climbing out of the doldrums. Some, like Lulu and Boulevard, remained relatively busy throughout.

An OpenTable survey of 50 of its Bay Area restaurants suggests that the overall improvement has been incremental, about 10 percent more seats filled in June 2004 compared to the year before.

As both co-chef/owner of the super-hot Town Hall and co-chef of the still-recovering Postrio, Mitch Rosenthal sees the whole picture.

"At Town Hall, we don't really have slow nights. It just took right off," Rosenthal said. Almost all its customers are local, he said, and their only complaint has been that "they wanted bigger and more expensive wines."

On the other hand, Postrio, which is more costly and depends more on tourists, conventions and business diners, took a big hit in 2001 and is still recovering. Progress has been steady for the last 18 months, Rosenthal said, but Monday nights can still be slow and weekends, while busy, are running about 100 dinners a night behind the peak of 400 in 2000.

At Tamarine in Palo Alto, owner Anne Le is optimistic that the good times will stretch into the fall. Business this summer has been 15 to 20 percent higher than expected, and there are other signs: People are ordering off the reserve wine list (no bottle under \$200), and fall bookings for parties and private rooms are up. Le is stocking up on high-end wines.

At Bacar, which opened with much fanfare in 2000, partner and sommelier Debbie Zachareas likes the steady progress she's seeing. But she's cautious.

"There's no indication that we should rest easy. But at least it's a big jump from when no one could even think of resting easy."