

DINING GETTING FINER IN HAZEL DELL?

SOME HOPING FOR ARRIVAL OF UPSCALE EATERIES IN AREA

By Michael Andersen, Columbian staff writer

Monday, March 22, 2010

One \$3.59 cup of French fries at a time, Hazel Dell's restaurant scene could be growing up.

Five Guys Burgers and Fries opened on 78th Street in December, bringing the chain's six-inch-thick sandwiches and sit-down service — not to mention huge crowds at every mealtime — to the domain of the drive-thrus.

Across the street, Buffalo Wild Wings expects to open in June. A few miles up Highway 99, the area's second Applebee's opened in 2008. Portland-based Blind Onion Pizza opened a franchise shop on the highway in late 2007, and tucked behind Felida's subdivisions to the west, the independently owned Farrar's Bistro rolled out its first custom menu the same year.

Haute cuisine? Not quite. But it's enough to send the area's restaurant fans dreaming of the day when some entrepreneur will unfurl Hazel Dell's first tablecloth.

"This place has been known as a suburb for the 10 years I've been in here, but Hazel Dell is really a city of its own now," said Dean Kohler, 26, relishing the end of a meal at Five Guys on Friday afternoon. "I don't eat a burger from anywhere else now."

Two tables over, Tammy Young of Hazel Dell said she's hungry for more progress.

"It's all been kind of fast-foody," said Young, a nurse at Legacy Salmon Creek Medical Center. "We'd like to see some mid-range and higher-quality stuff coming in for sure."

Young and her husband Joel, an automotive designer, said they eat out two to three nights a week and have visited Five Guys about five times since January.

Chains 'Suck Up Air'

The more sit-down restaurants move in, the more attractive the area will become to other restaurants, predicted Jeremy McCullough, store manager at Blind Onion.

Each new option helps remind diners that "they don't have to go out to 192nd or 164th or something like that to get a nice dinner," McCullough said.

Jim West, a Hazel Dell real estate salesman who spent 25 years in the restaurant business, was more skeptical about recent progress.

"The restaurant that everybody wants is the locally owned, maybe more chef-driven, with not the corporate menu food, which is what most of those guys are," he said.

“Chains like Applebee’s pour money into marketing and “suck up a lot of air” in the local dining market,” he said, “especially during downturns.”

“In the restaurant business, historically, the tougher the recession, the more the chains gain market share,” West said.

Subsidies For ‘Quality’

If Hazel Dell’s restaurant scene hasn’t quite hit the big time, it’s not for lack of trying by local government.

Before stepping down in 2008, former Clark County Commissioner Betty Sue Morris, of Felida, persuaded the county’s roads department and the local sewer district to offer special fee breaks for “quality restaurants,” worth maybe \$5,000 to \$10,000 from each agency.

The response? Underwhelming.

Farrar’s is the only new restaurant that has qualified for a sewer hookup discount, according to John Peterson of the Clark Regional Wastewater District. And not a single new restaurant seems to have asked for the traffic-fee discount, the county said last week.

Ron Lauser, a retired developer and Realtor who sits on the Three Creeks Advisory Council, called Morris’s subsidies “a drop in the bucket” compared to other fees that make independent restaurants hugely expensive to launch.

Still, Lauser thinks Hazel Dell could support a tablecloth-style restaurant. The big problem is persuading bankers to write the loan.

“I definitely think a nice restaurant would be economically feasible,” he said. “What they don’t realize is that Hazel Dell draws from Felida, Salmon Creek. They never see the demographics that they’re looking for, because they don’t look far enough.”

Morris, the former commissioner, agreed: It’ll be a banker who finally decides, one day, that Hazel Dell is ready for fine dining.

“The recession has to get over and people have to be able to borrow money,” Morris said. “I think its five years.”

