

Astaria Restaurant gets new look, menu despite vacant hotel

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The Astaria Restaurant & Bar in the historic Benjamin Franklin building in downtown San Mateo has revamped its look and lowered prices after determining hotel renovations were moving too slowly to delay the changes any longer.

Months of scaffolding and noisy construction have taken their toll on the restaurant, and co-owner Alicia Petrakis said she wanted to give the place a new feel and let customers know the business was alive and well despite the vacant hotel.

"It has been brutal for us," Petrakis said. "We were scaffolded for 18 months. People thought we were closed."

Business in the main restaurant declined about 30 percent after construction began, she estimated. During that time the restaurant was flooded five times and the ceiling came down, according to Petrakis.

Once building owner CitiSuites stopped work in May due to financial problems and scaffolding came down in September, Astaria began to see sales pick up a bit despite the national economic meltdown.

In addition to changing the restaurant's color scheme and adding flat-screen monitors, Petrakis and partner Eleni Lolos spruced up the Spanish revival hotel's lobby, a vast space that was largely empty save for construction debris.

They also lowered prices and changed the menu to emphasize comfort food and California cuisine. Local chef Tony Flier recently joined the kitchen.

"We had to do the changes we wanted to do now because we just weren't sure the hotel was ever going to open," Petrakis said. The 1927 building has been vacant, except for the restaurant, since United Airlines moved out in 2003. The air carrier housed flight attendants and pilots on layover stays there. Contrary to popular belief, it was named after the two original owners rather than founding father Benjamin Franklin, Petrakis said.

Taylor Lembi, president of CitiSuites, referred calls about plans for the building to hotel spokeswoman Renee Roberts.

"Like everyone, we've been affected by the economy," Roberts said.

"CitiSuites is completely committed to the project and wants to open the hotel."

The remaining renovations will take about four months, and the company will have a better idea of when it can resume work in 2009, Roberts said.

She added that the noise would likely be less bothersome this time around.

"It wouldn't be the intensity of the construction that had been going on previously because we're further along on the project," Roberts said.