

Grocery with Latin touch opens in Beechview

September 13, 2013 12:00 AM

By Diana Nelson Jones Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The IGA grocery store in Beechview has changed management. The owners of Las Palmas -- who have grocery stores in Brookline, Oakland and Washington, Pa. -- have assumed operations of the store as of this week.

The IGA opened two years ago with Ron Levick as the leasee. It is owned by the Pittsburgh Economic and Industrial Development Corp., an arm of the Urban Redevelopment Authority. A Foodland on the same site had closed in the summer of 2010. Mr. Levick still holds the lease, but Las Palmas has bought the business.

Robert Rubinstein, acting executive director of the URA, said he is hopeful about the transition.

Gabriel Berumen and his four brothers opened their first enterprise, Las Palmas, a market with Latin American products, in Brookline four years ago. In their largest venture of the four locations, the Beechview supermarket will remain a member of IGA and will continue to carry the same groceries, with an infusion of Latin American products sold in Las Palmas stores, he said.

The meat section has doubled, with sliced American cheese and sliced bologna along with prepared fajita meat, Mexican chorizo and carne asada. Mr. Berumen said the brothers plan to reconfigure an area in the back of the store for seating and to use the kitchen to serve tacos, burritos and American fare.

An outdoor taco stand, similar to the one outside the Las Palmas on Brookline Boulevard, is operating now at the IGA.

"It had been struggling," said state Sen. Wayne Fontana, D-Brookline, explaining the transition at the IGA. "I can only guess a lot of folks who had gotten used to going other places [while the Foodland store was closed] continued to do so."

Mr. Berumen said he is keeping staff members who want to stay and the products IGA shoppers had come to expect.

In June, Las Palmas opened a small store in Beechview one block from the IGA, and it was immediately successful, Mr. Fontana said.

"That's what Broadway Avenue needs, positive activity," he said.

Mr. Berumen said the small store in Beechview will move its stock to the IGA and that building will take on a new tenant.

The Brookline store was barely a year old when a property owner in Oakland recruited Las Palmas to open a store there. A year later, a property owner in Washington asked them to open a store there.

Mr. Berumen said he and his brothers started their first business with a pickup truck to stock their shelves in Brookline and now get deliveries in a 24-foot rig every week for all of their stores.

Within a year of its opening, the Brookline store had people waiting in line for tacos from the vendor cart outside.

"At first, it was slow, and some people said things like, 'Go back to your country,' " Mr. Berumen said. "You have to deal with that. They don't know me and my brothers. They don't know our lives or how hard we work.

"We're trying to have a better life. After they know us in Brookline, they love us and we love them. We want to keep the store in Brookline."

On the Table: Casa Rasta restaurant full of Afro-Cuban influences

August 15, 2013 4:00 AM



Outside on the patio at Casa Rasta in Beechview, diners sit across from light-rail trains gliding past.

By Melissa McCart Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

"You came on the right day," said a woman behind the bar at Casa Rasta in Beechview. She grabbed from a stack of just-printed menus. "We have a lot of new dishes."

The Mexican-Caribbean restaurant debuted a few doors down Broadway Avenue in 2011, opened by a former prep cook at Kaya in the Strip District, Antonio Fraga, and his wife, Laura.

When the couple moved to bigger digs in February, from a 10-seat takeout place to a 60-seat restaurant and potential bar, they expanded the menu. This one is the second edit.

Mid-level, inexpensive neighborhood restaurants like this one are important for two reasons. One, they solidify a community on the rebound as a gathering place for neighbors and a draw for non-residents.

Two, they stir an appetite for good food and new eateries, serving as test runs for restaurateurs with bigger pockets who are wary to jump-start a neighborhood's Main Street.

Abay Ethiopian Cuisine was an example of this in East Liberty, having opened in 2003, three years after Shadow Lounge debuted. Both recently closed, but they were pioneers in an area that has become a restaurant corridor.

In Beechview, Casa Rasta is inconsistent and the food is not refined, but that's beside the point. Some cherry-picking of the menu ensures a more satisfying meal, while charming service and an eclectic dining room make it worth the trip.

Outside on the patio, diners sit across from light-rail trains gliding past. A couple chats with passers-by. The backdrop is a faded sign on painted brick of Davio, a 1990s restaurant next door in what had been the ground floor of a home.

The fact that Davio and Casa Rasta are next-door to each other displays a Pittsburgh dichotomy.

Many old-timers favor the red-sauce classic, while transplants and younger folks support the newcomer with an eclectic menu.

Both restaurants reside in quirky, non-corporate spaces. But having one next to the other displays a tension as Pittsburgh transitions from a town with an older population to one that's luring young artists and creative types, students and tech workers.

Casa Rasta has developed somewhat of a cult following for home-cooking influenced by Veracruz, the region on the Gulf of Mexico where Mr. Fraga grew up.

"There are a lot of Afro-Cuban influences in Veracruz, from the food to the dress code," Mr. Fraga said.

"You can see it in the plantains, the fish and in the way things are seasoned," he said. "You can see it in how people dress in that everyone wears white."

He has expanded beyond jerk wings of his original menu. Mango wings were suggested by an endearing server, his long blond hair bandana-tied, '70s style, across his forehead and his skinny jeans tucked into his tri-colored Nike high-tops. He described them as "super awesome."

That's a statement, as people who like wings are awfully particular. Wings must be crisp. They must be juicy. They must be spicy. And they must come with something like blue cheese of the traditional version.

The jerk wings have been perfected, black with all-spice, essential for jerk marinades. In plates of six or 12, they have a cumulative heat.

The diablo wings are less perfect -- pale crisp chicken skin dotted with chili flecks. They're hot but not crazy. Yet they're good enough to prompt a table to try others: Sriracha and green curry, and yes, sweet and sour mango. Sriracha is terrific. Sweet and sour mango is like chicken candy. Green curry isn't quite right yet, nor is the creamy avocado dip.

To tone down the heat, the server suggested tamarind Jarritos and lesser-known Gaya Farm aloe soda, both intriguing at first but too sweet for a dinner drink.

Plan instead on bringing beer, as Casa Rasta awaits a liquor license. Until then, the bar is outfitted with fruit, juices and mixers for Mexican or Caribbean-inspired drinks: Margaritas, mojitos or dark-and-stormys. A server suggested bringing a handle of tequila for my next visit, which would make my dinner a bit too festive.

Instead of tortilla chips, thicker and starchier yuca chips are served with salsa verde or a bright and garlicky guacamole. The housemade chips are a pleasing change of pace.

Also a surprise is the poblano and potato taco, which, surprisingly, I liked more than citrus-marinated- or shredded-pork tacos. Vegetables over pork? That's a first.

Chorizo tacos are also available in red, soy or green, my preference, with lime and cilantro, part of the original roots menu. Many items can be made into tortas, a thick flatbread-type roll prevalent in Latin America. The bread is slightly sweet like brioche and is a filling alternative to rice and beans.

New items include fried scallop and squid rings, seared tilapia, crab or sweet potato quesadillas and a spicy pork with green sauce, the most lively dish, made with tart tomatillos, chopped cilantro, and garlic over slow-cooked meat.

Expect more changes for Beechview and from Mr. Fraga, who mentioned opening a new vegetarian restaurant in the former Casa Rasta space down the road. He's also considering a second Casa Rasta location on the North Side, but it's in limbo for now.

As restaurants have done in East Liberty and elsewhere, perhaps Casa Rasta and its neighbors will inspire a renaissance of Beechview: a charming neighborhood with untapped potential.

Munch goes to Slice on Broadway in Beechview

January 23, 2014 12:00 AM

By Bill Toland / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

One of the best things about being a professional journalist, aside from being able to clip your fingernails at your desk without colleagues thinking anything of it, is that your life is pretty much awash in pizza. Election night? Pizza in the newsroom. Random Friday night? Pizza in the newsroom. Win an extremely major journalism prize? Celebratory pizza in the newsroom. Win an extremely minor journalism prize? Regardless, there shall be pizza in the newsroom.

Spend enough years in the business, you eat a lot of pies. As such, journalists become pizza connoisseurs nearly by default. Which is why you can trust my opinion when I tell you that the pizza at Slice on Broadway is very, very good.

So good that the tiny pizza shop along Beechview's Broadway Avenue can no longer contain itself. First, it added a small but handsomely rustic upstairs dining room, in a space that used to be an apartment. Then it acquired a liquor license, allowing it to serve a selection of wine and take-out beer. And now it's planning to open a second location, in Carnegie (Slice on Broadway II) later this year.

Probably the best compliment I can pay the pizza is that my daughter, who is 23 months old and has a notably finicky palate, ate nearly two whole slices. This is a child who will not eat cake, nor ice cream, nor chicken fingers, nor cookies, nor blueberries, nor anything that you might reasonably expect a 2-year-old to enjoy.

But the slice of plain cheese pizza? Snarfed it.

We adults enjoyed Slice, as well, and used the Munch bankroll to test-drive a couple of pies and sandwiches. The "Fancy Pants" pizza (\$11.95 for a small) came lightly dressed in a fragrant basil pesto, and silky, salty ribbons of prosciutto balanced nicely with the sweet sun-dried tomatoes and the dollops of goat cheese. Sublime.

"The Big Lou" (\$9.95, small) would not precisely pass for a meat-lover's pizza at one of the big chains, but only because they are a bit more judicious with their toppings at Slice. A couple of buttons of pepperoni, a sprinkling of hot Italian sausage, and some fresh mushrooms over cheese and red sauce. Simple, elegant, tasty; like the rest of the pizzas here, this one came on a sturdy yet splinter-thin crust, raised here and there by char bubbles.

Subs, which are presented on Breadworks baguettes, were also richly crafted. A Caprese sub (\$6.95) is the salad you know and love on a bun: some tomato, some mozzarella, some olive oil, and then the basil for a bit of sweet herbaceousness. Basil is also featured in the BBLT (\$6.95): bacon, lettuce, tomato and house-made basil-pesto mayonnaise (which is where they get that extra B).

Slice is one more exceedingly pleasant place on an avenue of increasingly pleasant spots: Crested Duck Charcuterie, Las Palmas, Casta Rasta, Brew coffee shop, and now this one.

Is this the best pizza in Pittsburgh? I don't know. There are plenty of fine pizzerias in the city and its suburbs. But it's clear why it receives so much love on Yelp and in the various best-of polls, and why this pizza shop, opened three years ago by co-owners Joe Ciotti (a former buyer for Lord & Taylor, and surely one of the city's few Bucknell-educated pizza men) and Rico Lunardi (formerly of Lunardi's Italian restaurant, just a few paces north on Broadway Avenue, now closed) has grown so popular so quickly.

Slice is not too fancy, but not too pedestrian; it aspires to gourmet pizzas without gourmet prices. The attention to detail is evident on every pie. If you don't believe the newspaperman, just ask the 2-year-old.

Crested Duck Charcuterie branches out after earning USDA certification

January 16, 2014 12:00 AM

By Melissa McCart / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

This week, Kevin Costa, owner of Crested Duck Charcuterie in Beechview, will have earned the U.S. Department of Agriculture certification that ensures standards for butchery, a process that has taken more than a year to complete. This means by the end of the month, he'll be supplying Giant Eagle's Market District stores with dry-aged meat, first in Robinson, followed by stores in McMurray, Pine and Shadyside.

That's not the only news for an entrepreneur who has carved a reputation with his DIY work ethic. In December, Mr. Costa started weekend-only restaurant service in the 16-seat dining room adjacent to the kitchen. The shop also expanded its presence in the Strip District with the relocation of the Pittsburgh Public Market in October, transferring over all retail sales there after they had been split between locations since he opened in Beechview in January 2012.

The growth of Crested Duck Charcuterie is a feel-good, underdog narrative. After returning from a Peace Corps stint in West Africa, the 28-year-old Ross native got into butchery at The Goose in Indianapolis, Ind. From there, Mr. Costa returned to Pittsburgh and taught himself the craft of charcuterie, studying from books and online sources as well as corralling advice from hobbyists and farmers.

Without an experienced mentor, it has not been an easy process. "It took me at least 10 tries to get the mortadella right," he says.

Mr. Costa sold cured meats under the name Crested Duck Charcuterie first as a stand at Farmers@Firehouse market, followed by a stall at the Pittsburgh Public Market when it opened in summer 2011.

Nearly a year later, he made a bold move by setting up his brick and mortar business in Beechview, a neighborhood that has been slow to revive from a tough economy. He's had help from his parents, Don and Donna Costa, as well as his brother, Adam, his primary investors. He lived in the apartment above the shop until he bought a house three doors down last month.

"Beechview was where I found a building big enough for the curing room in the cellar," he said. Downstairs Mr. Costa has outfitted a temperature- and humidity-controlled room with shelves where bresaola hangs next to prosciutto, guanciale and lomo. It smells divine: grassy and sweet with a little funk.

When Mr. Costa bought the building, he tore out the three-door entry and added two huge plate-glass windows with views of the trolleys on Broadway. The ground floor was revamped into two rooms. One is the kitchen with a Garland oven and an Iron Ridge smoker. By a window, the demo table stands where he breaks down whole animals and holds monthly Wednesday night classes.

In early December, the second room debuted as the dining room with the start of weekend dinner service with red walls and tables dressed in black tablecloths. A service bar softens the space with reclaimed wood. A former barn pulley has been wired with bulbs to serve as a chandelier.

The menu of signatures, cold plates, hot plates and dessert is a work in progress. It includes a charcuterie assortment of five items and condiments, a cheese plate and homemade pickles.

A Provencal tart with flaky crust presents like flatbread dressed with caramelized onions. Heirloom grain salad is spiked with currants, pecans and fennel. Crispy pork belly is served with mostarda on a bed of arugula and radishes.

Mr. Costa suggests the duck liver mousse, a pale mound that looks like flan, sweetened with honey and served with fig, frisee and pancetta.

Mr. Costa also recommends duck confit wrapped in a crepe with pears, dolloped with creme fraiche and pickled red onion. He says the meatballs are a concession on what he hopes will shape into a more adventurous menu. Spiked with chili and black pepper, meatballs are dressed with arugula pesto instead of marinara.

Eventually, he will incorporate specials and extend dinner hours, such as Sundays for starters. "There's not much open in Beechview then," he says. He'd also like to add more seats.

As sales have increased, Mr. Costa has bought from bigger farms that offer antibiotic and hormone-free meat. They include Jamison Farm in Latrobe that will sell him individual cuts such as pork belly rather than whole animals. This is a departure from his early practice of supporting very small family farms.

"I sell so much bacon I'd have too many cuts left over that would not sell at the same pace," he says.

Despite the expanded presence in the Public Market, Mr. Costa's charcuterie outsells his fresh meats, which include chicken, pork and beef. Ironically, best-selling charcuterie includes items not made from pork such as the ruby-hued duck speck prosciutto or the dirty martini lamb salami with juniper, ginger and cinnamon.

Another favorite is the Moroccan lamb coppa, a finalist for the 2013 Good Food Awards, an artisan food competition with an A-list judging panel assembled by founder and Alice Waters acolyte Sarah Weiner and Slow Food Nation producer Dominic Phillips.

For Market District, he's also making beef bresaola, limoncello salami and a second salami with ginger, fennel, orange zest and lemongrass.

Regarding his expansion, Mr. Costa is taking what he considers a conservative approach. "I'd rather start small and be consistent," he says. "I don't want to get in over my head."

Enjoying Beechview

September 18, 2013 12:00 AM

As a new homeowner in Beechview, I greatly enjoyed the article highlighting some of the area's businesses and restaurants (["Beechview a Big Draw for Pittsburgh Latino Residents,"](#) Sept. 8). While I am not Latino, I still enjoy living in such a unique corner of town. I believe articles like this further emphasize that Pittsburgh is "most livable" not only for the cost and convenience factor but also for the diversity aspect. One thing I love about Broadway Avenue is the lack of chain restaurants and stores. The PG really did a nice job highlighting some of those stops (such as Tienda La Jiminez and Casa Rasta).

A small, related fact that the PG forgot to mention is Beechview is downwind from Dormont, one of the South Hills' most sought after and coveted neighborhoods. Given Beechview's proximity to Downtown, one could not ask for much more for the value. Thanks to the PG, I hope that more people see what a "diamond in the rough" this neighborhood is. Good work, PG!

Walkabout: In Beechview, BREW is perking up Broadway Avenue

August 2, 2011 4:00 AM



More than java: At the new BREW in Beechview, customer Pam Runco (left), chats with manager Nathan Mallory, joined by Phyllis DiDiano and Kevin Acklin.

By Diana Nelson Jones Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

MaryAnn Kantrimaitis was one of the first customers to walk into BREW on Broadway Avenue in Beechview Monday morning. Phyllis DiDiano gave her friend a hug, a huge smile and trilled, "Welcome to our coffeehouse."

It was a triumphant moment for Ms. DiDiano, a Beechview native who has worked for years in various community groups advocating for its revival.

After nine months of planning and a series of hitches that delayed the opening, she said Monday, "I can't believe the day is here."

Beechview's once-bustling retail corridor hasn't had many new shop openings in recent memory.

BREW's was an unhyped soft one to help the crew work out the bugs and take advantage of the neighborhood turnout on Broadway for tonight's National Night Out festivities.

The grand opening is Aug. 11 from 6 to 8 p.m.

BREW, at 1557 Broadway, isn't just a coffeehouse. It is a purposefully planned community development tool created by RenewPittsburgh, Cannon Coffee in Brookline and a community advisory board.

"The idea was to build it as a nonprofit and recruit a board from the neighborhood and have the money [revenue] used for community projects," said Kevin Acklin, a lawyer and executive director of the volunteer organization [RenewPittsburgh](#), which raised \$15,000 to renovate the building. All the labor was volunteered.

Ms. DiDiano, president of CLUB (Community Leaders United for Beechview), said revenues could also help other new businesses get started. Phase two of the BREW project is to build a commercial kitchen in back to be used as an incubator for bakers to start businesses.

Nathan Mallory, who co-owns Cannon Coffee, is under contract to operate BREW, which also shares his staff of five. The idea is to get the coffeehouse on strong legs and hand it off to an entrepreneur, he said. Mr. Mallory and Mr. Acklin are working on plans for a similar kind of coffeehouse in Sheraden.

"We've been approached by people in other neighborhoods," said Mr. Acklin. Specifically, an entrepreneur in the Hill District wants the team's help to replicate the coffeehouse there, he said.

The community development angle resonated with a number of people who volunteered to help and donated supplies. Ed Wethli, president of Kiva Han Coffee, donated a \$20,000 espresso machine. "It's part of my corporate mission," he said. "We've done well and we're growing and this is a way for me to give back. A coffee bar is a community gathering place, a place where you can affect change. It's good for a neighborhood."

Residents of Beechview have watched their business corridor drain to near lifelessness over several decades. Now they have BREW, they await the IGA grocery store opening in mid-September and can see the last stages of renovations at 1603 Broadway, where Crested Duck Charcuterie is expected to open sometime this year. Of Beechview, BREW customer Pam Runco said, "We're getting there." The neighborhood has waited a long time "to have anything," she said. "We'd pretty much hit rock bottom."

Mr. Mallory said that, as the coffeehouse builds a customer base, it will need to hire staff, "and we're going to reach out to Beechview. We want to hire Beechview." "This will be the highlight of a lot of people's day, to meet people here," Ms. DiDiano said.

CLUB is the nonprofit fiscal sponsor for BREW. BREW also has its own board whose members include Mr. Acklin, Deno De Ciantis of the Penn State Center, Lisa Karraker of the [Beechview Merchants Association](#), Saul Jimenez of Tienda La Jimenez -- a Beechview store -- and Clement Okoye, the building's owner. The coffeehouse occupies what old-timers might remember as Davoli's Butcher Shop. Last a nail salon, it has been vacant for many years. The walls are the yellow of lemon chiffon. "It's called 'Optimistic Yellow,'" Ms. DiDiano said, laughing. "That's really its name. And we have a can left over."