



Night Owl: Oakland's Forge Pizza and Lungomare play to Jack London Square's waterfront strengths

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OAKLAND -- It was a cold December afternoon at Miss Pearl's Jam House on Jack London Square, and a group of men sat at a long table hunched over laptops. One of them was Temoor Noor, owner of Oakland's Grand Tavern gastro pub, who had the heavy-lidded stare of someone who was defying the body's natural requirement for sleep. Miss Pearl's days were numbered: The Southern-themed restaurant would be closing in less than two weeks to make way for Lungomare, whose theme would be Italian, specifically from Tuscany and Liguria.

The men at the table -- one of them Chop Bar's Chris Pastena -- were making plans for the new menu and floor plan, paid for in part by local financier Tom Henderson.

Opening night was Feb. 7, several months after the much-anticipated fine-dining Haven restaurant debuted and just a few weeks after the opening of The Forge Pizza, next to Bocanova.

The new restaurants have not solved the problems with the square's blueprint, which never quite fit the location. But the new restaurateurs seem to understand how to play to the built-in strengths of a harbor.

The greatest strength would be the water, Lungomare's manager, Ami Alexander, said.

"Have you seen our patio?" Alexander said, looking toward the glass-enclosed patio and sparkling water as a group of four walked in. "Inside or outside?" one of them, a woman, asked her companions.

"This is nice," she said, while she walked past a sheet of water that now divides the entrance from the bar and lounge. "They left the bar the same."

"It's the configuration that changed," one of the men with her added.

The bar is the same only topped by a beige surface. Noor and Pastena added a cafe as well, which is a welcome addition on the square and makes good use of the lounge during daytime hours. (Be warned though that a cappuccino costs \$4.36 with tax.)

Heat lamps warm tables outside, and at least one comes with a fire pit and lounge chairs. Inside, the new décor is amber, red and black, less bright and brash than it used to be and more alluring. A couple next to me at the L-shaped bar courted each other as they quietly sipped cocktails the color of soft

sunshine. I drank a \$12 glass of lagrien red with an \$11 appetizer of baby squid covered in a rich red sauce and perched on a small cake made from chickpeas.

Former City Councilman Ignacio De La Fuente emerged from the vast dining area in the back. I am certain he pretended not to see me waving from the bar.

After an hour or so, I slid off the stool and walked over to Forge, the other new addition to Jack London Square. I expected it to be a temple where diners would worship obsessively tended dough and sauce made from Early Girl tomatoes. It was a fair assumption given that Forge's "pizza program" was designed by The Pizza Hacker, Jeff Krupman, and the pizzaiolo is Jeff Hayden of Boot and Shoe Service. The pizzas are perfectly blistered in a Valoriani oven, the Ferrari of pizza ovens, imported from Italy. Forge's pedigree also involves Kuleto's and Moose.

But Forge takes after its other comfort food siblings in Orinda, Table 24 and Barbacoa, a wood-fired Mexican grill. And despite the reclaimed wood, skyscraper ceilings and rustic metal, Forge feels like a brew pub. Booths along the far wall fill with a mixture of parents, kids and couples. Happy clusters of friends seem to gravitate toward the communal table. One of several tables for 10 in the back was filled on one side with five gray-haired customers who faced five 20-somethings. Forge is not the sports bar some people expected. Several TVs are visible from nearly anywhere in the room, including the rectangular bar that divides what is often a very loud room.

Outside is a sanctuary. Forge capitalized on the waterfront real estate by creating an outside gazebo with tables and two inviting fire pits surrounded by low-slung wood patio chairs.

"We started off thinking pizza and beer," owner Michael Karp said. "We wanted it to be comfortable and all about the food."

If the restaurants on Jack London Square were boats, Forge would be a 60-foot yacht with a party on the deck out in the bay.

Lungomare would be an Italian cruiser off the coast of Italy, while Bocanova would be sailing from the Gulf of Mexico to the Caribbean Sea. Haven could be a sailboat or a racing catamaran.

Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon, by contrast, would be the sturdy old fishing boat that has outlasted the fancy yachts; she just needs a fresh coat of paint from time to time.

Scott's Seafood Restaurant would be one of those deluxe fishing vessels that take out happy tourists for a day on the water. That's where I headed next.

Louis Armstrong was playing when I walked into Scott's and a woman at the bar tipped back her beer glass to capture the last swig. I ordered a glass of 12-year-old Glenfiddich that numbed my gums.

Michael Bubl  sang "Cry Me a River," and I stared at highlights of the NBA All-Star Game on the TV above the bar.

I remembered what Deputy Mayor Sandr  Swanson told me back in January during Oakland Restaurant Week. We were at City Hall listening to an account of food and drink in Oakland's history. Restaurants

show a city's culture and hospitality before anything else, he said. "Scott's and Kincaid's have been keeping Jack London Square going until other places can get there," he said.

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