



Friday, May 14, 2010

## Restaurants planned for Pittsburgh's vacant Red Room in East Liberty neighborhood

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Tim Schooley](#)

Rick Stern turned east from East Carson Street and barely looked back.

The theater operator, real estate investor and restaurateur reached a tentative agreement to buy the former Cafe Allegro restaurant in Bedford Square on Pittsburgh's South Side in November, but has opted out of that deal to instead lease the former Red Room lounge on Highland Avenue in East Liberty.

Stern reached a deal for the Red Room space in March and is partnering with executive chef Brian Pekarcik, formerly the chef at the Marriott City Center and its Steelhead Grill, to open Spoon, an upscale casual restaurant featuring modern American cuisine. The team plans to open Spoon in July. In the fall, they plan to open BRGR, a gourmet burger restaurant, in the former 2Red, which served as a companion to the Red Room before both restaurants closed in late January.

"We were pretty much ready to close on the Cafe Allegro location, and this opportunity came up in the east side," Stern said. "We just decided that we felt the Red Room location was a better fit for our chef's style of cooking."

Stern's venture will bring new life to a restaurant space that many saw as a keystone location in the redevelopment of East Liberty. Red Room generated a strong following with its emphasis on lush comfort, a strong drink selection, and a menu that offered inspired nibbling and main entrees.

Stern first met Pekarcik when the chef interviewed for a position at his restaurant Willow in Ohio Township. Impressed with his cooking but convinced he wasn't a good fit for Willow, Stern decided to partner with Pekarcik on a new restaurant to be designed around his skills in the kitchen.

"His food is very interesting," he said. "I don't think there's another chef that really presents and cooks the way he does."

Pekarcik is a Murrysville native who trained in California, working for such lauded chefs as Gary Danko, Bradley Ogden and George Morrone.

He said the influence of the California chefs with whom he has worked will be in the menu and cooking mix at Spoon, which will emphasize local food from sustainable sources whenever possible.

"I think the perception on dining and what the masses are willing to spend is going to be completely changed," Pekarcik said. "I want the restaurant, and the price point and the menu, to be really approachable."

When owner Rob Reese opened Red Room in 2004, some in the industry saw it as a risky move, given East Liberty's longtime economic decline. The restaurant ran into problems when it expanded to open the 2Red Lounge addition in 2008, just as the economy was falling into crisis. Construction delays caused the new bar with outdoor seating to miss the summer season, the Red Room to fall behind on its bills, and the overall business to eventually default on its rent, according to court records that include a Chapter 7 liquidation filing made in February.

Regardless, the neighborhood continues to show major signs of resurgence, including Target's plans to open a store there in 2011, and Stern is confident in the location.

Stern's change of plans means the Cafe Allegro property is back on the market.

"We've had one serious party, and we're in discussions with a few other parties on it," said Terri Sokoloff, a principal with Ross-based restaurant services firm Specialty Group, who represents the former restaurant on behalf of its owners, the Cardamone family. The family seeking \$635,000 for the property, fixtures and furnishings, and liquor license.



Joe Wojcik

Brian Pekarcik, left, and Rick Stern plan to open two restaurants in East Liberty: Spoon and BRGR. It will be Pekarcik's first opening as both chef and owner.

[View Larger](#)

[tschooley@bizjournals.com](mailto:tschooley@bizjournals.com) | (412) 208-3826

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.