

Washington Avenue morphing into restaurant row

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Michael Stravato/HBJ

Benjy Levit of Benjy's: Overseeing construction of a new Benjy's restaurant set to rise on a suddenly hot stretch of Washington Avenue.

A series of high-end restaurants have begun clustering along Washington Avenue even as property values and retail rents continue to skyrocket above those in the more established Westheimer/Montrose area.

Chef Monica Pope, owner of T'afia restaurant in Midtown, is the latest restaurateur to announce she's ready to cook on Washington Avenue.

Pope and a group of investors are planning to open a new concept called Beaver's next month. The restaurant will be located at Sawyer and Washington Avenue, just south of the former Pig Stand restaurant.

Benjy's, the trendy West University-area restaurant at 2424 Dunstan, is also expanding to the area.

Benjy's is planning a two-story restaurant at 5922 Washington Ave. that will include a ground-level patio and second-floor lounge when it opens next June.

And another Rice Village-area tenant, Azuma Sushi & Robata Bar, will open an eatery on Washington Avenue in the Washington Square shopping center later this year.

Meanwhile, Catalan Food & Wine Bar, Cova Hand-Selected Wines, El Tiempo Cantina, Molina's Cantina, Max's Wine Dive and Cyclone Anaya's have all recently set up shop on the busy street.

Pope, a 15-year veteran of the local restaurant industry who formerly operated the now-shuttered Boulevard Bistro on Montrose, says she has seen different areas of town emerge as restaurant hotspots over the years. Now, it's Washington Avenue that is striking a chord with restaurant owners and diners.

"People are always looking for a new area with a buzz," she says. "It's starting to really look like a restaurant corridor."

The popularity of the Washington Avenue area is reflected in the still-rising rental rates, which reached \$2.03 per square foot in the second quarter, up from \$2 in the first quarter, according to research firm O'Connor & Associates. Meanwhile, rental rates in more high-profile Westheimer/Montrose area lagged behind, staying flat at \$1.78 per square foot in the first and second quarters of this year.

Pope compares the new restaurant explosion along Washington Avenue to the Midtown area three years ago when she opened T'afia at 3701 Travis St.

"Once I saw that the Continental Club was surviving and Julia's Bistro was opening, I got the perception that I wasn't in no-man's land and that there was a nice pocket of activity going on in the (Midtown) area," she says.

Mark Hanna, owner of Houston-based restaurant and hospitality consulting firm Customer First, says early activity had restaurants flocking to the west end of Washington Avenue, but the trend is now spreading throughout the area.

"While there has been a lot of major residential development going on in the area, a lot of the properties right on Washington Avenue have remained quite affordable," he says.

Eager Beaver's

Washington Avenue's newest resident, Beaver's, is described by Pope as an "ice house with good Texas-style barbecue where people can come and hang out."

Jon Alford, who has previously manned the barbecue pits at Central Market and Demeris Barbecue, will serve as the pit master for what Pope calls "a grueling 24-hour-a-day process in the kitchen."

"We have a group of real estate veterans, restaurant owners and people with expertise in barbecue, so this is a group effort," she says.

Pope says she's been watching the area for about four years, and the concept came together when the location, a former bar, became available.

Just down the street, the new Benjy's will span 7,500 square feet, which is 50 percent larger than the original location near Rice Village. Owner Benjy Levit says he chose the Washington Avenue location because of the large amount of land he was able to acquire in the area.

The new restaurant, which went under construction about two weeks ago, will feature a party room that can accommodate up to 40 guests. Levit notes that the new eatery will be far enough away from the original Benjy's that it will serve an entirely different market.

"The demographics of the Washington Avenue area fit our target market," Levit says. "It's a densely populated area with a lot of young people who like to go out."

Washington Avenue Newcomers

RESTAURANT NAME • LOCATION

Catalan Food & Wine Bar • Washington Square shopping center

Cova Hand-Selected Wines • Washington Square shopping center

El Tiempo Cantina • 5602 Washington Ave.

Molina's Cantina • 4720 Washington Ave.

Max's Wine Dive • 4720 Washington Ave.

On-tap for Washington Avenue

RESTAURANT NAME • LOCATION • OPENING DATE

Beaver's • Washington Avenue and Sawyer • September 2007

Azuma Sushi & Robata Bar • Washington Square shopping center • End of 2007

Benjy's • 5922 Washington Ave. • June 2008

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