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## Look Hu's on fire

### Local restaurant scene growing

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If only every industry in Manitoba had the apparent confidence of the restaurant sector.

Restaurateurs of all kinds in Winnipeg are getting the jump on the economic recovery, whenever it may come, and opening up new or additional locations.

The newest is Noel Bernier, who christened Hermanos, a South American-styled restaurant in the Exchange District, last week.



The 5,500-square-foot space, formerly home to Taste of Sri Lanka, features vibrant colours, wine displayed on a half-wall near the bar and giant photographs throughout of South American images, including soccer players, dancers and the Christ The Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro -- one of the new seven wonders of the world.

Bernier said he decided to open the new concept because there was no experience in Winnipeg that "engaged" both the dining and beauty of South America. He said its menu has a lot of Argentinean and Brazilian influence, but it will tap into the flavours from virtually all South American countries at various times throughout the year.

Bernier is far from alone. Hu's On First, the Asian bistro located in Canwest Global Park, is preparing to open a second location next month in St. James. Daly Burgers recently expanded from its Corydon Avenue base to Pembina Highway; this summer, Toronto-based Pizza Pizza opened its first two Winnipeg locations; and The Lobby On York opened its high-end offering in the former Sheraton Hotel.

The growth is coming amid two 25-cent increases in the province's minimum wage this year. The latest hike, which came into effect last week, boosted minimum hourly earnings to \$9, a rise of nearly six per cent of restaurants' biggest expense.

"Business couldn't be any better," said Tony Georgakopoulos, manager of Daly Burgers' week-old outlet. "Since we opened, it's been non-stop crazy busy. We're almost tripling the sales of the Corydon location." He said the plan is to build up a small chain of five to six locations in Winnipeg.

Hu's On First is putting the finishing touches on a major renovation to 7,000 square feet that was formerly the long-time home of Grapes Leons.

"They've gutted it to the shell and are building it in their own style. It's going to be quite exotic. It will be a significant size of restaurant for this city," said Bob Borys, commercial leasing agent with Colliers Pratt McGarry, which brokered the deal.

He said from his vantage point, the hospitality industry has dodged the bullets from the economic downturn.

"Have you tried to get into a restaurant on the weekend in this city? It's crazy," he said.

Scott Jocelyn, executive director of the Manitoba Restaurant and Foodservices Association, said the year-over-year sales of most operators in the province have been flat in 2009. Considering the widespread prognostications of economic calamity which began a year ago, he said the situation is "positive."

"Operators were really watching their expenses and their employee scheduling to make sure they were controlling costs. We're cautiously optimistic. We know that we're a luxury expense to many people," Jocelyn said.

Jocelyn said he was particularly pleased to see the expansion by the likes of Hermanos, Hu's, Daly Burger and The Lobby because they're not part of any deep-pocketed multi-national chain.

Robert Warren, the I.H. Asper executive director for entrepreneurship at the University of Manitoba, said restaurateurs' actions are a reflection that people are willing to spend money and have faith in the economy.

"It shows local consumers have a lot of confidence in the earnings that they're making and they're willing to spend it on eating out," he said.

Warren said it's also a continuation of a trend in which people head out on the town either because don't

have the time or aren't interested in preparing meals themselves.

One of the city's highest-profile eatery locations is still up for grabs. The revolving restaurant in Fort Garry Place has sat empty since the beginning of the year.

Miriam Bergen, whose family owns the building, said she has had the occasional enquiry about the space, which has capacity of more than 250 people on two floors, but she doesn't expect to sign a new tenant until sometime next year.

"You want to get just the right people in there," she said.

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