

Food tent closing

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Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A downtown pavilion filled with tantalizing delicacies from some of Santa Cruz's best eateries will be transformed back into a pigeon-filled parking lot Friday.

"I guess I've got to start cooking again," said Rodney Porter, who eats there regularly.

The pavilion, erected downtown after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake to house displaced businesses, has become a popular spot to enjoy the sun and a meal from one of the handful of restaurants inside.

"People like to gather there because they can share a meal and they don't have to eat the same kind of food," said Donna Maurillo, a public-information consultant for downtown reconstruction.

Porter says he tries to come at 11:30 a.m., before the lunch-hour rush.

"The food is good and I like eating outside at the tables," Porter said.

Some of the pavilion's restaurants have found new homes, say officials at the Santa Cruz Redevelopment Agency.

Bento Baki Japanese cuisine and Little Shanghai Chinese food will relocate to the Locust Garage parking structure on Cedar Street, while Pizza My Heart is headed to the Melrose Building on Pacific Avenue.

Others have not been so lucky. Monica's Espresso Cafe and Asian Rose are still looking for spaces downtown. Although city officials say some places are for lease on Pacific Avenue, few of the vacant areas are small enough to be affordable to the restaurants.

Michael Roberts, who has been running Iguana Taqueria for a year and 10 months, said he is closing the business to spend some time traveling. "It was a great

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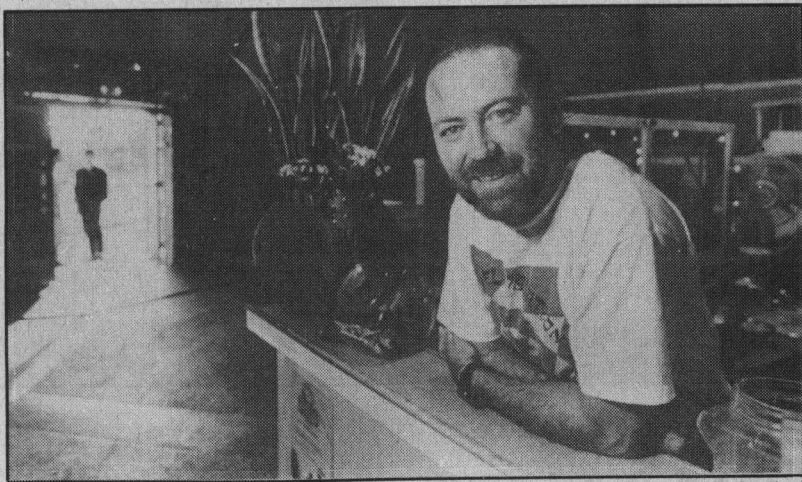
portunity," he said.

People who are going to miss the variety offered in the pavilion shouldn't fret, says Bruce Van Allen of the Community Housing Corp.

Crews are working now to build the Mercado El Centro, scheduled to open this April on Pacific Avenue with housing for seniors upstairs, and bakery and a gift shop downstairs, and, for all the food pavilion fans, a "food court."

"I know people feel real strong about the pavilions coming down. What we hope is that our food court will be at least as attractive as that was," Van Allen said.

The Mercado will feature food from eight restaurants, which may include some of the ones moving out of the pavilions. Van Allen said some commitments have been



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Michael Roberts is closing the Iguana eatery to go traveling.

made, but could not disclose the tenants at this time.

"If you're hungry, you can be

confident you will find something that appeals to you at the Mercado," Van Allen said.