

Restaurants open for diners again in Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — The restaurant business is back on its feet here, six months after the earthquake.

Several favorite Watsonville restaurants suffered moderate damage to their buildings in the temblor, forcing their owners to close, rebuild or relocate.

The good news is that many of the damaged eateries — and even some new ones — are opening. In the past two weeks, both the Orchid Grill at 40 Penney Lane and the new Cilantro's at Watsonville Square, have opened.

Two favorite downtown restaurants, both located on the 400 block of Main Street, have also reopened recently since undergoing renovations after the earthquake. They are Reuben's Mexican restaurant and King's Garden Chinese restaurant.

And Zuniga's Mexican food opened at the Watsonville Airport in late December, after being forced to vacate its badly damaged building on Freedom Boulevard.

Two other favorite eating spots are making plans to relocate in the near future.

Jalisco's owner, Stella Romo, is looking at several sites for relocating her cafe. Among the sites is the PG&E building at East Fifth and Main streets. Romo's popular restaurant was demolished after the earthquake ruined its building in the 300 block of Main Street.

Rancho Grande, 1934 Freedom Blvd., is progressing on constructing a new restaurant, dance hall and bar at Freedom Boulevard and Marin Street. The always-crowded eatery had started construction on its new place prior to the earthquake. Unlike many other restaurants, it has remained open in the intervening months.

In addition, La Fogata Mexican food is planning to open a new restaurant next month in the Watsonville Crossroads Shopping Center, Main Street and Green Val-

ley Road. The owner, Jaime Maldonado, still plans to operate his original restaurant on Union Street.

For Bill Lee, one of the three owners of Orchid Grill, the past 5½ months have been a waiting game.

"Our delay was strictly so we could line up financing," Lee said. "We still haven't gotten funding from the SBA (Small Business Administration). If it hadn't been for the financing delay, we could have opened in six weeks."

The owners had to get a swing loan from a private lender to bridge the gap between repairing their business and getting a SBA loan, Lee said.

Orchid Grill lost \$50,000 worth of inventory from the earthquake. The food was donated to local relief efforts the day after the earthquake so it wouldn't go to waste, he said.

Only minor structural damage occurred to the building, he said, but hundreds of place settings were ruined. In all, the restaurant suffered \$350,000 in losses, including 80 percent of its china, 99 percent of its glassware, an extensive wine cabinet and supply, as well as all the carpeting and picture frames.

Lee said that since opening 1½ weeks ago, business has been booming.

"We've had an outstanding amount of business," Lee said. "It's been real strong."

At Cilantro's, which opened last week to rave reviews, the business has been very good, said manager Rudy Torres.

The owner of Cilantro's, Jose Espinoza, is no newcomer to the restaurant business. He's been operating the acclaimed El Palomar restaurant in the Palomar Hotel on the Pacific Garden Mall for many years.