

VCP Earthquake 1989 - Watsonville - Rebuilding RP 3/31/92 p. 1

Coffee shop return another victory in recovery from '89 quake

By CHELA ZABIN
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Ann Johann is hoping that, by next week, she'll be able to walk around downtown in peace.

On Monday, she'll open the doors to the Plaza Diner and Bakery and, for the first time since the 1989 earthquake, Watsonville will once again have the Ford's department store luncheonette.

Johann, who, with her husband, Robert, and sons Rob and Jim, runs Bake-Rite Bakery, said the coffee shop opening has been anxiously awaited.

"I don't like to go in (Ford's), because people attack me," she said. "They say all of Watsonville is waiting...I hope that all of Watsonville comes."

It won't be exactly the same, of course, as the old formica counter that used to grace the store's lingerie department, but for the downtown shopper looking for a good cup of coffee or a fast hamburger, it should suffice.

On Johann's invitation, a coffee klatch known around town as "the Good Ole Boys," or "the Old Boys Network," owing to its membership of former city officials and other movers and shakers, met yesterday for coffee and pastries.

Despite some ribbing about her

menu and a few complaints that the coffee yesterday was too strong, the Old Boys said they plan to be regulars. The group now meets at Bake-Rite and Rancho Grande restaurant.

The Johanns lease the space from Ford's and will continue to run their other bakery just a few blocks away on East Lake Avenue. The Ford's shop, on the store's West Beach Street side, will be open Monday through Saturday, from 7 a.m. to the late afternoon.

Like the rest of the rebuilt Ford's store, the coffee shop doesn't look much like its former self. The walls are bold, primary colors, the furniture teal and white-washed oak and the flooring a speckled gray, white and black geometric design. Modern-looking halogen lamps hang over the counter.

The menu includes hamburgers, fries and ice cream, but some concessions have been made for more health-conscious customers, including "lite" ice cream, a salad bar and foods fried in cholesterol-free canola oil. House specialties will include french toast, made with Bake-Rite's cinnamon bread, and Philadelphia steak sandwiches. Other baked goods from Bake-Rite will be available.

Bake-Rite's store on East Beach Street across from the plaza came down in the 1989 earthquake and was the scene of Watsonville's only quake fatality. Elida Ledesma Ortega, 44, who had just stepped out of the store after buying a treat for her son, was killed by falling bricks.

After the earthquake, Bake-Rite set up shop in one of the modular buildings rented by the Chamber of Commerce for displaced businesses. Johann said executives from Ford's ate there regularly and suggested that the bakery run the coffee shop in the new building.

Johann wasn't keen on the idea at first.

"I said, 'I should retire,'" she said. But her two sons, Jim and Rob, thought it was an opportunity not to be missed. "We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them," she said.

There are no plans for a grand opening, mostly because Johann said she knew she couldn't invite everyone and didn't want anyone in town to feel slighted. Word will just have to travel through the grapevine, and Monday, "God willing," customers will find their way through the doors, she said.



Mike McCollum

A cup of coffee toasts the opening of the Plaza Diner and Bakery in Ford's department store. Clockwise from Ann Johann, pouring, are Fred Betz Sr., George Betz, Wallace Lew, Marvin Byers, Steward Johann, Frank Osmer, Darlene Lopes, Bill Johnston and David Johnston.