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New Bill of Fare at New York's Tavern

Reopened Central Park Spot Promises a More Intimate Setting and a Focus on the Food

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NEW YORK—Tavern on the Green, this city's famous Central Park restaurant, is about to embark on a new business plan: appeal to actual New Yorkers.

For years, the restaurant's picture-postcard setting, more than the quality of its food,

made it an essential part of the city's tourist experience.

Thursday, after having been closed for more than four years, Tavern will reopen as a more intimate, rustic spot that promises a seasonal, locally sourced menu.

The high-stakes overhaul will be guided by a couple whose previous experience is operating a modest-sized creperie in Philadelphia, and a chef who hasn't helmed a kitchen in more than a decade. "The size of it has never been that intimidating to me," said one of the new proprietors, Jim Caiola. "I have faith."

Mr. Caiola said he was enchanted by his first visit to the restaurant as a young acting student in the 1980s. "It was so magical and so spectacular," he said. He said couldn't resist applying when he saw that the city, which owns the restaurant's land and the building, had called for bids.

Mr. Caiola and his business and life partner, David Salama, both 50 years old, beat out four other applicants to win the spot, and they hired chef Katy Sparks, who says she promises to use "lots of fire" across multiple grills to ensure quick, clean preparations. She previously ran the kitchen at New York's Quilty's restaurant and most recently worked as a culinary consultant.

It will be a striking change of pace for all three. The restaurant owned by Messrs. Caiola and Salama grosses as much as \$2 million a year, Mr. Caiola said. Tavern's financial model calls for \$24 million in



A dining room opens to the kitchen in the newly renovated Tavern on the Green restaurant in New York's Central Park.

revenue the first year, and the agreement states the proprietors must pay the city a minimum of \$38.7 million during the 20-year license agreement.

At first, the selection of the new proprietors seemed "preposterous," said longtime restaurant critic Gael Greene, who remembered attending lavish parties at Tavern. "It seemed so unlikely that we would have to go so far to find somebody courageous enough to take it on, but I say, Good for them."

The building originated in the late 19th century as a sheepfold, with sheep grazing on the lawn known then as the Green. In 1934, the city's master builder Robert Moses dispatched the sheep to Brooklyn and converted the imposing Victorian Gothic building, near the park's western edge be-

tween West 66th and West 67th streets, into Tavern.

It was intended to be a populist alternative to an earlier restaurant in the park, the Casino, which catered to New York's sophisticated classes, said Central Park historian Sara Cedar Miller. But restaurateur Warner LeRoy promoted a different vision when he reopened the restaurant in 1976.

"He did all kinds of crazy things," Ms. Miller said. Opening day featured circus acts and bikini-clad models serving an ice-cream sundae that weighed 7,250 pounds. Celebrities began flocking to flamboyant parties framed by twinkling lights that entwined Tavern's tree branches. Tavern ballooned to 31,000 square feet and for years was the nation's highest-grossing restaurant,

taking in upward of \$38 million a year.

By the time the LeRoy family's license agreement expired in 2009, the restaurant had fallen into disrepair. The city has so far spent \$18.3 million gutting and stabilizing the building. "The city wanted to do the antithesis of what Tavern had been," Mr. Salama said. "Nothing Victorian, nothing decorative, no curlicues."

The new proprietors pushed officials to embrace a more ambitious concept, making the kitchen bigger than originally envisioned and decorating in a style that might be deemed rustic luxe. A new carved fireplace is flanked by sheep heads. Columns along the open kitchen pick up the building's exterior details and coloring.

The new Tavern will be

about one-third the size of Mr. LeRoy's establishment. The elaborate space known as the Crystal Room has been turned into a glass box that opens to a landscaped patio with views of Central Park. That design reflects a change in the restaurant's relationship to the park, Ms. Miller said. In the 1970s and 80s, Mr. LeRoy blocked the view of the park's ragged lawns with giant plastic topiary.

"He was hiding from a very ugly park," she said. Today, the adjacent patch of grass, the Sheep Meadow, is an expanse of lush, carefully tended green.

Ms. Greene said she has received calls from friends eager to experience the new concept. "Everyone will go once," she said. "If it's wonderful they'll go back—and if it isn't, they'll snicker."

Cathy Wang for The Wall Street Journal