

EAST BAY BUSINESS TIMES

SERVING THE GREATER EAST BAY REGION

MAY 18, 2007

Volume 9, Number 37

Fenton's expands to Nut Tree



Fenton's Creamery employee Jenny Lu gets a sundae topped off by owner Scott Whidden at the new Vacaville parlor.

Soft opening for landmark



BY DAVID GOLL
EAST BAY BUSINESS TIMES

For its first 112 years, the owners of Fenton's Creamery were satisfied with a single location to sell their sweet, creamy product, whether it was the horse-drawn wagon of founder Elbridge Seth Fenton back in the 1890s or its home for the past 46 years on Oakland's Piedmont Avenue.

But so far in 2007, Fenton's has tripled its presence, with an elaborate ice cream stand in the expanded Terminal 2 at Oakland International Airport and a new 7,000-square-foot temple to America's favorite dessert in Vacaville.

The latter location had a May 10 "soft" opening, with a grand opening

celebration slated for either May 24 or May 28.

The second full location for the East Bay's legendary ice cream parlor and eatery, nearly twice as large as the Oakland restaurant that was rebuilt and extensively remodeled after a 2001 fire, is part of a new mixed-use development on the site of the former Nut Tree complex along Interstate 80 that includes retail stores, restaurants and a family-oriented recreational area.

But don't expect Fenton's, with its expansive dining rooms, full menu and on-site ice cream production, to become another Baskin-Robbins anytime soon.

"We have to be nice to the people who have been good to us and we're at capacity in the Oakland location,



Fenton's is designed to look like an extravagant 1930s ice cream parlor.

where we have to turn away business at times," said Scott Whidden, owner of Fenton's for the past 20 years. "... But it's hard to deliver this level of sophistication in a lot of different places. I would love to (expand) on a select basis in communities that really appreciate it and by operators who wouldn't be tempted to cheapen ingredients or lessen the (Fenton's) experience. I see myself as the guardian of a wonderful tradition, a guy who is just passing through."

Whidden has no problem being outnumbered 2,700 to 3 by Baskin-Robbins.

Vacaville is definitely a city that appreciates Whidden's painstaking high-quality approach to making and serving ice cream, according to Whidden. He was courted by city officials, including Mayor Len Augustine, to participate in a development of venerable food-oriented California businesses at the new Nut Tree development, as a tribute, of sorts, to the old

Nut Tree that started as a fruit stand in 1921 and grew into an expansive complex including a restaurant, bakery, gift store and miniature railroad geared to kids before going out of business in 1996.

Roger Snell, CEO of Marin County real estate investment and development firm Snell & Co., said he wanted to gather Northern California food businesses with strong historical roots in one place. The resulting food pavilion is modeled after the Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco. The Nut Tree site features tenants such as Fenton's, Jelly Belly Candy Co. of Fairfield, Mariani Packing Co. of Vacaville, the Stonehouse California Olive Oil Co. of Berkeley and smaller local businesses such as the Capay Valley Farm Shop, Winters Fruit Tree and the second location of the Villa Corona, a famed Mexican restaurant tucked away in a corner of a modest Napa shopping center.

Paradoxically, the pavilion is part

of a very 21st-century complex that encompasses 80 acres and 325,000 square feet of office buildings and retail development, including such big-box anchors as Best Buy, Borders Books and Old Navy.

Another component is the Nut Tree Family Park, now home to the original Nut Tree miniature train, as a counterpoint to the development that lines I-80. Snell said he hopes the park, train and places like Fenton's will serve as dramatic contrast to endless chain of fast-food eateries along the freeway.

"Our whole approach here was to give visitors as many choices as possible, and because of the history of the Nut Tree, we wanted them to be unique, historical food businesses," Snell said. "It's hard to even describe places like Fenton's or the Nut Tree, but when you ask people about them, they just light up and talk about all of their experiences from over the years."

When newcomers to the region or out-of-town visitors ask him about Fenton's, Snell said he responds: "If you lived in Alameda or Contra Costa counties for any length of time or went to Cal, then you went to Fenton's."

Snell certainly hopes to tap into that kind of nostalgia for the success of his entire development, especially from Bay Area residents traveling up and down the I-80 corridor to Sacramento, Lake Tahoe and beyond.

Retro chic and mid-century nostalgia is certainly in the air at the new Fenton's, which Whidden designed to resemble an extravagant 1930s-era ice cream parlor, incorporating such upscale touches as Carrara marble from Italy. Just as in Oakland, he and his staff of at least 100 will be making, assembling, dishing out and delivering the 17 "regular" ice cream flavors, 14 special flavors, four sherbets and myriad of giant sundaes, milk shakes and floats, not to mention such Fenton's standards as crab salad and shrimp sandwiches, Philly cheesesteaks and pastrami.

He even plans to re-create the rather old-fashioned community involvement of his Piedmont Avenue restaurant, where it's not uncommon for 70 members of the Oakland Fire Department to become volunteer staff members on fundraising days when a percentage of sales is donated to various charitable causes.

"Members of the Oakland Fire Department were up here to encourage the Vacaville Fire Department to start their own chapter of Random Acts, which they plan to do," Whidden said of the OPD's charitable organization. "The Oakland firefighters plan to be up here for the grand opening with their parade wagon."