



Montano vision now thrives

By Mike Roberts | Village Life staff writer | May 04, 2010 11:26

When Vinal Perkins and Doug Scalzi dreamed up Montano de El Dorado in 2004 they counted on an appealing, upscale “lifestyle” center on the hill above White Rock and Latrobe roads attracting innovative retailers and restaurateurs - quickly.

Early on, it appeared they were right. Interest was high when they broke ground in October 2006. “We were well on our way to a full center,” said Perkins.

Enter the recession. Economists now pinpoint December 2007 as its official beginning. Montano opened the following month with a lot of “for lease” signs and just two tenants, Peet’s Coffee and FedEx Kinkos.

On a recent Friday afternoon, with Montano’s Mediterranean architecture glowing in the angled spring sunlight, Perkins strolled around Montano and asserted that the center is 90 percent leased ... finally.

With the recent opening of the slightly schizophrenic, and wildly popular “Relish,” part burger joint, part cocktail lounge, his dream has crossed the “tipping point,” he said.

“We’ve got synergy now,” he said, waving to a row of now-occupied store-fronts, while a crowd mingled on the patio noshing sweet potato fries and sipping milkshakes and martinis.

“This is what we’ve been chasing for two years,” he said. “There’s now enough foot traffic that these guys (tenants) should survive.”

How did Perkins fill his storefronts during a deep and lingering recession?

Holding the investment group together was the first step, he said. He parted ways with Scalzi, but local retail magnates Jim Rodda of Pottery World and Jim Meissner, who owns three local sewing centers, stood by his side, as did Umpqua Bank.

“Surrounding yourself with quality people is important in any business venture,” said Meissner. “Vinal and Jim Rodda are that. Given the collapse of the economy it was even more important here.”

Rodda added, “Vinal held this together. If it weren’t for him and his vision it would never have happened.”

Rodda’s decision to open a Pottery World store in Montano’s two-story stone and glass centerpiece didn’t hurt.

Early on he hesitated on the Montano site because of the logistics of his bulky furniture, huge pots and heavy fountains. But a smaller store concept, less dependent on the big pieces, solved that problem.

The flagship Rocklin Pottery World store is a whopping 33,000 square feet. The Montano store will be half that.

Initially the second level, with its dramatic views of the hills and the valley, was planned as an upscale restaurant. All the utilities are still in place. But for now it will showcase Pottery World's home furnishings and fashion accessories.

The store's 4,000 square feet of outdoor retail space will house Pottery World's trademark water features and patio furniture.

The back patios wrap around and under the site's signature hilltop oak, which Perkins affectionately calls the "million dollar tree," creating a woodsy store atmosphere and plenty of shade. Pottery World's is currently targeted for late June or July.

In the current brutal retail economy other quality tenants, especially good ones, the ones that provide entertainment value, have been scarce.

Mary Donnelly, the delightfully eccentric co-owner of Montano's third tenant, Our House gallery, said Perkins' business model is based on support and synergy. "The tenants here are treated well and we work together," she said. "The management supports us and we're loyal to him. I feel like I have someone in my corner."

"These tenants are friends and business partners," said Perkins. "I care for them. If they fail, we fail."

"As a shop owner it feels like I'm more than just a rent check," added tenant Joan Masegian, who runs We Olive with her husband Ken and son Jacob.

The family offers fresh California Certified extra virgin olive oils and balsamic vinegars in various ages and flavors, accompanied by all sorts of gourmet goodies. Sampling is encouraged, making a visit to We Olive a gastronomically educational experience, and just the type of "shopping as entertainment" that Perkins desires.

It also explains why "He's in here all the time," said Masegian. "He knows what we're up to, and helps out where he can."

Unlike typical merchant developers who build and sell retail centers, Perkins planned from the start to retain an ownership stake in Montano, and to stick around and act as leasing agent. "Too many shopping center developers take no pride in ownership," he said.

His pride is reflected in Montano's details; tall buildings that lend an old world feel, real clay tiles on the roofs, huge windows, water features and open air plazas, seating and landscaping that encourage shoppers to linger and socialize.

"Shoppers want more than just shopping," he said. "They want a place to be, to meet friends, a place where they feel secure and special."

Perkins credits Tony and Louis Mansour's nearby Town Center for creating that kind of a feel. "They set the bar pretty high," he said.

Perkins insists he's not competing with Town Center. "This is about local synergy more than competition," he said. "Both centers make this area a destination and ultimately help each other."

Complementary tenants complete the package. Montano's personality has evolved into boutique and home design themes that Perkins said he hopes will spill into the subsequent phases.

The current four buildings are only the first phase of an eventual 200,000 square feet of retail space spread out over 4.5 acres, served by a new Latrobe Road intersection south of White Rock Road.

Perkins said he's already paid a half million to El Dorado County in road fees, and expects to spend up to another \$1 million before he's done.

The planned Marriot Springhill Suites includes a dramatic porte cochere entryway to protect guests from the elements in winter. In summer, concerts and events will be held in a southeast facing open air amphitheater.

Negotiations are underway with a wine merchant, some additional boutiques and a couple real estate offices for spots in the northeast building adjacent to El Dorado Hills' resident Lin Strommel's "distinctive shoe boutique for men and women," Bella Talloni, Italian for "beautiful heels."

Strommel's selection includes accessories, and offers "a little something for every taste and every budget," she said. She and Robin Bernardoni, who operates Runway and Twirl fashion boutiques in Montano try to carry complementary shoes and accessories, and often share customers as a result.

Perkins said he attracts innovative local retailers like Strommel, Bernardoni, Donnelly and Relish's Richard Righton by working with them, providing incentives and even going into business with them sometimes.

"As a commercial landlord in this economic climate I have two choices," he said. "Either I sit here with empty buildings waiting for things to turn around and watch my existing tenants die, or I can try to fulfill their needs."

With Relish open and Pottery World immanent, the next step is to schedule summer events.

Perkins plans ongoing music on the patios. Dave "Hotrod" Henry, who owns the Morgan Taylor Salon in Montano, is helping organize a car show. Bernardoni has ideas for fashion and design events with actual runways, showing off her Runway and Twirl fashions.

Righton and Perkins are planning a patio celebration during the Amgen bicycle race, which will pass beneath Montano on the afternoon of May 16.

Later in the summer Perkins promises a center-wide grand opening celebration.

"We set out to make a statement in this community," said Perkins. "Our timing wasn't great, but it's coming together now thanks to the faith Jim Rodda and Jim Meissner had in this center, in me and in this community.

"It also took tenants who believed in the vision," he continued. "They've turned out to be my

business partners, my biggest allies and my friends.”

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