

Taste of the Town

By Angela Pettera

THE REVITALIZATION OF DOWNTOWN VENTURA

This sleepy city by the sea is waking up, culinarily speaking.

IS VENTURA FINALLY BECOMING GENTRIFIED AFTER YEARS OF BEING A PIT STOP FOR TRAVELERS ON THEIR WAY BETWEEN SANTA BARBARA AND LA? A few restaurateurs are betting on it. It's only a quick 29 miles or so from Westlake Village and Thousand Oaks. Camarillo residents often jump on the 101 and exit at California Street for dinner. Santa Barbara locals have been coming to the classically French 71 Palm and the American Austen's at The Pierpont Inn for years.



GARY MOSS

Of course, Ventura's downtown area still has its share of thrift shops tucked between the newer high-end furniture stores and trendy clothing boutiques. But more and more cafés, wine bars, and upscale dining establishments are finding an audience along the 20 or so blocks overlooking the sea that act as the nexus of Ventura nightlife.

Among the chefs who are betting on Ventura's recent upturn is Andy Brooks, who plans on opening **Brooks** restaurant early this month. Brooks has worked under Carrie Nahabedian (formerly of the Four Seasons Hotel Los Angeles in Beverly Hills) at NAHA in Chicago, and under Bradley Ogden (of The Lark Creek Inn in Larkspur, CA) at Lark Creek Cafe in San Mateo. When the La Cañada native came back to his home state to work on opening his own temple to New American cuisine, a friend recommended Ventura. After checking out the area, Brooks decided that he liked the community and he loved the beach. So he took over Ruby's at 545 E. Thompson Blvd., two blocks west of Main Street. Brooks has transformed the ugly orange and blue Mexican cantina into an elegant indoor and outdoor white-tablecloth dining experience. A full bar sits in the center of the main dining room. A second room, which can be closed off for private dining, features a large skylight. The patio out front is topped with canvas and can seat another 20 or so diners. Brooks will serve dinner only (Tuesday through Sunday) for its first few months. Lunch will be introduced at the beginning of summer. The wine list features all West Coast wines, mostly from Santa Barbara wine country. The prices are moderate (entrées are \$19-\$25). Brooks' first menu, which will change seasonally, offers sweet corn soup with smoked garlic meatballs; limoncello-steamed mussels; a roasted beet salad with burrata cheese; seared day-boat scallops with cactus relish; wood-grilled Wagyu steak with a rosemary-zinfandel sauce; and an ancho-chile chocolate cupcake with honey-vanilla gelato and cinnamon sauce.

Chef Andy Brooks' (opposite) new American cuisine includes cast iron-seared day boat scallops with a cactus relish and mole vinaigrette served with truffle squash.

