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Like old times in Old Town



New local operator returning festiveness to park and giving it a new name – Fiesta de Reyes

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Worker Alberto Gatica and others Tuesday prepared an area in Old Town for installation of new gas lines. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune) -



Chuck Ross interviewed candidates this month for positions at what will be Fiesta de Reyes in Old Town. (Crissy Pascual / Union-Tribune)

Everything old is new again could be the unofficial motto for Old Town State Park's largest concession, and that's not a reference to its 1850s Old California theme.

Umbrellas on the restaurant patio of the Casa de Reyes? They're back. Colorful costumes and festive atmosphere, complete with strolling mariachi bands? Check. Local vendors selling an assortment of eclectic goods? Yep.

After suffering a prolonged identity crisis – swinging dramatically from the popular, Disneylandish Bazaar del Mundo to the drab but more historically accurate Plaza del Pasado – the largest single concession within the park is getting a new, upbeat name; Fiesta de Reyes.

And, new operator Chuck Ross fervently hopes, a break.

“My hope is that San Diego will love what we do here,” said Ross, owner of Old Town Family Hospitality, which took over the dozen retail shops and restaurants this month from New York-based Delaware North. “It's in the best interest of San Diego, and the statepark system, for this to work because we've already seen what happens when there is disruption.”

Delaware North and its takeover of the concession is the stuff of San Diego fractured business lore. The company never gained momentum after its successful 2005 bid against San Diego businesswoman Diane Powers for rights to the state contract on the former Bazaar del Mundo.

Under Powers, who held the concession for 33 years, the collection of shops and restaurants was a thriving cash cow that drew locals and tourists alike. But its focus on margaritas and bright lights was less appealing to state park officials, who wanted a new emphasis on historical accuracy and the restoration of debilitated structures.

Enter Delaware North, which outbid Powers for the contract, in part because it pledged to spend \$12 million on renovations and give the state a bigger cut in revenue.

So Delaware won. And lost.

Powers' loyal following balked at the change in management and ambience, and stayed away in droves. Under Delaware, which terminated the subleases on the locally run retail shops and took them over, the concession brought in about one-third of the over \$20 million in revenue that Powers rang up.

In December, with six years left on its contract, Delaware threw in the towel and recruited San Diego businessman Ross to take over the ailing concession. The company considerably sweetened the deal for Ross with about \$20 million in rent subsidies and capital improvement funds.

Ross, owner of the South Bay Fish and Grill in Chula Vista, immediately began to woo the community and mend fences damaged during Delaware's tenure. Among other things, he hosted a series of citizens advisory group meetings that included historical advocates, Old Town residents and members of the business community.

“We got blasted with opinions,” Ross said. “But we got everyone in a room to discuss how to make it more fun and festive, and see the different points of view. And that's what we shared with the state (officials) – the need to reach some compromise here.”

Fred Grand, president of the Old Town Chamber of Commerce, said he's impressed with Ross' commitment to reach out to locals.

“It was clear during the time Delaware North was in the state park that the local community didn't embrace their actions or their businesses,” Grand said. “Ross is well-aware of that and doesn't want to make the same mistakes.”

Grand said one thing Ross has going for him is that he is a local entrepreneur, not an out-of-town corporation.

“Delaware was controlled from back east. It was hard for them to react,” Grand said. “Local control makes a big difference. Ross can listen and make decisions right on the spot if he chooses.”

One decision Ross made has not endeared him to at least one faction, the 130 union employees that worked for Delaware North. All of the employees were laid off March 7, and Ross has invited them to reapply with no guarantee that they will get their jobs back.

Ross said he plans to run the concession as nonunion. Brigitte Browning, president of Unite Here Local 30, has called for a boycott of Ross' concession until he agrees to rehire the displaced workers.

“His arrogance is reminiscent of the way Delaware North came in, disregarding the public's love of a San Diego icon and acting as if the employees brought none of that to the table,” Browning said. “Most of them are original employees who have been there for years and gave excellent service.”

Ross acknowledges the issue is a sensitive one, but said the troubled concession can't recover if it operates under the same constraints that helped sink Delaware.

“No one in their right mind would come into this under the conditions that they had, and there was not a whole lot here that a good business person would want to maintain,” Ross said. “It didn't need to be revamped, or tweaked, or modified slightly – it needed to be redone.”

Ross said he hopes to succeed where Delaware failed in part by reinventing the concession's leading restaurants, the Casa de Reyes and the former Jolly Boy Saloon, which will be renamed Barra Barra. Both are closed for remodeling, but will reopen in coming weeks with new menus and a more lively atmosphere, Ross said.

Ross, 53, honed his skills in the restaurant industry, landing his first job at the age of 17 as a cook in a Red Lobster restaurant in Florida, and working his way up to director for the chain's parent company, General Mills.

In the early 1980s, General Mills purchased the Palo Alto-based chain of Good Earth restaurants, and Ross was asked to move to San Diego and oversee the expansion of the brand.

It soon became clear that the healthy food franchise wasn't going to catch on, Ross said. But its ultimate failure taught Ross a lesson about trying to force concepts that don't fit.

“We tried to take the healthy foods concept and integrate it in parts of the country where they weren't health-oriented in their diets,” Ross said. “When we first opened there was no meat on the menu – my father wouldn't eat there.

“There has to be enough of a concept behind a business to appeal to the masses, or you have to change in the market you are in to appeal to it,” Ross said.

In 1985, Ross got a job with Hard Rock America, and for more than a decade helped build the Hard Rock Cafe franchise across the U.S. In 1995, the Rank Group bought the cafes, and Ross departed soon afterward to pursue his own business interests, including the purchase of the Chula Vista restaurant.

Then, in September, Delaware North approached him about taking on the state park concession. Ross took over March 8 and has been busy remodeling the restaurants and recruiting local retail operators, including some of the original shops that lost their leases to Delaware.

Brian Miller, owner of the local Geppetto's toy store chain, said he leaped at the chance to regain his original 800-square-foot shop, which his family had run in the park since 1993.

“I might not have opened another store this year because of the economy, but I think with what Ross is doing, it will be an exciting time,” said Miller, who plans to open the store next month. “And it's very nostalgic for me to have the old store back.”

Ross is also working with other concessions within the park, as well as Old Town businesses outside the park, to coordinate and advertise entertainment and events on a regular basis.

And he is striving to strike the delicate balance between the public's desire for fun and the state's mandate for historical accuracy.

That tension is apparent in recent negotiations with the state over renaming the plaza and the move to replace some drab canvas that covered the patio of the Casa de Reyes with modern umbrellas.

At first state park officials balked at the word “fiesta,” worried that it was a too contemporary form of Mexican slang, but eventually relented, Ross said. And the state agreed to let Ross put umbrellas in a portion of the patio for the time being, in return for his building a carrizo – a type of bamboo arbor – for the rest of the patio.

Ronilee Clark, a spokeswoman for California State Parks, said Ross is inventive.

“Delaware North, for whatever reason, was always challenged from a creative perspective at blending history and fun, and it has always been our point of view that the two are not mutually exclusive,” Clark said. “Ross seems to be embracing that and to be excited about the opportunity.”

Ross is planning a grand opening in May to show off the remodeled plaza, the revamped restaurants, and the new shops. The event will include a circus, complete with fire-breathers, jugglers, stilt-walkers and a

high-wire act, he said.

Circuses, Ross hastens to add, were common in the 1800s.

“That's what it will take to turn this around and get sales going in the other direction,” Ross said. “A new face, a new look, a new menu – a new attitude.”

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