

Real Estate Deals of the Year

Best New Restaurant / San Francisco - Lafitte Waterfront restaurant took eight years of sweat to finally open

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Chef **Russell Jackson** rejoices in Lafitte's opening last November as a "small (expletive) miracle," but the restaurant's greatest success may still be two years down the road. Lafitte's Pier 5 location places it in the company of the new Exploratorium and America's Cup activity come 2013. Lafitte may reap some early adopter benefits in this new locus of San Francisco dining on the waterfront.

Jackson swore off owning restaurants after getting burned in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, a stubborn breed of chef, he never could shake the desire to present his own ideas in his own restaurant. He returned to San Francisco, where he attended the [California Culinary Academy](#), and began scouting locations.

"All roads came back to, this is what I should be doing," Jackson said. "It all boils down to ... I find an immense amount of joy in my life from cooking."

To fuel the startup phase, Jackson served adventurous, multi-course dinners in secret locations, introducing potential investors to his culinary swagger. Jackson has a ravenous appetite for the new and unexpected. Oddities of his daily-mutating menu at Lafitte have included tobacco leaves and bacon samplings.

From 2002 to 2006, Jackson scoured San Francisco for a space that could foster his swashbuckling whims. In the one-mile radius by the water and the financial district, he saw more than 50 sites by a conservative count. He likens the scrutiny of restaurant deals in San Francisco to submitting himself to a tick comb. Deals kept falling through.

Jackson even dismissed Lafitte's current home at Pier 5 once, before circling back in 2006 at the request of financial partner **Alicia Esterkamp Allbin** of developer [Pacific Waterfront Partners](#). The 100-year-old building had recently been cleared out, and Jackson fell hard this time around. He ditched a nearly finalized transaction and inked the deal.

Allbin saw Jackson's ferocious passion as a boon, not a liability. "We were always committed to a tenant that would (offer) something exciting that would pull the energy to that northernmost end at Pier 5," said Allbin.

Site finally secured, Jackson moved forward with fundraising, but his timing was a bit off. Investors walked the plank left and right as the recession hit. The project continued, pulled by Jackson's charisma, and costs were adjusted to fit the \$2 million the project could muster.

One investor that stuck it out to the savory end was **Burt Kendall**. He'd never before put money into a restaurant, but felt strongly about Jackson.



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He really has this extraordinarily strong work ethic,” Kendall said. “A year after all the kinds of things that go wrong, (others would) get tired and do something else. And that’s not Russell.”

Next, Lafitte had to double its seating size to give it a chance for profitability. Using the outdoor cafes of the Champs-Élysées as inspiration, Jackson’s team sketched out designs to submit to the State Historic Preservation Office and National Park Service, which needed to approve the project because the site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The final tent design still causes problems in cold weather, but Jackson says on sunny days it’s a major selling point for the restaurant.

Eight years in the making and six months into operation, Jackson sees sunny days ahead.

“Through the quagmire of the economic nuclear wasteland, we’re managing to slug our way through,” Jackson said in his characteristic dense, flavorful speech. “The proverbial gold at the end of this rather dark, dank rainbow is the America’s Cup. Everybody’s feeling like this is going to be our moment in the sun.”

WINNER

Location: Pier 5, The Embarcadero, San Francisco.

Size: 2,100 square feet inside, 1,300 square feet on outdoor patio. 135 seats.

Cost: \$2 million in build-out costs.

Broker: Rhonda Diaz of Terranomics Retail Services.

Developer/landlord: San Francisco Waterfront Partners LLC.

Contractors: SJ Amoroso (development); Premier Structures (restaurant).

Architect: Hannum Associates and Page & Turnbull (development); MWA Architects and Page & Turnbull (restaurant).

Engineer: Glumac International.

Law firm: Farella Braun + Martel LLP.

Financial Partner: Corsair Partners LP in partnership with ControlSF LLC.