

Dining Notes

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The Loop Pizza Grill plans new prototype restaurant at St. Johns Town Center



Submitted by [Gary Mills](#) on July 12, 2012 - 7:37pm

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The Loop Pizza Grill is heading to the St. Johns Town Center for a makeover.

That's where the 31-year-old Jacksonville-based chain known for its signature pizzas, salads and burgers, plans to open a new prototype restaurant this fall.

The 4,000-square-foot, 150-seat restaurant is planned for the vacant spot next to Total Wine & More at 4413 Town Center Parkway, located at the northern edge of the St. Johns Town Center. Build-out of the restaurant is slated to begin this month, said Loop co-founder **Mike Schneider**. And demolition work could begin as early as Monday, he said.

The prototype represents a new look for The Loop; but the restaurant's fast-casual concept, including its menu, will remain largely unchanged.

After all, the fast-casual concept is the fastest-growing restaurant segment. In 2010, the number of fast-casual restaurants grew at a rate of 3.9 percent; during the same period, however, the number of full-service restaurants declined 1.4 percent, according to Technomic.

Based on 2010 sales numbers, the five fastest-growing fast-casual restaurants included **Panera**, **Chipotle**, **Panda Express**, **Zaxby's** and **Five Guys Burgers and Fries**.

Of those five, Panera was the first to enter the Jacksonville market in the mid-1990s, some 15 years after The Loop opened its first restaurant in San Marco in 1981.

The Loop prototype's interior will feature a design concept by Loop co-founder and designer **Terry Schneider** and **Rebecca Davison** of Designmind, the Jacksonville-based interior design firm founded by Davison and Larry Wilson. According to the company's website, Designmind's credits include restaurants **Caffe Andiamo** and **Restaurant Medure**, both in Ponte Vedra Beach, **Matthew's Restaurant** in San Marco, and others.

Among the restaurant's signature design elements will be a 50-foot-long mural by Jacksonville artist Steve Williams. In addition to the mural, Williams will contribute other artwork as well, he said.

With some of the design details still in the final stages of planning, one thing is certain: the restaurant will have outdoor seating for 20-30 guests.

Plans for the prototype date back to 2005 when Mike Schneider, Terry Schneider and their team worked with consultants to create a strategic development plan to reintroduce The Loop, beginning with a fresh look as the chain was set to mark its 25th year in business, Mike Schneider said.

"The plan was to roll out the new look in 2006-2007," he said.

By 2006, however, the recession was taking hold, and restaurants began to suffer its effects. That included San Marco's **Bistro Aix**, in which both Schneiders are part owners. Two years later, the recession hit The Loop, he said.

Plans for the prototype were shelved as The Loop worked to make changes to its menu, staffing and other operations in order to weather the economic storm.

As The Loop was preparing to update its five corporate-owned stores – "We need a facelift," Schneider said – the St. Johns Town Center space became available with the closing of Karl's and the relocation of Villa Vita.

"We saw the two spaces available" and began negotiations with the building's owner, a process that stretched into March, he said.

Schneider is hopeful that the new restaurant will open by late October.

But Loop customers in San Marco, Avondale, Baymeadows, Mandarin, and Orange Park should get a (visual) taste of the new prototype as some of its design elements make their way to those restaurants in the coming weeks and months.

After seven years, "everyone is past ready to start," Schneider said.