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South Jersey Business

Pub set for first last-call



Camden's 60th bar sports scenic views of Phila.

By EILEEN STILWELL
Courier-Post Staff

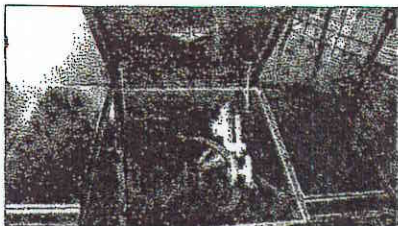
CAMDEN

Slated to open this week, Victor's Pub is not just another Camden corner bar. It's the city's 60th, to be exact.

Wrapped in glass, with a dramatic view of the Philadelphia skyline and the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, it is a big, modern sports bar with a big mission: Entice city workers, Rutgers students, baseball fans, Tweeter concertgoers and residents of The Victor to eat, drink and socialize in a city with a bad rep.

The risk is big, as well, for owners Sam Sarin and Mike Romano, who also own Sam's Bar in Blackwood. Together they have invested close to \$800,000 to try to turn a 6,000-square-foot expanse on the first floor of The Victor at Delaware Avenue and Cooper Street into a popular destination.

The lifelong friends purchased a liquor license for \$35,000 from Carl Dranoff, a risk-taker himself, who transformed the for-



A Victrola phonograph sits at the entrance of Victor's Pub in Camden. The pub is expected to open Friday.

mer RCA Nipper building into a luxury tower of 341 apartments.

If for any reason they leave the business, they are required to sell the liquor license back to Dranoff.

"Most, if not all, of The Victor residents are of drinking age," joked Romano, a veteran barkeep from Gloucester Township.

Rose Keane, a retired principal of a South Philadelphia elementary school, was among the first wave of residents in December 2003 to move into The Victor.

"We really need something like a good pub. Now, I won't have to meet

friends in Cherry Hill or Philadelphia. I've very excited," she said.

Dranoff holds a second pocket liquor license, one of about six in the city, said Joyce Patterson from the city clerk's office. Pocket licenses must be renewed with an annual fee of \$2,200 until the owner finds a suitable bar, restaurant, club or liquor store to open a retail establishment.

Maying Eaves, one of 1,150 employees of L-C Communication Systems-East, which is located across Market Street, does not drink alcohol, but welcomes a friendly meeting place.

"I've worked on this

VICTOR'S PUB

- Address: 1 Market St., Camden
- Phone: (856) 635-0500
- Web site: www.victorspub.com

waterfront for 15 years and I was always meeting people outside the city. I welcome another option to keep us here," she said.

Even the competition seems to be rooting for the South Jersey guys who admit to knowing very little about Camden.

"It will be tough in the beginning, but if they hang in like we did, it's going to be a very positive thing," said Gary Mahon, a partner in 20 Horse Tavern, a bar and restaurant that opened in the middle of the port district on 2nd Street three years ago.

Lunch is strong at 20 Horse, drawing on port workers; but dinner, he said, is still disappointing.

Most nights Mahon turns out the lights by 9 p.m.

"We're still a Monday through Friday place. Our catering business keeps us

going on weekends," Mahon said.

Two other eateries opened and closed at The Victor within the last two years. One specialized in hearty chicken fare and the other, a New England Soup Co. franchise, folded before Christmas.

"Both were too limited," said Thomas Corcoran, president of Cooper's Ferry Development Association and a resident of The Victor.

"The pub owners have a very successful track record and a good business plan for what they need to do here," he said.

Sarin, a former builder, is so proud of the finished product he included peeks into the bathrooms on a recent tour.

The restaurant has 220 seats, including 55 stools, around a massive granite bar. It will be open seven days a week — 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. — and employ about 31 people.

The lunch and dinner menu, which ranges from a bucket of steamers to filet mignon, is under the di-

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Victor's/Camden restaurant features 220 seats, 10 beers on tap

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rection of Tim Eliason, former chef at Riverton Country Club.

Patrons can wash their meals down with one of 10 beers on tap, fine wine or some trendy drinks, like So-co or Jagermeister or Red Bull.

The pub is equipped with an electronic trivia game that can be viewed from any of its 20 flat screen

TV's.

Free parking is available across Delaware Avenue on a lot owned by the Delaware River Port Authority. Without free parking, the owners said they would have walked away from the deal.

The owners had hoped to be open by November, but environmental issues, specifically the discovery of toxic vapors above residential guidelines from underground pollutants, have

slowed the process. Dranoff installed a new ventilation system and is awaiting permission from the state Department of Environmental Protection to open.

If it happens today, as expected, Victor's Pub will have a soft opening Friday, and a grand opening March 21.

"I'm really ready, I'm nervous, but excited," said Sarin of Washington Township, whose daughter,

Stephanie Gillin, designed the interior.

Though the owners have been working on the pub since October, Dranoff suspended their \$18-a-square-foot rent payments until the DEP allows it to open.

Camden's waterfront will officially open May 1 when the Riversharks play their first of 70 home games. Last year, the average game attracted 3,800 spectators. Victor's Pub, which has

planned a number of cross-promotions with the ball park and is located less than a base run away, is hoping to become a watering hole for fans.

In July, another restaurant is slated to open in the new Ferry Terminal Building adjacent to Adventure Aquarium on the waterfront. Employees of Susquehanna Bank, which will open its new headquarters in the same building, are ex-

pected to move in about the same time, said Doug Siebert, project manager for Steiner & Associates, a Columbus, Ohio firm that expanded the aquarium and is developing land around it.

Bud Cardone, who is working on his 61st year as a successful Camden business owner, said Camden's stigma has crippled development.

"There's not a decent place downtown to take a

client. I have to drive to Anthony's in Haddon Heights. But I'll give the pub a shot, and if it's good, I'll tell others," said the owner of Largetmoor Film Service at 6th & Cooper streets.

"Maybe, it will become Camden's Chickie and Pate's," he said.

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