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Paragary's successor softly opens downtown eatery

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Sass Bar & Grill owner Sam Ventura greets customer Ava Avione at his restaurant Tuesday evening. A grand opening is planned for Jan. 15.

Craig Sanders/The Record

By Roger Phillips
Record Staff Writer
December 22, 2010 12:00 AM

STOCKTON - Rachel Lackey sank her teeth into a pulled pork and potato empanada and declared it delicious. She looked at its \$6.95 price tag on the menu and said that, too, was palatable.

Score one small victory for the Sass Bar & Grill, which is trying to succeed downtown in the Hotel Stockton in the same spot where the controversial Paragary's failed.

Six months after owner Sam Ventura bought the lease from Sacramento restaurateur Randy Paragary, Sass had its soft opening Tuesday night. A grand opening is scheduled for Jan. 15, Ventura said.

Tuesday, a half-dozen tables in the plush, spacious eatery - aesthetically unchanged from Paragary's - were filled as of about 6 p.m. Several diners said they previously had eaten at Paragary's but only once each.

Sass' customer's choices Tuesday included a Caesar salad (\$7), a

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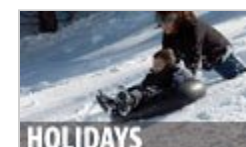
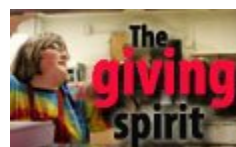
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"lamburger" (\$10.95) and chicken Diablo (\$15.95). Ventura said the menu will expand by the time of the grand opening.

"We've tried to make sure there are plenty of items under \$15," Ventura said.

Sass did not serve alcohol Tuesday; Ventura said he expects the restaurant's liquor license to be in place today.

Sass will be open for dinner again tonight and Thursday, for lunch Friday, then will close through the holiday weekend before opening again for dinner Tuesday.

Eventually, Ventura said, he plans to be open seven days a week for lunch and dinner - and he added that he believes his restaurant's cuisine will develop a following.

"There's a little more excitement in our menu" than Paragary's, he said.

Also, there's less drama surrounding Sass. Paragary's became for some in the community a lightning rod for the excesses of downtown redevelopment after the city's lease provided it with \$2.5 million worth of free rent over five years. Those who disapproved stayed away in droves.

Ventura said he spent recent months courting the Stockton business community, and he is relying on social media such as Facebook and Twitter to promote Sass, at least in its early days.


Lackey said an early-morning Facebook session drew her and her husband, George, to Sass for its opening. George Lackey seemed impressed.

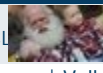
"The prices are good," he said. "And the building is beautiful inside."

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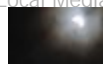
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