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A new heart for Brookhaven

Sembler creates restaurant, retail 'village'

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Rachael Tobin Ramos](#) Staff Writer

Jeff Fuqua, president of retail developer The Sembler Co., is about to bring urban cuisine to the semi-suburban enclave north of Lenox Square.

For the mixed-use project that has been named Town: Brookhaven, Fuqua hopes to create a Virginia-Highland "north," he said.

He's lured nearly a dozen local restaurant concepts to his Brookhaven development, including Ray's on the River, Nuevo Laredo Cantina, Atkins Park Tavern, Rolling Bones Premium Pit BBQ, San Francisco Coffee Roasting Co., The Real Chow Baby: New American Stir Fry, Genki Noodles and Sushi, Sogno Gelato, Raving Brands' The Flying Biscuit Café and Moe's Southwest Grill and Mirko Pasta, from a co-owner of the Figo pasta chain.

"I made the decision about 10 months ago not to align ourselves with national tenants," said Fuqua. He's also looking for 10 local fashion retailers, such as Bill Hallman.

The 600,000-square-foot, \$500 million project in Brookhaven has been changing in response to the neighbors, said Fuqua. The site is on Peachtree Road, adjacent to Oglethorpe University.

Neighbors urged him to shelve plans for a high-rise, and to consider the local restaurant angle, he said, which he has done.

Brookhaven, a wealthy enclave north of Buckhead, for years had little more than a now-closed Jocks & Jills Sports Grill to satisfy the area's hungry families, empty nesters and 2,000 Oglethorpe University students.

"There were no local, chef-driven restaurants," said Fuqua.

Recently, the Jocks & Jills became Hudson Grille by Metrotainment Cafes, and several restaurants, including Valenza, have opened on Dresden Drive.

With construction of Town: Brookhaven, nearly 90,000 square feet of restaurants will change the culinary scene.

Fuqua has two 8,500-square-foot restaurant pads, which will be filled with higher-end restaurants, while smaller spaces will fit more casual eateries. He's been courting the city's top restaurateurs.

Chef Gary Mennie of Taurus has expressed interest in the project, but hasn't signed on the bottomline yet.

"I'm very interested," said Mennie. "It's a great idea, concept and location. I think the philosophy behind locally grown operators is brilliant."

The use of all "locally grown" restaurant concepts is a departure for Sembler, better known for big-box stores like Target and chain restaurants like Panera Bread. His Edgewood Shopping Center on Moreland Avenue has a strong local component, like RuSan's sushi, but also has chains like Five Guys Burgers and Fries.

"I think it's a real interesting wrinkle," said restaurant broker Harold Shumacher of The Shumacher Group, who hasn't been involved in leasing for the Brookhaven project.

"I think that's exciting. It is breaking the mold and makes the project not look like everywhere else."

The Brookhaven project is also unique, said Fuqua, in that he can't think of another assemblage of more than 50 acres in the last 50 years off of Peachtree Road.

He assembled the 52-acre project by buying the former Peachtree Garden apartments, plus some adjacent lots.

"We want a village and that's the pitch," said Warren Bruno, the owner of Atkins Park and also a restaurant broker.

Together with partner Kim Brown, their company, Camden Commercial Real Estate, had been signing leasing deals for the Sembler project.

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Bruno will own the Atkins Park that will be in the development. In part, he said, he's been looking for great restaurants to be near his own eatery.

He said he's starting to gain a critical mass -- as more restaurants want to be near each other.

It will be the fourth location for Atkins Park, said Bruno, after Virginia-Highland, Cumming and Smyrna.

Mirko Digiacomantonio, one of the owners of Figo Pasta, said he thinks the restaurants there will be a great success because of the location.

Doug Bond, owner of San Francisco Coffee Roasting Co., said he appreciates that Sembler is going local. Usually, he said, the big chains have a lock on spots in new developments.

"You have to beat Starbucks to the punch on locations in this business."

"It's all about having a landlord that appreciates what you do and customers that will come and see you. And I've got all that in this Sembler development."

Bruno cites the area's residential density and well-to-do demographics as making the project extremely attractive to restaurateurs.

When finished, Town: Brookhaven will have 1,500 residential units on top of restaurant and retail spaces, plus 150,000 square feet of office space.

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The project will include a public space that will host arts and music festivals.

Fuqua is also planning an "adults only" movie theater with seven screens that will show blockbuster films, accompanied by dinner and cocktails.

A groundbreaking for the project will happen on Oct. 18, and will feature a performance from Georgia Shakespeare and an appearance by Oglethorpe President Larry Schall.

The new name, Town: Brookhaven, was developed by Atlanta firm Iconologic.

The Town branding will be used by future Sembler projects as well, said Fuqua, such as an upcoming project he's already dubbed Town: Gainesville.

Iconologic's Juliet D'Ambrosio said the name is "very organic and represents what we think the place is going to be: a real heart for Brookhaven."

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Joann Vitelli

Locals only: Jeff Fuqua of The Sembler Co. has signed nearly a dozen local restaurants for Town: Brookhaven in hopes of building the appeal of neighborhoods like Virginia-Highland.