

Neal Fraser opens Redbird in downtown's Vibiana, finally



Santa Barbara ridgeback prawns, uni, nori and wasabi snow at Redbird. (Amy Scattergood / Los Angeles Times)

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🔖 Neal Fraser opens Redbird, a restaurant in the rectory of a former cathedral

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Fans of Neal Fraser's excellent cooking have long been waiting, literally or figuratively, outside the deconsecrated gates of downtown's Vibiana Cathedral for news of his restaurant, long-scheduled to open in the building's former rectory.

Well, the gates are finally opening, as Redbird is slated to open Wednesday evening for dinner service.

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Fraser, as you may remember, closed Grace in 2010, hoping to relocate the much-loved restaurant downtown. In the meantime, the space that was Grace became Playa, which then became Petty Cash. Much time passed, Neal and Amy Knoll Fraser moved their catering kitchen downtown and took over the Vibiana events space; the Frasers teamed with Bill Chait; and the restaurant evolved to become Redbird.

It should be said that Redbird — a reference to the cardinal who once lived in Vibiana's rectory — is decidedly not Grace. But it will have some Grace-like dishes on the menu, as well as the kind of cooking that has made Fraser one of the town's foremost chefs. ("We didn't want it to be too religious," Knoll Fraser says. "No crosses.")

As you'd expect, both the restaurant, which the Frasers have been effectively working on since 2008, and the menu show signs of much thought and preparation. The dinner menu (Redbird will open for lunch and brunch early in 2015) is divided into four sections: appetizers, mains, desserts and a kind of small plates course that Knoll Fraser named "kickshaws."

"It's a play on 'something' in French," Knoll Fraser says, explaining that the word popped up on her phone one day as a Word of the Day. The little dishes include tempura-crust smelt with grilled lemon and spiced aioli; shishito peppers with bottarga and togarashi; chicken pot pies; New Caledonian blue shrimp with grits and mole; and something called the Whole Hog, which has "flavors of posole."

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