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The renaissance moves forward

A downtown area in disarray just a decade ago, the Clematis Street District is experiencing a revival that is attracting residents and tourists alike. Leila, a high-end restaurant serving Syrian and Lebanese cuisine, and Middle Eastern culture, is one of the businesses that is leading the way

West Palm Beach, FL – Donald Trump called it Florida’s hottest street in an interview with *People* magazine and developers are clamoring over opportunities to play a part in keeping the renaissance of this historic district in downtown West Palm Beach accelerating.

City of West Palm Beach officials believe the momentum continues to build in the Clematis Street District with several additions slated for 2004, including the latest – a cosmopolitan Middle Eastern restaurant called Leila. Located at the corner of Datura and Dixie in downtown West Palm Beach, one block south of Clematis Street, Assad’s casual chic eatery will open its doors May 17 in a refurbished historic structure that once housed the West Palm Beach fire department.

Inside, guests will drink ethnic wines and partake in the art of mezze, the Middle Eastern tradition where generous portions of cuisine are shared among friends. A myriad of salads and dishes – such as falafel, tabouleh, stuffed grape leaves and hummus – will dot tables accented by candlelight, creating a collage of Mediterranean fare. Dinner entrees follow and include such delicacies as grilled kefta kebab, shrimp with cilantro, grilled fish and lamb.

For a taste of Arabic culture, patrons can smoke the arguileh and savoring the smoothness of the fruitful pipe tobacco; sip on Turkish coffee and shai (tea); listen to professional musician Joe Zeytoonian play the electric ud (a Middle Eastern fretless stringed instrument) on selected evenings and watch Dawn illustrate belly dancing on the art form it originated as in ancient times.

The high-end and heritage-rich Leila is just what the Clematis Street District needs, says Joan Goldberg, cultural affairs advisor for the City of West Palm Beach.

“We are committed to making Clematis Street an area lined with culturally diverse shops, boutiques and restaurants. This is a key reason why Leila is such a valuable addition,” Goldberg said. “We’re creating a unique ambiance that tourists and residents alike cannot find in a mall. The rebirth we’re seeing downtown is exciting.”

Drawn by warm weather and blue skies, new residents flocked to West Palm Beach in droves after World War I. Clematis Street was the heart of the young city, and for decades after World War II, Clematis Street was the hub of West Palm's downtown – a place where families, friends and neighbors shopped and socialized. By the late 1980s, the district was defined by dilapidated buildings and high crime, until city officials designed and implemented an ambitious revitalization plan.

Today, Clematis Street is vibrant again. Children splash through synchronized jets of water in the \$2 million, city funded Centennial Fountain, which started the revitalization project in 1991 when current Downtown Development Authority Executive Director Nancy Graham was mayor of West Palm Beach. A weekly street party – known as “Clematis by Night” – attracts adults downtown as do the myriad of boutiques, galleries, restaurants and theaters.

The revival of Clematis Street encountered a hurdle when CityPlace - a mixed-use development with shops and restaurants – opened three blocks away. Yet recent news reports indicate that the district’s renaissance is on pace once more.

The Palm Beach Photographic Centre, a museum that attracts 70,000 visitors each year, is moving from Delray Beach to West Palm Beach in 2007. The Photographic Centre will become part of the new City Center planned for downtown West Palm Beach just off Clematis Street. It will also include a new city hall and library. City officials hope the complex will attract art galleries, boutiques and a playhouse as well.

City officials also announced that the building that currently houses the library will be removed for a waterfront project that will tie City Commons Park to the waterfront. Several highly regarded landscape architects are submitting plans to transform the area into a visually stunning masterpiece.

“This will restore the historical link between the waterfront and the Clematis Street District. In the early days of West Palm Beach, it was a place that bustled with the movement of passengers and goods,” Goldberg said. “The rebirth we’re having right now is returning the downtown area to the vibrant lifestyle it saw in the early 1900s.”

Clematis Street is seeing plans for residential growth, too. Kenco Communities, a Boca Raton-based luxury home developer, plans to break ground this summer on The Metropolitan, an eight-story building in downtown West Palm Beach. The 149 units are projected to be finished a year later. The condos are currently priced between \$200,000 and \$500,000 and about 80 contracts have been sold since the units went on the market in November.

Kenco is also buying land on the downtown West Palm Beach block between Dixie Highway, Quadrille Boulevard, Evernia Street and Datura Street. The company expects to complete the acquisitions in the next six months and then construct condos.

Assad, an active member of the Clematis Street Revitalization Project, is encouraged by the planned enhancements. A native of Damascus who also lived in Beirut before his family moved to the United States in 1973 when he was 18, Assad learned English by watching television and climbed the ladder at a State Farm Insurance agency, eventually becoming one of the most prominent insurance salesmen in the nation before founding RBA Strategies, a firm that markets corporate benefits, in 1986.

RBA Strategies has a location in New York City, but its The corporate office is located in the historic Comeau Building on Clematis Street. So when Assad saw the need for a high-end Middle Eastern bistro in West Palm Beach, Assad hired a support staff with seasoned restaurant experience and decided to refurbish the former fire house at the corner of Datura and Dixie, a short walk from Clematis Street.

“We’re raising the bar on the Clematis Street District,” Assad said. “It’s only a matter of time before this area is the city’s cultural center filled with nice restaurants, shops and entertainment venues.

“We wanted to be a pioneer, and be a part of the Clematis Street revitalization at its early stages,” he added. “I would rather help set the stage than arrive when the show is already going.”

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