

Restaurants savor Midtown

Business

Owners of four new eateries optimistic.

They believe a good location trumps the bad economy.

By **Joe Guy Collier**
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Scott Kilpatrick, co-founder of Arizona-based RA Sushi, eyed the chain's newest restaurant Tuesday, a day after it opened in the 1010 Midtown high-rise in Atlanta.

Near the entrance, chefs made quick work of sushi roll orders. Waiters in black attire weaved through the tables of this airy space.

The U.S. economy has hit its worst stretch in decades. Midtown's glass and concrete condos aren't filling up nearly as quickly as they were a couple of years ago when RA Sushi decided on the location.

"If we spun the clock back today and asked, 'Would you sign a new lease in Midtown?'," north of downtown, Kilpatrick said, "I quite honestly think we would still do it. We really like this location."

Despite the recession and slowing Midtown growth, RA Sushi and three other restaurants in the 1010 Midtown building will open this year or already have.

Noon Midtown, a gourmet sandwich and coffee shop, opened in late April. Lunch traffic has been good so far, Noon's owners say.

Ri Ra Irish Pub & Restaurant, a Charlotte-based chain, expects to open in July. Piola, an Italy-based chain of pizzerias, plans to open late this year.

The site for these restaurants is just south of a stretch along Crescent Avenue that already has a host of restaurants including



Lunch patrons dine at RA Sushi, one of four restaurants that have opened or are about to open in a new Midtown high-rise.

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Sushi chef Saran Kannasute works on an order at RA Sushi during lunchtime Tuesday. Kent D. Johnson kdjohnson@ajc.com

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Restaurant owners glad to be there

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The recession makes for a difficult time to launch a restaurant, but Midtown remains an attractive location, said Harold Shumacher, a local restaurant real estate broker and president of the Shumacher Group.

It has a large concentration of working professionals and residents who are willing to walk from place to place, he said.

"The fundamentals of Midtown haven't changed," Shumacher said. "The point we're at in the cycle has changed."

Restaurant launches typically take nine to 12 months, Shumacher said. It's impossible to time it perfectly, he said. "At some point, you just hold your nose and jump in," Shumacher said.

Katie Birmingham and Ross Davis, wife and husband owners of Noon Midtown, said they felt lucky to land a spot in the Midtown area, particularly close to the office buildings clustered around 14th and Peachtree Streets.

This is the first restaurant for the couple. It features a sleek layout – white tables, orange accents and an open kitchen wrapped in cherry wood.

"You don't normally get a break like this," Davis said. "For a startup, this is a very prominent location."

The couple decided to start their restaurant two years ago. Birmingham was working as a lawyer in Midtown, but she had previously been a chef at several Atlanta restaurants, including Bacchanalia.

Midtown needed more lunch spots, she said. "I joke that I don't know if I had gotten tired of being a lawyer or tired of eating lunch in Midtown," Birmingham said.

The economy has been a concern, but Birmingham and Davis said they believe Noon is hitting an underserved lunch market in Midtown. Noon's prices, about \$7 to \$10 for gourmet sand-

wiches, have helped, Birmingham said.

"If we were opening a fine-dining restaurant, I might be biting my nails a little bit," she said. "You can get in and out of here at a reasonable price."

Kilpatrick, the RA Sushi executive, said he also thinks his restaurant hits a niche that works well in Midtown. It serves sushi and Japanese fusion dishes against the backdrop of high-energy music, targeting 21- to 44-year-olds.

RA, which has 23 locations across the United States, is often a first stop before hitting another club, Kilpatrick said. Crescent Avenue already is a popular area for nightlife.

"We like that synergy with places where people are going out," Kilpatrick said.

The economy is a concern overall for his chain, he said. In addition to Atlanta, RA Sushi is opening restaurants this year in Houston and metro Kansas City.

RA has put the brakes on commitments beyond those locations, but it recently started eyeing new sites, Kilpatrick said. Attractive locations with lower lease rates are opening in some cities, he said.

It's hard to predict where the economy is headed, but people seem to be going out again, Kilpatrick said, and RA Sushi hopes to capture some of the market.

"We're proud of the concept. We're proud of the staff," Kilpatrick said. "It's high energy. It's a lot of fun. It's a reasonable price point."

Midtown remains an attractive location for restaurants. It has a large concentration of working professionals and residents willing to walk from place to place.

1010 Midtown

Two of four planned restaurants recently opened along the Crescent Avenue side of the 1010 Midtown high-rise. The other two restaurants will open later this year.

Noon Midtown

(www.noonmidtown.com):

Opened in late April — Serves the breakfast and lunch crowd with gourmet sandwiches, soups and salads, as well as pastries and breakfast items; Features Counter Culture coffees.

RA Sushi Bar Restaurant

(www.rasushi.com):

Opened this week — Offers sushi and Japanese fusion cuisine in a high-energy environment. Part of an Arizona chain with more than 20 locations across the United States.

Ri Ra Irish Pub & Restaurant

(www.rira.com):

Expected to open in mid-July — Part of a Charlotte chain that uses salvaged materials from Ireland to build new pubs in the United States. Will showcase live music several nights a week.

Piola (www.piola.it): Expected to open late 2009 — Italian eatery featuring thin-crust, wood-fired brick-oven pizza and simple, healthy Italian cuisine.

