

Gioco closing, ending an era for restaurant pioneers

By: JEAN IVERSEN May 11, 2018

Gioco, the last remaining joint venture of restaurateurs Jerry Kleiner and Howard Davis, is closing May 13 after nearly two decades in the South Loop.

"Our 20-year lease is running out," said Kleiner from his home in Los Angeles. "The landlord wants to get market rent, we don't blame anybody. It's been a good run."

Indeed, the neighborhood is poised to take off. Just yesterday, developer Related Midwest announced **plans to transform a vacant, relatively isolated 62-acre site** nearby into a neighborhood of homes, restaurants, cultural institutions and businesses all with views of the river.

The building's owner, Kevin Thornton, confirmed that lease negotiations had failed.

Employees have been running the rustic Italian restaurant at 1132 S. Wabash Ave. for the last few years. "I was trying to transition the ownership to them so they could take it over," said Davis. "It all depended on them being able to sign a new lease with the new landlord, and they were unable to do that."

Though Kleiner and Davis **dissolved their partnership KDK Restaurants** in 2011 and have sparred in court over the years, they're entertaining the notion of reopening Gioco together in another South Loop location.

"That area is still trying to find its own identity," said Kleiner. "If we found the right opportunity, we may revisit Gioco." Davis agreed. "Because we have a terrific staff, we could just go into another location with them and keep it going, but we couldn't find one."

It's not the first time Gioco has shuttered. The restaurant closed in March 2011 along with KDK sibling Red Light after both ventures fell behind in state sales tax payments. Gioco was able to settle its debt and reopened a month later. Gioco was always a "more stable, stronger business" in the KDK portfolio, said Davis, attributing a traditional Italian menu for its post-recession resiliency.

Kleiner and Davis launched Gioco (Italian for "game") long before a string of condominium and commercial development hit South Loop. "We put a stamp on that whole area," said Kleiner. "I'm proud of that."

Gioco's closing spells the end of an era for Kleiner and Davis, who, along with former business partner Dan Krasny, helped pioneer West Randolph's transformation to restaurant row with Vivo, opened in 1991, followed by Marché in 1993 and Red Light in 1996. All have since closed.

Opening clubs and restaurants in undeveloped areas is a signature move for Kleiner, who still runs **Barbakoa in Downers Grove** and Carnivale in Fulton Market, a 30,000-square-foot space that represents Kleiner's penchant for opulent interiors.

Gioco's space is a former speakeasy built in 1890.

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