

Dondis restoring former Magazine Street Market

By: Robin Shannon, Managing Editor December 17, 2013 0

After searching more than a decade for the right property to house an event hall and home base for his catering business, Joel Dondis found what he considers an overlooked gem in the Lower Garden District.

Over the next six months, he intends to transform a former open-air marketplace at 1911 Magazine St. into a large banquet hall to host wedding parties and corporate events.

Dondis said the size and location of the building are ideal for making his business plan work.

"I wanted a large free standing space with no columns or obstructions," said Dondis, who, along with founding Sucre, La Petite Grocery and Grand Isle Restaurant, operates a catering and special events business.

"I also needed something located within a good proximity to downtown in a good neighborhood," he said. "To find something like that and have it be zoned correctly was tough, but this property satisfied all of my needs."



Chef Joel Dondis plans to turn the former marketplace at 1911 Magazine Street into the home base for his catering business and a small events venue. (Photo by Robin Shannon)

The 16,000-square-foot building, situated on a triangular plot of land bound by Magazine, Camp and St. Mary streets, is on the site of what was once the Magazine Street Market, which dates back to the 1850s. In 1931, the structure was renovated under the federal Works Progress Administration to turn it into an indoor establishment, which stayed in operation until the late 1950s. Most recently, the building was home to a printing shop.

Dondis purchased the building in October for \$2 million from 1911 Magazine LLC, a business entity representing the estate of the late Jane G. Prechter. He is working with architect Robert Bodet and general contractor Lanaux Construction of New Orleans. The venue is slated to open by June.

In a nod to the building's history, Dondis said the event venue will be known as Il Mercato. The building's Spanish-style architectural features will be restored to the original look. He even plans to incorporate the former market's logo — a goose with its head turned backwards surrounded by assorted produce below a pair of kissing pigs — which appears on a shield in several spots on the building.

"We do not want to change the look of the building," Dondis said. "We just want to restore it to its former architectural glory."

Contractors will convert the building's small parking lot into an outdoor courtyard lined with stucco walls and wood and iron gates. The western side of the building features a row of seven archways that had been closed in as part of the WPA renovation.

Dondis plans to tear out the brick and install new French doors and windows to create a slate-floored arcade area, or covered porch, similar to the Cabildo and other French Quarter properties. The arcade would serve as a transition area to the main event hall.

Sarah Hall, president of Dondis' catering business, said the company is working with designer Julie Goldman to

transform the building's dank interior into a multi-room event venue tailored to host events of assorted sizes.

"The main hall will be flexible so that larger parties will have enough space, but smaller parties won't feel swallowed up," Hall said. "There will also be a smaller room for private events and space for an eventual kitchen facility."

Dondis formed the catering company in 1994 as an off-premise events business. The company will continue to cater other outside events, but Il Mercato will serve as a home base and could host as many as 80 events per year, Hall said.

Dondis said he will spend about \$750,000 on restoration and new construction, which includes new electrical, mechanical and HVAC systems. Once the facility is functional, Dondis said he would put about another \$750,000 into the building to install kitchen facilities.

Because the space is larger than 5,000 square feet, Dondis said he would need a conditional use permit from the City Council, which he is in the process of obtaining. He is also applying for a liquor license and intends to secure the full blessing of the Coliseum Square Neighborhood Association.

Dondis said he has already coordinated valet parking a block away in addition to site security. Any events that feature music will be inside the building and would not use amplification. Music would also never carry on past 9 p.m., he said. •

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