

Famed N.Y. Italian restaurant Carmine's coming to the Penn Quarter

By Jonathan O'Connell
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On the to-do list for Washington tourists, 7th Street NW has multiple attractions -- the Verizon Center, the bustling Gallery Place development and the art galleries and theaters that run down to Pennsylvania Avenue.

Now add meatballs to the list.

In late summer, Carmine's, the famed New York City Italian-style dining destination, plans to open a nearly 700-seat restaurant, likely the largest year-round seating capacity in the city, at 425 7th St.

The restaurant currently has two locations in New York City and one each in Atlantic City and the Bahamas. Jeffrey Bank, chief executive of Alicart Restaurant Group, which owns the chain, said he wanted more East Coast locations and Washington offered the best opportunity to serve a large volume of daytime workers, tourists and families.

The Carmine's in New York's theater district was recently ranked the sixth-highest grossing restaurant in the country by Restaurant & Institutions magazine, serving an estimated 800,000 meals last year. At 20,000 square feet, the District location, Bank said, will be substantially larger. Save for warm weather days when Sequoia in Georgetown can sit roughly 750 people inside and outside, Carmine's is likely to be the largest restaurant in the city.

It will have portions to match. Bank said it would offer "true, family-style restaurant now with reasonable prices."

"Carmine's is all about having your Sunday night dinner with the family, with large portions coming across the table," he said.

He settled on 7th Street, below the Jefferson at Penn Quarter condominiums, after an aggressive pitch by developer Douglas Jemal, whose Douglas Development owns the space.

Jemal says he dined at Carmine's in New York three times, meeting Bank, asking patrons for their thoughts and observing management and staff. "He has incredible energy," Jemal said of Bank. "This guy knows every ingredient of every pasta and every meatball."

Opening such an enormous restaurant in a slow economy carries risks, said Lynne Breaux, president of the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington, but she said that "the energy, the foot traffic of that location -- it portends major success." She said she expected other restaurants on the block to benefit. "I think it all adds to a very favorable mix for the whole street scene," she said.

Signing Carmine's represented a major save for Douglas Development. After five years seeking a grocery store for the site, Jemal inked Balducci's only to watch the grocer spend more than \$1 million building out the space before having the rug pulled from beneath it by one of its investors, Bear Stearns, the mortgage firm that nearly collapsed in 2008. "They were probably three weeks away from opening up," Jemal said.

Bank discussed the location with D.C. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty and later rebuffed an offer to open at National Harbor. He is now in negotiations with Jemal to open a Virgil's Real Barbecue, another Alicart chain, at 709 D St. NW.

Carmine's does not enjoy universal support in the Penn Quarter neighborhood, especially after the excitement over Balducci's. Sebastian Heath, who lives around the corner on E Street, said he is protesting the restaurant's liquor license because he thinks it will downgrade the neighborhood. "There are going to be increases in theft and petty crime and police activity," he said.

But Bank called it a non-issue. "We're not a nightclub, we don't have live music or anything like that," he said. Already he said he has booked a dozen holiday events -- there will be nine private dining rooms -- and plans to hire 175 people. A private entrance in the back will accommodate high-profile guests.