

Utah natives to bring new all-natural dining concept to Sugar House

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A pair of Utah natives - one an attorney, the other a former software company executive - have partnered to launch a new dining concept in the Salt Lake City's Sugar House neighborhood.

To be located at 880 E. 2100 S., Au Naturale has been designed to appeal to people on tight schedules who want to eat healthy, natural foods, said Doug Nelson, a partner in the business along with George Metos.

The eatery will be located in what was once a bank building with drive-through capabilities. The structure was most recently home to a Christian bookstore. The building measures 5,700 square feet. The main level contains roughly 3,700 square feet, with a large kitchen and seating for approximately 85. A patio will have seating for an additional 30 patrons while the downstairs area will house offices, dry storage and a freezer. The partners have a 20-year lease on the building, which Nelson said was eyed by a number of other potential restaurant tenants, all of which wished to buy the building.

"We got very lucky because the landlord didn't want to sell the property," he said. "We couldn't be happier about it."

Nelson, most recently an attorney and business development executive with Sun Microsystems in California, said the idea for Au Naturale was born of frustration.

"Living in California I'm mobile all the time and looking to eat on the go and not having the time or inclination to stop at a restaurant and go inside and sit down, your only choices in that situation are fast food or going into some place like a gas station," he said. "Whatever it is, it's not going to be very good for you. There's been tons of press about how bad fast food is and how it contributes to the American problem of obesity and health issues. It seemed to me that somebody needed to do somebody about it.

"It's a confluence of events that makes this possible now, One, people definitely want to eat healthier. Both my generation and younger generations in particular are starting to take note of what's in their food and where it comes from and what it might do to them and to their environment. The other thing is there have been what I guess I would call some revolutions in kitchen technology that allow us to make this great food available to people quickly. Everything on our menu we've designed with all-natural ingredients and is naturally prepared, but we can still get it to you, from the time you order it, whether it's at the drive-through or over the counter, in under three minutes."

Clark Norris, head chef at the Silver Creek Lodge, Mariposa and the Royal Street Cafe restaurants in Deer Valley, was brought on as a consultant to help develop the menu and design the kitchen at Au Naturale.

"The minute I talked to him about it, he latched onto it," Nelson said. "He thought it was overdue and said he would love to be a part of it. He will stay at Deer Valley but we plan to tap into his knowledge periodically under a supplemental consulting arrangement."

Au Naturale's menu includes pot pie, sushi and veggie rolls, burritos with nontraditional ingredients, flatbread pizzas, a number of sandwiches, soups, sides and salads, coffee drinks, teas and infusions, fountain drinks, milk, bottled beverages and several desserts. There is also a children's menu. Entree prices run from \$6.49 to \$11.99. Nelson said a license to serve beer and wine will probably be sought.

Plans call for the eatery to be open for lunch and dinner seven days a week, but "Sunday is a little questionable in Utah," Nelson said. "We'll see how it works."

Ross Siragusa has been hired as the restaurant's general manager. Nelson said he and Metos will be hands-off business owners, although they would like to help market the concept, "And at some point in time, as soon as it's as big a success as we think it will be, look to open others. But you've got to walk before you run."

Nelson and Metos have been friends since early childhood, Nelson said, despite carving out different career paths - Nelson an attorney specializing in corporate and intellectual property law and Metos the founder and former owner of Sculptured Software.

"We've always wanted to do something together business-wise but we really never knew what," Nelson said. "With Au Naturale, we obviously want to make a profit, but at the same time we do feel like we're doing something good and hopefully something that resonates with people and makes their lives a little better."

Metos lives in Utah; Nelson splits his time between Utah and California.

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