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IN THE NEWS

Inside Memorial City's Restaurant and Bar Expansion — Exclusive Details and Renderings of a New Destination Corner Hotspots and a Family Business Ethos Transform Houston's City Within the City

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A neighborhood without neighborhood restaurants is like Destiny's Child without Beyonce, an amusement park without roller coasters, an Avenger movie without Robert Downey Jr. Without them, a huge chunk of the soul is missing.

Memorial City, which continues to evolve far beyond the mall, is getting those type of restaurants in a new destination corridor.

A new Kirby's Ice House with an even bigger patio aims to open by college basketball's 2020 March Madness. Mia's Table, the fast causal spot from Johnny Carrabba named after his only daughter, and a new Torchy's Taco are both set to follow shortly in the spring.

PaperCity got an exclusive tour of this new restaurant and bar row rising on the corner of Gessner and I-10 and found it to be more tucked away than the address might suggest. The site is shielded by the office buildings dotting I-10 and Mia's, Kirby Ice House and Torchy's will all be close enough for people to walk between them.

The 5,830-square-foot Mia's and the 4,550-square-foot Torchy's Taco will even share a sprawling patio. And of course, the 7,000-square-foot Kirby's Ice House is all about the patio life.

With a fountain already burbling, this is almost a peaceful corner of Memorial City (it's across the freeway from the mall). At least until the excitement gets going.



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"We're really just trying to bring the 24-hour crowd to Memorial City," MetroNational president Jason Johnson says as we walk part of the site.

IN THE NEWS

MetroNational's new 18-acre development is going to be a place for twentysomethings, thirtysomethings and young families to relax and live life in one of the rapidly changing areas of Houston.

"It's a good place to hang out with friends," Kirby Ice House's Russ Morgan says,

Having 100 beers on tap tends to put people in a good mood, but the Kirby Ice House partners are just as excited about having a restaurant like Mia's close by.

This doesn't work without having multiple concepts that draw a crowd. For Johnny Carrabba, the old school Houston restaurant king who is determined to adapt to the times, this is in many ways a doubling down on his decision to stay in the restaurant business.

The 60-year-old Carrabba easily could have sold off the prime land his Kirby Drive restaurants occupy to the eager high-rise developers that came calling. The developers told Carrabba his land was woefully "underdeveloped" and urged him to cash in. Instead, the restaurant man is expanding after 32 years, more determined than ever to feed Houston families.

He sold his interest in Common Bond, the highly successful bakery, and is concentrating on Carrabba's spots like Mia's. Which is decidedly not just another burger joint.

"I just kind of felt like hamburgers are kind of being overdone," Carrabba says of Mia's focus. "I didn't want to get into that price war."

"It's really a country diner in a way."

When Carrabba enters the room where the major players in this project are gathered, there are shouts of "Johnny!" and handshakes that almost engulf arms all around. To Carrabba, hospitality is a passion that remains a worthy advocacy in its own right.

He jumped at this particular site in large part because of MetroNational's involvement.

"I'm confident in the location because MetroNational is going to do a great job," Carrabba tells PaperCity. "Because they're family owned. They're not going to do anything halfway."

Johnson, the youthful-looking steward of a Memorial City vision first dreamed up by his grandfather that's stretched to 265 acres, nods his head at this.

"Family businesses are pretty successful in Houston, Texas," Johnson says.

For Carrabba, family can take on all kinds of definitions. Just the Houston Carrabba's restaurants employ 220 people, 120 of who've been with company for more than 10 years. There are 10 employees who've worked for Johnny for 30 years or longer.

"I just think family owned businesses have a little more soul," Johnny Carrabba says. "And that's the way I want to keep it."

Jason Johnson comes from a different generation than Carrabba, but the two men share a sense of overriding responsibility.

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“There’s a lot of pride in a family business,” Johnson says. “Making sure you’re doing your best. You don’t want to let your family down.”

Johnny Carrabba’s commitment to family extends to making sure the restaurant named after his daughter, who is headed to SMU in the fall, succeeds. Carrabba named Mia’s after his daughter, who he speaks of with clear pride, in part to ratchet up the pressure on himself,

“It makes me work harder because I don’t want to ever go to my daughter and say, ‘Sorry Mia, your restaurant just didn’t work out,’ ” he laughs.

New Restaurant Rules
The restaurant world is dramatically changing. Fast casual spots that are several steps above fast food and delivery are the new drivers of the industry. Mia’s and Torchy’s Tacos both fit into this transformation.

Memorial City’s new restaurant hot corner — the original Kirby Ice House draws huge crowds and this offshoot figures to be just as popular — brings a new hangout center.

The neighborhood is changing, finding its fun heartbeat. In many ways, this new development is a launching off point.

“We don’t expect this to be the last Kirby,” Morgan says.

You need a place where everyone wants to chill to become a true neighborhood.

“Making sure you have the right food, the right operators, is absolutely critical,” Johnson tells PaperCity.

It’s a new Memorial City. Pull up a chair — or a bar stool. Or just stroll between hotspots.

