

# CASA RÚSTICA FILLS VOID AT CENTER

B4A

Restaurant company enters new territory with Mexican eatery

BY PAM KRAGEN

## CARMEL VALLEY

A new Mexican restaurant from the creator of Breakfast Republic and Fig Tree Cafe has opened in Carmel Valley.

Casa Rústica, which opened last week in the Village at Pacific Highlands Ranch shopping center, fills the spot vacated last winter when the fine-dining seafood spot Crudo by Pascal Lorange closed after less than 18 months in business.

Casa Rústica is billed as a "fun Mex" restaurant serving the traditional Baja-inspired dishes found at restaurants in Old Town San Diego and elsewhere. Specialties include fajitas, enchiladas and taco plates and specialties like nopales salad and molé chilaquiles. Once the restaurant has ramped up to full capacity, it will serve lunch, dinner and brunch. For now, it is serving late lunch and dinner only.

A quick-service sister eatery, California Taco Club, will open in the space next door later this year.

Casa Rústica is owned by San Diego-based Rise and Shine Restaurant Group, founded in 2008 by Johan Engman. That was the year the Swedish-born entrepreneur opened his first restaurant, Fig Tree Cafe, in Pacific Beach. Since then, he has opened two more Fig Tree Cafes, in Hillcrest and Liberty Station, and seven Breakfast Republic locations county-wide.

This year, Engman said his restaurant company is embarking on a two-pronged program to both expand its reach and diversify its offerings. At least six new restaurants will open this year, and most will be outside the company's traditional Americana breakfast/brunch/lunch genre.

Last week, the company opened two Mexican-



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**Casa Rústica, a new Mexican restaurant, opened last week in the Village at Pacific Highlands Ranch shopping center in Carmel Valley.**

themed restaurants, the moderately priced Casa Rústica and El Jardin, a regional Mexican finer-dining spot at Liberty Station overseen by "Top Chef" veteran Claudette Zepeda-Wilkins.

Still to come this year are the California Taco Club next to Casa Rústica, which will serve a revolving menu of gourmet tacos; NorPa Kitchen, serving Neopolitan-style pizzas and freshmade pastas; North Park Breakfast Co., a more elegant brunch spot; and Eggies, a quick-service breakfast sandwich take-out concept.

Engman said he chose the location for Casa Rústica because he had a good relationship with the shopping center's management and he's already operating a Breakfast Republic there. "That's an area that didn't have any Mexican food and I saw a void, as opposed to just saying I wanted to open there," Engman said.

Engman said he likes the idea of operating dual, but noncompeting, restaurants

in the same shopping centers because it's an economical way to combine vendor services and marketing dollars. Similarly, El Jardin operates across the street from Breakfast Republic at Liberty Station.

Casa Rústica is a more budget-friendly restaurant than its predecessor in the space, Crudo, a fine-dining, raw seafood-centric eatery run by nationally known chef Pascal Lorange.

Casa Rústica's opening last week coincided with the relaunch of an Italian restaurant just a few steps away in the same shopping center. Amici's Ristobar is a more homey, lower-priced and family-friendly version of its finer-dining predecessor, Dolce.

One of Casa Rústica's dining specials is a Tuesday Date Night deal with a special \$35-for-two menu. On Wine Wednesdays, the corkage fee is waived for bottles purchased and consumed onsite from the restaurant's menu or in-house wine shop. There's also a happy hour, with \$4 to \$6 drink and appetizer specials,

from 2 to 6 p.m. daily.

Diners can get a taste of Casa Rústica, along with two other newer restaurants in the shopping center, from 6:30 to 9 p.m. July 25 at the annual "A Moveable Feast" progressive dinner program at the Village at Pacific Highlands Ranch.

The dinner will begin at Wokou Ramen & Yakitori where an appetizer and cocktail course will be served from 6:30 to 7:15 p.m. Diners will then move to Amici's for entree and wine course from 7:30 to 8:15 p.m. Then the meal concludes at Casa Rústica, with dessert and coffee served from 8:30 to 9 p.m. Tickets are \$50 and can be ordered at [phrprogressivedinner2018.eventbrite.com](http://phrprogressivedinner2018.eventbrite.com).

Casa Rústica hours, until further notice, are 2 to 9 p.m. daily. Lunch service and brunch will be added in the coming weeks. The restaurant is at 13490 Pacific Highlands Ranch Parkway. Call (858) 356-9915 or visit [casarusticad.com](http://casarusticad.com).

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