



Mayor Kitty Piercy — flanked by Corn royalty Nils Stark (left), Phil Calandra and Alison Albrecht — cuts the ribbon on the new Maize Lounge

# EUGENE IS THREE TIMES 'CORN-ER'

Cornucopia expands into UO campus area with Maize Lounge BY VANESSA SALVIA

The three individuals behind the Cornucopia empire — Alison Albrecht, her father Phil Calandra and business partner Nils Stark — finish each other's sentences and often all talk at the same time. It's challenging, for a reporter, to write out the who-said-whats, but this jumble of ideas and personalities has not hampered their business success one iota.

"The first line of our charter is 'Have Fun,'" says Calandra. "The Church of Fun," echoes Albrecht. There's a sense that whenever these three get together it's a party, and they want to bring that excitement and fun to everything they do. Otherwise, what's the point?

Albrecht and Stark began in business 17 years ago with a small bottle market on 11th and Monroe. They transformed the 17th and Lincoln location of Cornucopia from a market into a bustling neighborhood dining spot 12 years ago. Two years ago they opened up their second "Corny" location at 5th and Pearl.

And three weeks ago they expanded again, into half of the 13th and Oak building occupied by The District, a hugely popular dance club that sometimes draws hundreds of people Thursday through Saturday. But the rest of the time the building sat empty — and because The District doesn't open until 10 pm, daytime foot traffic never saw any activity there. The District asked Cornucopia to partner up, and last September the trio began making it happen.

"It's a new Cornucopia concept," says Albrecht. "We want to be a little different from the other Corns," adds Stark. Back to Albrecht: "Not that there's a shortage of bars in town, but this area seemed like it could use something a little larger and that would work well with The District. We had had our sights on growth around the two-year mark because 5th and Pearl is doing really well, and what we saw here was an underutilized building that a lot of people are interested in."

With pool tables, high ceilings and Eugene's largest big-screen TV mounted behind the bar (along with other smaller screens throughout), Maize Lounge has a sports bar feel. But it's not just the atmosphere that's different — the food is different too. Chefs created a new tempeh-based Vurger recipe that will only be served at Maize. Potatoes prepared six ways (seven if you count the supersized baked spud) share the menu with Cornucopia's signature hand-formed, grass-fed beef burgers and hot dogs.

Most everything is reasonably priced at well under \$10 — with the most expensive items being ribeye steak or babyback ribs at \$13. A build-it-your-way condiment bar lets you pile your plate with any tasties you want. Breakfast is served all day. "We stop serving alcohol at 2 o'clock but we'll serve breakfast or whatever you want if you're here," says Calandra. And Albrecht notes that, "if people are here we're gonna be open."

Cornucopia hired 30 people to get this new location off the ground, and more than half of those jobs are full-time. The company prides itself on treating employees well and putting integrity before profits. They buy food from local producers whenever possible, and they refused to entertain offers from out-of-state banks who wanted to take over their credit card payment system. "We stuck with our local bank and everything's running through this town," Albrecht says of their money stream.

Maize Lounge is family friendly until 9 pm, and you just might find Stark or Albrecht dining with their own families. "We based this on where we would like to hang out," Stark says. "Why go anywhere else?"

At night, though, Maize likely will attract more students. Game nights will bring in people searching for a little entertainment: on Mondays play "Giant Jenga" with two-by-four lumber, sing karaoke on Tuesdays, and on Wednesdays play "Bar Olympics" based on "Minute To Win It" games. Kids eat free on Sundays.

Stark says they are all still "somewhat amazed" by how successful their enterprise has become. "We don't take our success for granted," Albrecht concurs. Calandra says they get comment cards "by the hundreds" and read every one. They personally respond whenever there is a phone number and constantly adjust their business practices based on customer feedback. "We change our menu about every six months based on what people like," Calandra says. "You go to some places and they haven't changed their menu in 10 years. You can't stay the same . . . the quality of foods change, prices change."

"We don't do well with stagnation," says Stark. "We get bored after a while and create new challenges for ourselves. Who knows what our next venture is gonna be, but we're really happy that The District asked us to be here." ■

*The Maize Lounge, 99 E. 13th Ave., is open every day, 11am-4am; 485-3663.*