

Rumours of the demise of Lan Kwai Fong have been greatly exaggerated – once again, writes **Ben Sin**

California dreaming

One of the first things Chris Lau Wing-nam did when he returned from his studies in Australia this year was head to Lan Kwai Fong for a fun night out. But as he made the familiar trek up D'Aguiar Street, the 22-year-old was taken aback to see a gaping hole where the California Tower and California Entertainment Building once stood. "The street was unusually quiet for a Thursday night, and the construction site was an eyesore," Lau says. "It's like the old Lan Kwai Fong I knew and loved has gone forever."

Similar declarations were heard in many circles last August when the 12-storey buildings were torn down after 27 years of operation to make room for a state-of-the-art 24-storey tower slated to open at the end of next year. After all, the California high-rises were key developments in the transformation of Lan Kwai Fong from grubby lane into Hong Kong's most famous nightlife spot.

"Lan Kwai Fong will never be the same," wrote former DJ Nat King, who runs the blog site HKHustle.com.

Businessman Allan Zeman, who owned both buildings, says the decision to demolish them "broke my heart".

"My office was there for nearly 30 years," says the 62-year-old dubbed the Father of Lan Kwai Fong.

Zeman spearheaded the area's nightlife movement with his opening of the California Restaurant in 1983, and consolidated the business after he bought California Entertainment Building in 1988 and California Tower four years later.

But he decided to redevelop the properties – reportedly for HK\$1 billion – to take consumer

entertainment to the next level. The towers were too old, with low ceilings and no open terraces, which became problematic for businesses after the government banned smoking in enclosed spaces.

So his new building is being designed for "very big" venues, each covering at least 4,000 sq ft and featuring its own terrace, which won't just be for smoking.

"The new trend is to eat outdoors and get fresh air," Zeman says. "The building will offer everything that people of Hong Kong would want."

The problem is that the building isn't scheduled to open for at least another 18 months, and with Wyndham Street and SoHo booming as alternative nightlife areas, some believe Lan Kwai Fong is in danger of losing its spot as the go-to entertainment hub.

Zeman dismisses such worries, citing the many other establishments that keep punters crowding into Lan Kwai Fong. Still, Zeman's company, Lan Kwai Fong Entertainments, hired the marketing agency Fluid to launch an aggressive campaign to promote the area, including putting up a website and magazine.

"The main point of what we're doing is to show that there are still things happening in Lan Kwai Fong outside of the construction," says Scott Davies, managing director of Fluid's I Love brand.

But some entertainment industry insiders reckon Lan Kwai Fong has been losing its lustre in recent years, and Zeman's redevelopment was more of a move to stay relevant.

"Lan Kwai Fong is getting very, very tired," says celebrity chef Harlan Goldstein.

Ironically, he opened his high-end restaurant, Gold, in Lan Kwai Fong Tower, last November. But since the tower's main entrance is on Wyndham Street, Goldstein considers the venue to be part of the Wyndham Street nightlife scene,

which he says is "on fire". He even closed his other restaurant in the heart of Lan Kwai Fong, Tuscany H, to focus strictly on Gold.

"Gold has been fully booked from November to today, and that's never happened before with Tuscany," he claims.

Several factors make Wyndham Street a superior spot, he says.

"One of the major reasons is that Lan Kwai Fong closes its streets [to traffic] on weekends, and that made it hard for customers to be dropped off," he says. "If you're a woman, dressed up and in high heels, you don't want to walk up a hill just to get somewhere. With Wyndham, you can be dropped off at the door."

Another reason, he says, is that Lan Kwai Fong has become more plebeian. It's a sentiment that others have expressed. When announcements were made last year that live music hot spot The Cavern was being replaced by the Hard Rock Cafe, many bemoaned the transformation of Lan Kwai Fong into a corporate-driven tourist attraction.

"Lan Kwai Fong has been watered down the past several years," says Sandeep Sekhri, managing director of Dining Concepts, which operates two restaurants in the Lan Kwai Fong area, among many others.

"I've been in Hong Kong for over 20 years so I've seen the scene move. There once was a bar named Oscars in Lan Kwai Fong that drew hundreds of people a night, then people moved on to Dolce Vita, and then later Alibi on Wyndham Street. That crowd is always moving around as their hot spots come and go."

His point is: people moved on from Lan Kwai Fong long ago. "Fortunately for us, we're destination restaurants where people are coming specifically to eat our food. So Lan Kwai Fong losing its appeal doesn't affect us," he says.

David Yeo, owner of Aqua



Some believe Lan Kwai Fong (above) has been losing custom to other entertainment areas in Central such as SoHo and Wyndham Street

Restaurant Group, says the customer profile of Lan Kwai Fong has changed over the years and Zeman's revamp is just a response to the changing demand.

"Lan Kwai Fong used to be more of a sophisticated cocktail crowd; now it's a younger beer drinking crowd," Yeo says, adding that venues in SoHo and Wyndham Street tend to appeal to more sophisticated women, and that, in turn, draws the men.

Zeman probably wouldn't put it those terms, but he says the new building will aim to bring in a more diverse clientele. "It's going to be a full lifestyle building," he says. "Not just bars or restaurants, but also spas and yoga lounges and other different ventures the area has never seen before. Everyone will find their niche in Lan Kwai Fong."

However, he concedes that the long wait to opening is hard to bear.

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Allan Zeman

"Would I want the new tower to be up today? Of course," he says. "But I think we have enough options nearby to keep the area vibrant." Among the new entrants is 19-

year-old Rachel Geicke, who recently opened Likuid in Lan Kwai Fong. An avid clubber, Geicke reckons she knows just how to spice up the nightlife. "We'll keep things fresh with unique events and promotions, costume parties, and our club features state-of-the-art lighting systems which simulate a laser show," she says.

Another club slated to open in April, Bisous, is the brainchild of Chinese-American sisters Janelle and Kat Zai. "It's a very exciting time for Lan Kwai Fong," says Janelle Zai, the younger sibling. "The economy is picking up and there's a new influx of expats and newcomers from the mainland. Yes, it's a more diverse group than before but it's a positive change for the area."

Zai, too, initially had concerns about Lan Kwai Fong losing its status as a nightlife hot spot. "The direction that the area was heading

was a bit unclear at first, especially when Ben & Jerry's [on D'Aguiar Street] closed and was replaced by a clothing store. But with Likuid opening and Hard Rock coming soon, it seems that everything will actually step up a level."

And despite the continuing construction, the vibrant street parties that the area is known for will continue to take place – including one for the upcoming Rugby Sevens, says Tommy Fong Leung-shuen, director of the Lan Kwai Fong Association.

"In my 30 years, I've heard people say 'this is the end of Lan Kwai Fong' several times," Zeman says. "It hasn't happened yet."

With the new clubs opening and old favourites such as Volar and Beijing Club still going strong, it seems that reports of Lan Kwai Fong's demise have been greatly exaggerated.



Allan Zeman (above left) has plans for a new building (artist's impression above) to replace the California Entertainment Building and California Tower; watching the world go by (left). Photos: Dickson Lee, Edward Wong



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