

Mandalay Moves Into Shaw

Popular Silver Spring Restaurant Builds Anew on Ninth Street

BY HUNTER GORINSON

Per a surprise announcement at the annual Shaw Mains Streets Development Forum this past September, a long-neglected corner parcel at 1501 Ninth St. NW will soon be home to a second location for the metro area's most prominent outlet for Burmese cuisine: the Mandalay Restaurant & Café, an eatery held in high esteem by DC area foodies and which was cited by *Washingtonian* magazine this past May as the fourth best reason to love living in the District of Columbia.

Currently based out of Silver Spring, the family behind the acclaimed eatery, the Myints, has teamed with a small DC developer, INLE Development, to begin work on their Shaw acquisition this coming winter – a project that could signal the opening salvo of redevelopment for one of Shaw's fastest growing corridors.

Building on Blight

Securing the Mandalay as the neighborhood's newest restaurant is being viewed as a small victory by many longtime observers of area development, especially given the notorious reputation that 1501 Ninth St.'s previous tenant, Wing's Auto, earned during its decades in business on the corner.

"This is a very important corner that we've been trying to fill for a very long time," said Alexander M. Padro, executive director of Shaw Main Streets, an area nonprofit dedicated to promoting development and urban renewal in the Ward 2 community.

"It spent several decades as a used car lot, which was regularly being inspected by [the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs] because they

were not in compliance with a number of requirements. It was one of the last used car lots in the neighborhood. We'd been working on eliminating them since 1999 ... [and] we were finally successful in getting it out of there, thanks to the development plans."

At present, those plans call for a new four-story, 6,000-square-foot building that will feature a basement kitchen, a first-floor dining area with outdoor seating, a second-story bar and, in a truly rare twist, two levels of residential living space for the Myint family on top. Hashim Hassan, president of INLE Development and a family friend of the Myints, feels fortunate to have secured a single tenant for the entire property at a time when development in the District was wracked with economic difficulties.

"I went under contract to buy this vacant lot back in May of 2008, just as the financial debacle was starting and banks were becoming very, very restrictive with their lending," said Hassan.

"In the past, you'd get excited by buying a new property and think, 'This is my property, this my closing date, I'm going to own this, and I'm going to create something unique from my vision.' But ... as I was driving up to the closing attorney's office, I had mixed feelings about whether I should be doing this in an environment where everyone is go-



INLE Development's proposed design for the new Mandalay Restaurant & Café in Shaw. Rendering: INLE Development

ing bankrupt. Looking back now... I'm very excited about the move that I made that day."

A Family Operation ... from Top to Bottom

The Mandalay is a mom-and-pop operation in the truest sense of the term. After eight years in business, family matriarch Daw Hla Hme still heads up the kitchen, using recipes that she brought with her when emigrating from Rangoon in the mid-1980s. Today, the three Myint sons still manage the front of the house in Silver Spring, and once their new Shaw location opens in late 2010, half of the family will be making their new home there as well.

However, according to Joe Myint, the son who will remain in charge of Mandalay Silver Spring, the family won't be the only restaurant regulars making the move to Shaw. The restaurant actually began as a College Park donut shop before deciding on a whim to open for Burmese lunch and dinner. His mother's cooking proved to be an overnight success – so much so that they soon found themselves search-

ing for a larger storefront, which they found several miles away in Silver Spring. As it turned out, the Mandalay's fans have been willing to follow them, no matter what the distance.

"We have loyal followers. The first time we moved, they kept coming for nearly two years. Some people still come in two or three times a week, even if they have to travel from College Park," said Myint. "At any time in the restaurant, about half of the customers are from the old restaurant and half from the new one. Every day, you can find someone from the old restaurant in here eating."

Myint said that he expects that phenomenon to continue once Mandalay Shaw opens its doors.

different ways. [The cooking is] going to be a little bit more time consuming, and of course, it's right by the convention center, so we want it to be a bit more upscale."

Shaw Synergy

The site of Mandalay's new home at Ninth and P streets NW is not only immediately surrounded by three of central Shaw's most heavily trafficked landmarks – the Queen of Sheba Ethiopian restaurant, the Shiloh Baptist Church and area's only Giant Foods store – but also directly adjoins the future site of several large-scale redevelopment initiatives that will take the community's ascendant star even

aims to not only bring a brand new, vastly expanded Giant directly across from the Mandalay site, but 630 residential units, a 200-room hotel and 87,000 square feet of retail as well. After years of false starts and delayed groundbreakings, the developers of City Market have now pledged to begin work on the 4-acre project this coming January, and the benefits of having both the Market and Mandalay within such close proximity to each other has not been lost on the Myint family, INLE Development or area residents.

"That development generally is going to be the heart of the whole area, especially anchored with the new Giant grocery store, the hotel, senior housing



The Myint Clan (Left to Right): Aung Myint, Hla Hine, Kyan "Joe" Myint, Saw Myint, Wint Myint, Ohn Mar, Mar Myint. Photo: Andrew Lightman



Shaw residents can look forward to sumptuous Burmese cuisine. Photo: Andrew Lightman

However, though their Silver Spring location will remain in business, the family intends to skew the menu and décor of their newest outlet toward more upscale tastes, given its relative proximity to downtown nightlife and attractions.

"[Our two restaurants] are too close together, so we're going to have it be a little more high-end type of thing. Lunch will stay the same as we have it here, but ... we don't want to compete with ourselves, so it won't be everyday food. What we do at [Mandalay Silver Spring] is everyday food in Burma," said Myint.

"[In Shaw], we're going to do food that's usually reserved for special occasions but prepared in

higher over the next five years.

"This development at 1501 Ninth St. not only fulfills the retail vision for the block, but also is the first major project on the 1500 block of Ninth Street that will also feature a number of renovated Shiloh Baptist Church's properties ... as well as the restoration of the Carter G. Woodson Home, a national historic site, by the National Park Service," said Pardo. "[The new Mandalay] will demonstrate that the 1500 block of Ninth Street has not been left behind by the Shaw renaissance."

Moreover, the linchpin of the community's economic fortunes is to be Roadside Development's \$250 million City Market at O development, which

and everything else. It's going to bring density and purpose to a two- or three-block area that is majorly underutilized," said Ralph Brabham, who has charted the course of area redevelopment initiatives since 2007 on his ReNew Shaw blog (renewshaw.com).

"It's just thrilling to know that a sit-down restaurant will be there as well," he said. "I can't think of anything better than walking home from work and passing by the Mandalay with people eating outside and seeing that corner come to life."

For more information about the Mandalay Café, call 301-585-0500 or visit www.mandalayrestaurantcafe.net. ★