

Catering to the demand

Some new eating locations should complement the growing number of retailers in City Center at Oyster Point.

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NEWPORT NEWS -- Despite the layer of dust, smell of paint and bustle of construction workers, people still are popping their heads into the emerging Firkin Pub in City Center at Oyster Point.

One even asked with a straight face whether he could get a pint - of beer, not paint.

The pub owners hope to open their first of three spots for the franchise during the last week of June. About the same time, a few other nearby new spots to get a bite or drink a cold one will be ready, too. The openings will fill a growing need for restaurants as City Center adds retail and living spaces.

"We think City Center is perfect for a place like this," said Suffolk resident Harry Daniel, who's opening Firkin with his son, Greg. "To me, Newport News is a booming area right now, particularly City Center."

Firkin will open next to the parking garage along Thimble Shoals Boulevard. Around the corner on the other side of the building, Mariner's Row is a beehive of activity. Shoppers scuttle between the newly opened stores as they dodge construction workers and movers putting the final touches on the still-vacant stores adorned with "opening soon" posters.

Mariner's Row - the main retail section of City Center - picked up steam two months ago, when a dozen stores such as Coldwater Creek and Jos. A. Bank opened. That same strip is about to add a couple of boutique food stores that will cater to people looking to eat and those looking to buy culinary supplies.

Medik's Market & Cafe, which closed its Hampton store, plans to open next to Ann Taylor Loft on June 21. With a loyal following, the locally owned organic-foods business also caters and has a popular menu that will appeal to high-end shoppers and City Center residents.

Similar to Medik's, nearby Ceriello Fine Foods will stock refrigerators and fill diners' stomachs when it opens in late July. The New York-based company is just starting to expand beyond its roots as a small Italian market and will sell fresh meats, homemade sauces and imported goods.

Firkin won't be the only sit-down restaurant opening. Hayashi Japanese Steakhouse and Sushi, which has a spot in Williamsburg on Richmond Road, will open a second location around the corner from the retail row.

As City Center has filled with office workers and residents who are starting to move in, the location has had limited options for nearby food. The Lunch Bell has served the office crowd, but the Red Star Tavern - which opened earlier this year - marked the first major

sit-down attraction with a bar.

The Firkin owners, the Daniels, liked the quaint pub feel of the growing Canadian chain more than those of other franchises. The eatery will have a pool table, dartboard and some outdoor seating. The Daniels plan to open two more franchises in Chesapeake and Virginia Beach.

The Daniels scored a coup by landing two graduates of the prestigious Culinary Institute of America cooking school to run the pub. One of the things that the Daniels liked about Firkin as a franchise is the flexibility it gave them to devise their menu.

"We will have regular pub fare, and up to 11 different specials each day our chefs will come up with," Harry Daniel said.

The Firkin training program also appealed to the Daniels. They have employees learning in Toronto, where the pub got started, and Firkin will send trainers down for the week before and after the opening. "They have one of the better training programs around," Harry Daniel said. "And so many places open up that don't have good service at the start."