

MERCBAR OWNER TO OPEN THREE NEW BILTMORE-AREA RESTAURANTS

By Brandon Brown – Senior Reporter, Phoenix Business Journal

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Artists' rendering of the upcoming Camello Mexican restaurant to open in early 2025 as part of the Esplanade's \$50 million renovation in the Biltmore along the Camelback Corridor in Phoenix. - Volenec Studio

The group of execs behind the now-shuttered MercBar are back to work in Phoenix's Biltmore neighborhood and are expected to open three new eatery concepts in early 2025.

Rick Phillips, MercBar founder and owner, and his business partner, **Peter Hearn** who has a long history in Phoenix's restaurant scene including a tenure at Fox Restaurant Concepts have formed 151 Hospitality and have three restaurant concepts under construction at the Esplanade office complex, which is undergoing a massive renovation — *"We landed on these three concepts and the whole key to this is that they're all contiguous – it's all really on the same block," Phillips told the Business Journal. "That felt like a very New York thing for Peter and I."*

Phillips and Hearn have known each other for more than three decades. Hearn worked for Phillips at the original MercBar in New York City.

The three new 151 Hospitality concepts that were announced earlier this month to be part of the Esplanade's new renovation and are expected to open before the end of the year. *"The goal is opening in mid-February," Hearn said. "That's our timeline but there is nothing that's forcing us to push it faster. ... It's important for Rick and I just to make sure that we open it correctly."*

ELEVATED NYC TAVERN

In the space formerly occupied by MercBar, which was open near the corner of 24th St. & Camelback Road for nearly 30 years, will be another bar called 151 Tavern. The name references the address of the original MercBar in New York City, and Phillips said he plans on running the new spot similar to MercBar. He described it as an "upscale New York tavern, with "fancy comfort food."

We're not taking a wrecking ball through MercBar," Phillips said. "Let's just say that the MercBar customers that lament that we closed will be happy [with 151 Tavern]."

The 151 Tavern will also have a private dining area that will be designed like a speakeasy bar and can be used to host small private events and dinners for up to 14 people.

CHEF-DRIVEN MEXICAN RESTAURANT

The primary restaurant in the trio of new concepts will be Camello, a 6,000-square-foot Mexican restaurant Phillips said will be fun and energetic, featuring a chef-driven menu.

When deciding on what type of concept to put into the space, Phillips said two restaurants at that size can make money – steakhouses and Mexican restaurants – and he said that he wasn't going to put another steakhouse on Camelback Road. *"The Mexican places that I'm referring to that are more in Scottsdale, not on this side of town – the big operators like Toca Madera and independent place like The Mission," Phillips said.*



Artists rendering of the upcoming Camello Mexican restaurant that will be opening during the first quarter of 2025 as part of the Esplanade's \$50 million renovation in the Biltmore along the Camelback Corridor in Phoenix

Phillips and Hearn recruited Fidencio Alatraste to be Camello's executive chef. Alatraste's career includes roles at The Mission, The Mexicano, and Toro Latin Restaurant at the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess. Not only will he be driving the menu at Camello, but Alatraste will oversee the culinary programs across all 151 Hospitality concepts.

151 Hospitality is not only hoping to win customers over with the food at Camello, it hopes that the look and experience of the restaurant will set the eatery apart from the competition.

"What we're doing with Camello, we don't think exists in this market," Phillips said. "Let's make the food sensational, but let's make the place really fun and witty. It will be surprising to people."



Branzino A La Plancha Avocado Tomatillo Salsa, Salsa Brazas, Serrano, Onion-Radish Salad / Pork Belly Sweet Potato Puree, Watercress, Mole Caramel, Serranos, Pickled Red Onion.

Camello will have a dance floor and live music. The interiors of Camello have been designed by Volenec Studio, a New York-based firm with projects all around the world, including in London, Singapore and Dubai.

LITTLE PICKLE JEWISH DELI

The third eatery the duo are planning at the Biltmore will be a New York-style deli called the Little Pickle Jewish Deli.

In 2023, Phillips ran a pop-up restaurant at the Esplanade with the same name and he said when he negotiated the lease for the new spaces, the building's owner, Monarch Alternative Capital and Tourmaline Capital Partners, said that the Little Pickle needed a permanent brick-and-mortar home.

"They literally told me I have to be doing the deli again and reopen it because it was just so popular – the [office] tenants literally are demanding it," Phillips said. "That's how the conversation really began."

The deli will serve staples found at similar places in New York like pastrami sandwiches, bagels, house-smoked salmon and breakfast egg and cheese sandwiches. Phillips said there will be a big emphasis on catering for the newest edition of the Little Pickle.