The steak a la Bruno is coming back. So is the broiled burger. And the ravioli. And don’t forget about the calamari steak.

Joe’s of Westlake reopens its doors next week, marking the first time in more than two years that the charcoal grills will be fired up at the beloved Daly City landmark — and bringing an end to years of speculation about its fate.

The rebirth comes courtesy of new proprietors: The Duggan family, which also owns Original Joe’s in North Beach. It’s renovated the entire restaurant in an effort to balance past success and future sustainability. The aim is to open on Monday.

“Our goal is that the customers will feel very comfortable coming in. The bar is where the bar was. The Cascade is where the Cascade was. The main dining room is the same,” said John Duggan, who is running the show with his sister, Elena.

“Just everything is brand new.”

The layout of the redone, 10,000-square-foot, 300-seat restaurant will be familiar to the established clientele. However, diners will now notice that they can see from room to room. The bar, to the left of the entrance, still has a fireplace and televisions, but also fewer tables and a new sight line to the main dining area. Similarly, the adjacent Cascade Room — once a less desirable secondary dining room with low, claustrophobia-inducing ceilings — has been opened up with big windows letting in natural light.
The main dining room still revolves around the counter and the charcoal grill, but the booths are outfitted in green leather rather than the bygone oatmeal hue. If you had any doubt about the location, a towering backlit sign above the kitchen reads “Westlake.” The swivel counter seats remain, but have been reupholstered. Sputnik light fixtures — a tip of the cap to the Henry Doelger era — are scattered throughout the space.

Given the two-year hiatus, much longer than expected, much of the old staff will not be back, though regulars might recognize a few of the old staff, like maitre d’ Gus Kiniris and cooks Siamara Leon and Maynor Tabora. Ravioli maker Julio De La Rosa, a 35-year Westlake vet, is coming back, as is Oscar Ticas, who served tables there for 30 years.

“It’s been a huge undertaking,” said Elena Duggan. “It was really run down. It hadn’t been touched since it opened, other than band-aids. For us to build something that’s going to live on for another 50 years, we had to start fresh.”

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle

Co-owners Elena Duggan and John Duggan go over the menu during a meeting in the main dining room of their family restaurant, Joe’s of Westlake in Daly City, California on Tuesday, February 14, 2016.
And the food: It will be a hybrid of what North Beach is, and what Westlake was. Fresh pasta and ravioli will be made on site, and many of the standard Westlake dishes will be there. Prices — always a sensitive subject when classic restaurants are updated — will be lower than Original Joe’s but higher than the old Westlake version. Call it the tax of evolution.

The wheels of change were set in motion in late 2013, when Joe’s of Westlake owner Melinda Scatena struck a deal to sell the restaurant to the Duggans. Decades earlier, her father, Bruno Scatena, had partnered with Tony Rodin — grandfather to John and Elena — to open Original Joe’s No. 2 on Chestnut and Fillmore. He eventually branched off on his own to open Joe’s of Westlake in 1956.

Joe’s of Westlake was a grandiose mid-century vision, built by Doelger, the San Francisco developer who built much of the Sunset District. The restaurant was the centerpiece of his once-futuristic Westlake neighborhood, an early model of suburbia. Occupying the corner of John Daly Boulevard and Lake Merced Boulevard, the building had all the hallmarks of a Joe’s restaurant, too: dining counter, cocktail lounge, big booths.

Yet by 2014, Melinda Scatena, citing health reasons, wanted to sell the place. She figured the Duggans, given the common history with her father, would be appropriate stewards.

Scatena recently saw the remodeled version, newly glossy with fresh upholstery, tile and paint. And, well, she approved.

“It’s gorgeous,” she said. “They did a good job.”

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Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle

John Duggan and Elena Duggan chat at the chef’s counter in their family restaurant, Joe’s of Westlake in Daly City, California on Tuesday, February 14, 2016.
She believes that the renovated restaurant — now christened Original Joe’s of Westlake — is going to do strong business. A harder sell may be the restaurant’s hordes of loyalists.

When longtime Daly City resident Patty Gibney Sturm first heard that Joe’s of Westlake was closing, she was crushed.

“I swear to God, it was a gut punch,” Sturm said. “Joe’s of Westlake, closing. We had no idea.”

Joe’s was the place that would cater dinners at her grammar school, Our Lady of Mercy. Years later, when she worked at J.C. Penney nearby, it was the place where she would walk for lunch on secretaries day. Most recently, she would go at least once a month, always ordering the same dish: filet of sole, with ravioli. Her husband, who would trek down and up the hill from their Broadmoor home with her, always opted for the steak a la Bruno.

Sturm is not alone in her sentimental attachment to Joe’s of Westlake. Over the past two years of darkness, thousands of locals have shared similar sentiments surrounding the big neon signs, the surly staff and the charred smells wafting from the grill, seemingly penetrating the foggy air for blocks around the joint. It was a multigenerational place, an increasing rarity in today’s restaurant landscape, equally friendly to kids, young adults and seniors — 8 to 80, with everything in between.

“There’s a lot of family connected to Joe’s. Rehearsal dinners, after funerals, prom. It’s a gathering place,” said Sturm. “It’s almost like family in there. The minute you walk in the door, no matter how many people are milling in the lobby, it feels like home.”

It holds a special place in the Daly City community, which is something that Sturm quickly found out when she started a public Facebook page about the restaurant’s changes in 2013. Given the uncertainty swirling around at the time, she titled it “Save Joe’s of Westlake,” half hoping to rally employees and loyalists to buy it.

Once news broke that the Duggans would reopen the restaurant, she changed the page’s name to “Memories of Joe’s of Westlake”; the site became a de facto message board for the wayward clientele to float rumors, ask questions, seek out recipes, express outrage and even share their amateur detective work surrounding the reopening.

The Westlake community has been vocal, almost proprietary, in all news surrounding the restaurant, be it wondering about steak prices or changing recipes. Their reaction should be interesting to witness.

“A lot of old timers, senior citizens with the oxygen tanks and walkers and the whole bit — I’m sure they’ll find it expensive for their tastes,” said Sturm. “I think it will be a much higher dining experience — no more frozen vegetables — but you have to pay for it.”
The Duggans are acutely aware of the delicate balance between nostalgia and modernization, admitting they read everything that people write about them. They tackled the modernization dilemma several years ago, when a fire forced Original Joe’s to move from its longtime gritty Tenderloin location on Taylor Street to a glossier, polished blockbuster on North Beach’s Washington Square Park. It’s paid off in a big way; these days, Original Joe’s does an average of 800 covers a day.

“Taylor Street was a dying brand,” said John Duggan. “If we didn’t reinvent ourselves and make it more approachable to a wider range of people, we’d be dead.”

At Westlake, creating that same balance will be the challenge.

“This is the anchor of Daly City and the Peninsula dining scene,” said Duggan. “For us, growing up in San Francisco, west of Twin Peaks all the way to Burlingame, what do you have? What restaurants define that area? Not too many. Maybe the Gold Mirror, Marcello’s.

“We want to be the home for the west side of San Francisco and the Peninsula. That’s what Westlake, in its heyday, was. We think bringing it back to this level, we’ll be that again.”

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