

GENTRY

PENINSULA

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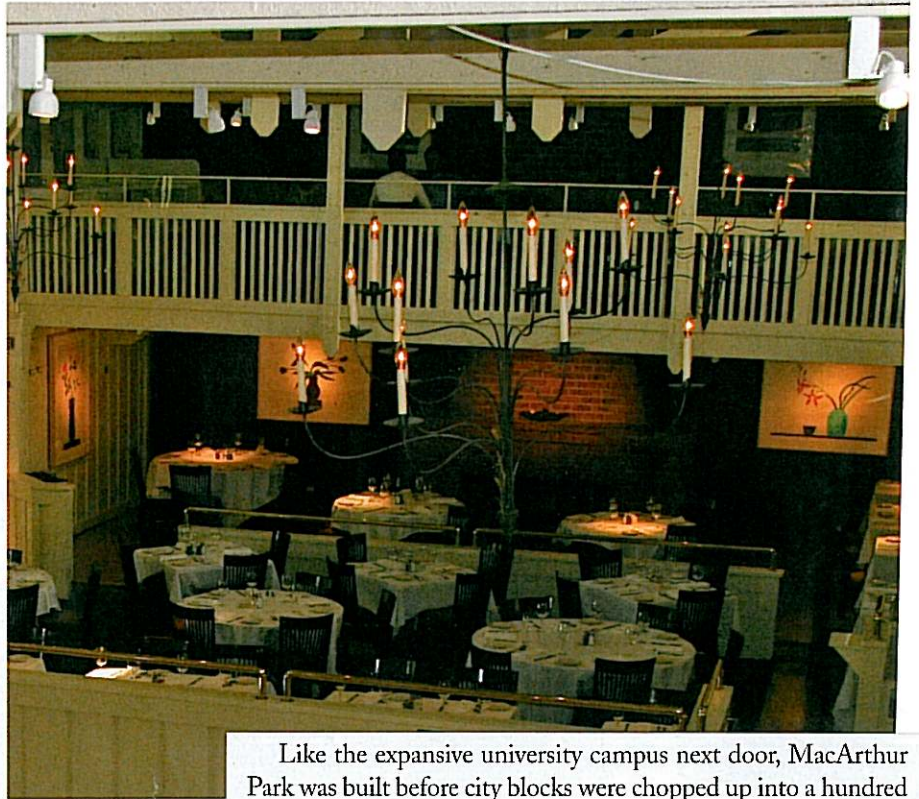
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a fresh start 90 YEARS LATER

Amalia McGibbon reports on
the MacArthur Park of today.

MacArthur Park Restaurant is a Palo Alto institution if there ever was one. Originally built in Fremont by renowned Bay Area architect Julia Morgan, the first woman to break into the male dominated field, the structure was used as a YWCA Hostess House for visiting families of World War I servicemen at Camp Fremont. After the war ended, it was sold to the city of Palo Alto for a symbolic dollar and moved to just beyond the Stanford gates in 1919.

From 1935 through 1976 the building was leased to the local Veteran organization as a meeting place for their members—who to this day gather frequently in one of the restaurant's many private rooms—and in 1981 it opened as MacArthur Park, with chef Faz Poursohi and restaurateur Chuck Frank at the helm. The restaurant industry promotes—if not demands—migration, and in time the two men moved on to other successful enterprises (Faz Restaurant and Catering for Poursohi, and Johnny Rockets for Frank). But you can't stay away from an opportunity like MacArthur Park for long, and in April 2008, the pair teamed up again and bought back the establishment.



Like the expansive university campus next door, MacArthur Park was built before city blocks were chopped up into a hundred parcels. The two-story, 11,000-square-foot building is like a Cadillac in a town of Mini-Coopers, and includes space-opening elements favored by Julia Morgan—best known for her work on Hearst Castle—such as exposed support beams and pagodas. The question is, what deserves to fill such a splendid interior? Faz's food, thankfully.

There are nightly specials, and on the evening I was there the restaurant was serving Smoked Chicken and Ricotta-filled Ravioli, and Mesquite Grilled Mahi Mahi topped with persimmon salsa and served with saffron basmati rice. I was tempted by the latter, a nod to Faz's native Iran, but eventually ordered his award-winning Oakwood-smoked BBQ Baby Back Ribs (which the chef insists on importing from Chicago). The ribs were sticky, sweet, fall-off-the-bone good—indeed worthy of an award, if only I had one to give. MacArthur Park Restaurant, 27 University Avenue, Palo Alto. 650.321.9990. ■