

# Not Goin' Under Ground

*The Underground, at the centre of Dong Khoi, has been one of the city's best known drinking establishments for over eight years. Its disappearance last month has got a lot of people talking. Time to dispel all the rumours. Words by **Will Peach**. Photo by **Rico Gonzales**.*

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THE UNDERGROUND, AS IT WAS KNOWN, closed its doors late last March. Since then many rumours have been flying around town. "Is it gone for good?" many have asked. "No, it's simply moved," others have answered. But what's the real story?

#### • A State of Transition

"We're waiting to see what happens," says owner Michael Keung, after their lease with Lucky Plaza's contractor's Fimexco recently ran out. "We wanted to re-sign, but the price they offered us was sky high."

But that doesn't spell death knell for the bar-cum-restaurant. Michael has been making inroads in order to keep the place alive.

"It's like our baby, we want to keep it going longer," he explains.

Aside from waiting to see whether the state-owned Fimexco Company will renegotiate on their price, the team has also been scouting out other options around the city, even considering spots on Thai Van Lung and Pasteur. According to head chef Thierry Faburel, finding somewhere as suitable as their former site has been particularly difficult.

"It's hard to find another place quite like

The Underground," adds the Frenchman. "It's easier for other bars to move, but not us, mainly because of our concept."

The idea for this restobar was born initially from The Underground's location. Situated below Lucky Plaza, it was built in place of a car park.

But the economy too, is also playing a role in their troubles.

"With the current economic climate, landlords don't know what they want to do," says Michael.

#### • The Glorious Past

The site at Lucky Plaza was one of the most familiar in town. The glowing neon signage borrowed from London's most famous transit system stood out as a beacon to all that passed by. Now with the doors all bordered up, its patrons are left only with the faint memories of the past.

"Firstly, I think it was popular because of its location," explains Michael. "Secondly it was popular because of the crew. From the kitchen staff to the bar staff, the crew was very cohesive and team-minded."

But former manager Emile has left the project, widening the responsibilities for the

existing team.

"Emile decided to leave for his own personal reasons," says Thierry. "It's going to be hard without him, but it's also going to be a good challenge for me and I realise there's a lot to think about. Emile has taught me a lot. He is a good friend and he will always be part of The Underground's success."

#### • The Famous Name

Despite these setbacks, the team still maintains that the new project will succeed. Their past experiences have certainly made them stronger.

"We ran into legal difficulties a few years ago in response to our name," says Michael, who researched it back in 1999 and found that their launch would mark the 127th Underground restaurant in the world.

"In fact we tacked 'the' onto the name originally to avoid copyright issues," he explains.

Adds Thierry: "The plan is to keep the name, even if we move to another building and are on say the first or second floor."

In fact the current period of upheaval seems have created newer ideas rather than succeeding in beating the team down. The time has allowed them to refine aspects of the older incarnation, getting it ready for a fresh reopening.

"Some things will be done differently," says the head chef. "The menu will have the same funky, fresh, international concept – but I would like to introduce more Asian dishes, tapas and classical cuisine. Also, some people have said that maybe the portions are too large so we will be reviewing that. But, of course, the salads and the most popular dishes will stay the way they are."

#### • A New Era

But how long will it be until we see the new version? According to the pair it should be sometime around two months. Where, though, remains unclear.

The likelihood, they feel, is that the global recession will lead to a return to their former site of glory. Michael believes that "the state of the global economy is the reason we have a chance to go back in." He expects land prices to drop.

One thing is for sure, however. Come opening time a much-relieved Thierry promises to show his "naked ass at the bar in celebration." But don't let that put you off the food. **W**