

Zebu Forno Signs Lease for Former Cornerstone Cafe Site in Freehold

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Moving to bring its European-style bakery-cafe concept to a prime location in the heart of downtown Freehold's 'restaurant row,' Zebu Forno has signed a lease for the site of the former Cornerstone Cafe at the intersection of West Main Street and South Street (Route 79).

The Red Bank-based franchise chain expects to open its fourth New Jersey cafe in the Monmouth County seat early January following a comprehensive remodeling of the 2,300-square-foot store's interior and exterior that will include the addition of sidewalk seating to the 60 to 70 seats inside. Plans call for the new Zebu Forno to be developed as a company-owned location before operations are turned over to a franchisee.

"We had been looking in downtown Freehold for some time, but had been unable to find a space that met our requirements for foot traffic and visibility," explained Andrew Gennusa, president of Zebu Forno Franchise LLC. "When we learned that this site became available, we decided to forego our normal process under which we first line up a franchisee and then work with them to find a suitable location. As a true 'main and main' location in a thriving county seat that offers strong traffic during our breakfast, lunch and evening day-parts, this was just too good of an opportunity to pass up. Accordingly, we will build out the space and operate the cafe until we have selected and trained a franchise operator."

Zebu Forno's extensive menu includes fresh-baked breads, muffins, bagels, and pastries, breakfast sandwiches, omelets, homemade soups, Panini sandwiches, wraps and other hot and cold sandwiches served on home-baked breads, handmade thin-crust pizzas, fresh salads, quiche, gelato, fresh fruit cups, espresso drinks, a variety of coffees and teas, and a soft drink selection that includes Boylan's soda on tap. All menu items are available for takeout, augmented by a selection of Zebu travel mugs, shirts, caps and other branded items merchandised throughout the stores.

The chain's locations are designed to convey a sense of a 'town gathering place' --a relaxed setting where people of all ages can meet and sit for hours without feeling pressured. Features include free Wi-Fi, flat screen TVs, satellite music, brick walls, wood plank flooring, original murals celebrating great artists of the past, and seating at conventional tables, stool-height tables and groupings of Indonesian roll back easy chairs. The cafe's oven and baking preparation area are strategically situated at the front of the store to allow patrons and passersby to view the baking process first-hand.

"All those features will be found in the Freehold cafe, as we 'Zebu-ize' the old Cornerstone space during the course of our remodeling project," said Gennusa.

Bill Parlamis, president of VJM Realty Holdings LLC, owners of the Freehold building that will house Zebu, noted that the chain was among the 25 to 30 prospective tenants to look at the space after he placed a "For Rent" sign in the window. "After I met Andrew Gennusa and visited their stores in Red Bank and Holmdel, I put Zebu at the top of my list as the best fit for this town," he said. "Zebu will be a great addition to the downtown's diverse restaurant scene for all three meal times, while also providing an alcohol-free alternative during the evening hours. I'm very excited to have them as a tenant."

Zebu's flagship company-owned location opened in 2001 on Broad Street in downtown Red Bank. The brand launched its franchise program in 2007 with the opening of a 3,000-square-foot location in The Commons at Holmdel lifestyle center on Highway 35 in northern Monmouth County. This was followed earlier this year with the opening of another franchised location on River Street in Hoboken, as the company moved forward on its plan to develop into a regional chain with 10 franchised locations in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania over a three to five-year period.

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