

The Press Democrat

Windsor expects economic windfall from Russian River Brewing Co. opening

BILL SWINDELL

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | October 28, 2018

Congratulations, Windsor. Your town just landed one of the biggest economic development prizes in recent local memory with the \$50 million Russian River Brewing Co. brewery and restaurant.

The central question now for elected officials and business leaders in the town of about 28,000 is how to leverage this new destination and widespread buzz generated by Russian River to lift other local businesses.

The longstanding Russian River brewpub in downtown Santa Rosa hosts an estimated 350,000 customers annually. Furthermore, its annual Pliny the Younger specialty craft beer release in February contributed \$3.3 million alone in economic benefits to Sonoma County.

The 10-acre Windsor site off Highway 101 at the corner of Mitchell and Conde lanes — which opened in early October, and will feature guided and self-guided brewery tours starting next month — is expected to bring in at least that amount of foot and car traffic, and likely much more.

"It's certainly a potential major landmark not only for Windsor, but for Sonoma County," said Ben Stone, executive director for the Sonoma County Economic Development Board. He contends the efforts of Russian River owners Natalie and Vinnie Cilurzo in the county are comparable to what Robert and Margrit Mondavi did as pioneers of wine tourism in the Napa Valley.

"It's really put us on the map," Stone said of the craft brewer who has gained an international following.

Residual spillover

In less than a month, the new brewery already has spurred another beverage sector deal. And hopes are quite high for more business growth and public transit to Windsor, plus ways to get around town by bike and shuttle.

The most significant related announcement has been Napa vintner Jean-Charles Boisset deciding to make his first foray into beer by investing in Old Redwood Brewing Co., owned by Dominic Foppoli and Clay Fritz.

Boisset intends to build a high-end French bistro at the Windsor brewery site as part of the effort, said Foppoli, a Windsor council member running for reelection.

"He made me a very, very generous offer. I wasn't looking to sell," Foppoli said. "He said honestly it was because Russian River is coming. This is the residual spillover effect."

Boisset declined to comment yet on the project, a spokeswoman said.

Hotels already have seen an uptick. The Desai family that operates both the Holiday Inn and Holiday Inn Express in Windsor has booked overnight guests specifically to go to the Russian River brewery even though it just opened Oct. 11 with little advance notice of the specific opening day.

"Down the road, we see big events there (Russian River) going on that will definitely give us a boost," said Kevin Desai, adding that he is looking forward to the brewery's Pliny the Younger release in February. "On the weekends, we see more guests coming to stay with us because of that."

The initial customer traffic at Russian River in Windsor has been healthy, and appears to have exceeded expectations — despite no brewery tours yet and an outdoor patio without furniture given that fall has arrived. In addition, brewmaster Vinnie Cilurzo has not started brewing new beers for his tap lineup as he ramps up the brewing system he imported from Germany to steadily expand production.