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Hollywood icon Yamashiro restaurant heading to the waterfront



An artist rendering of West Harbor, a planned restaurant, shopping and entertainment complex in the Port of Los Angeles that will replace the defunct Ports O' Call Village. (Courtesy Studio 111)

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One classic Los Angeles restaurant will replace another on the San Pedro waterfront at a new public attraction being built at the Port of Los Angeles.

The owners of Yamashiro, a Japanese-themed Hollywood destination for decades, have agreed to open a second branch on a seaside site now occupied by rustic San Pedro Fish Market & Restaurant, one of the top-grossing restaurants in the country.

Operators of both restaurants wanted to be in West Harbor, a \$150-million dining and entertainment complex that will replace Ports O' Call, a kitschy imitation of a New England fishing village built in the 1960s. Ports O' Call fell out of favor years ago and has been razed to make way for [new development](#) that will include restaurants, bars, shops and an amphitheater for concerts.

San Pedro Fish Market needed more space than it could get in West Harbor, however, so its owners plan to build [a new over-the-top restaurant](#) a mile and a half up the main channel from its current location that they hope will someday feed 3.5 million diners a year. San Pedro Fish Market was serving 2 million guests and grossing about \$30 million a year before the pandemic, according to its chief executive.

Its rambling structure is slated to be knocked down next year to make way for West Harbor's metal warehouse-style buildings with exposed structural elements, meant to evoke the industrial nature of the port.

The Fish Market will set up temporary quarters near its planned new home if it needs them, Chief Executive Mike Ungaro said.

The Fish Market's former footprint at West Harbor will be partially occupied by Yamashiro and [Sugar Factory](#), a trendy brasserie known for bombastic desserts and other Instagram-friendly fare.

Both Yamashiro and Sugar Factory are co-owned by Elie Samaha, a high-profile film producer and real estate developer with multiple business interests, including restaurants, nightclubs and hotels. San Pedro is the next place he wants to be, he said.

"We like to identify areas before they explode," he said.

In addition to opening restaurants at West Harbor, Samaha plans to break ground next year on a new Marriott hotel on 6th Street in San Pedro that will be a short walk from West Harbor, he said.

San Pedro is due for the sort of economic resurgence that has lifted other Los Angeles neighborhoods such as Hollywood and Venice in recent decades, he said. It could draw visitors from adjacent Long Beach and the Palos Verdes Peninsula as well as more faraway points as the harbor becomes an entertainment destination again and other businesses move to the area, drawn by opportunities such as ocean research center [AltaSea at the Port of Los Angeles](#).

To smooth the path of new development catering to visitors, the Port of Los Angeles is investing about \$1 billion in infrastructure improvements over 10 years, Executive Director Gene Seroka said last year.

The landmark [Yamashiro building](#) in Hollywood, supposedly a replica of a palace near Kyoto, Japan, was completed in 1914 by two brothers who wanted a mansion to house their Asian art collection. The Glover family purchased the property in 1948 and began operating a restaurant in the 1960s. For many years, though, its hilltop view was better regarded than its food was.

Samaha became a co-owner of the restaurant six years ago and has endeavored to improve its culinary reputation.

Annual revenues have risen from \$3 million to more than \$15 million, and it draws figures from the entertainment world with its no-paparazzi policy, he said. Online tabloid TMZ called Yamashiro a "celeb hot spot" in [a recent story](#) about a Singapore real estate developer and TV star dishing its sushi.

Celebrities will come to the San Pedro Yamashiro too, he predicted, perhaps after attending a concert at West Harbor's 6,200-seat amphitheater operated by the [Nederlander Organization](#).

"Everyone wants to rub shoulders with celebrities, don't ask me why," said Samaha, who was once married to actress and singer [Tia Carrere](#).

The interior of the new Yamashiro will be a mix of modern and traditional Japanese themes with a design that takes advantage of its high warehouse-type ceilings, he said. "I want to wow people when they walk in."

Samaha plans to further expand the Yamashiro brand with restaurants in other locations, including Miami and Saudi Arabia, he said.

West Harbor has signed seven tenants in the last few weeks, said Milan Ratkovich of Los Angeles developer Ratkovich Co., which is developing the property with Jerico Development Inc. of San Pedro. He expects to have enough space leased to secure construction financing by the end of the year and start work in early 2022. West Harbor should open by the end of 2023.

Other tenants include a Mexican cantina and [Jay Bird's Chicken](#), a quick-service purveyor of spicy chicken. There will be an immersive, interactive art gallery operated by [Hopscotch](#) of San Antonio. [Mike Hess Brewing](#), a San Diego beer maker, has agreed to operate a brewery and beer garden on the water's edge at West Harbor.

Los Angeles Flower District comfort food restaurant [Poppy + Rose](#) will open a branch at West Harbor that will include a 2,600-square-foot private garden where its owners will grow vegetables to serve to their customers.

The 42-acre West Harbor complex was laid out by James Corner Field Operations, the architects and urban designers behind the [High Line](#) park in Manhattan and Tongva Park in Santa Monica. It will include a town square, children's play area, dog park and perhaps a mechanical wave pool for surfing, Ratkovich said. Port officials have installed courtesy boat slips to accommodate water taxis and visiting boat owners on day trips.

Samaha pictures it becoming a popular leisure destination with the bonus of an unusually favorable liquor law allowance as a contained site on state-controlled land.

"You'll be able to buy one of those daiquiri drinks and walk around the property," he said. "There's nothing like it in L.A. or San Diego."