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BUSINESS

"He really is key in transforming the restaurant culture in San Francisco."

TODD CHAPMAN, a principal in JMA Ventures



Pat Kuleto surveys the view from his Napa Valley home, where he has established a boutique winery. The veteran restaurant designer's two latest creations are on the San Francisco waterfront.

DESIGN SECRETS OF A MASTER

Pat Kuleto has found a recipe that works as he readies latest S.F. restaurants for opening

By George Raine
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

As construction was wrapping up on Pat Kuleto's two new restaurants opening on San Francisco's Embarcadero later this month, it was decided that an olive tree would grace the piazza that joins them.

The idea seemed simple enough. An order went out for a small tree, a few inches in diameter.

When Kuleto heard about the size of the tree, he balked.

"I said we can't do that. I want a big, gnarly, massive tree," said Kuleto, a bear of a man who, were he an olive tree, would surely be a Sevillano, the noble olive of martinis.

Kuleto headed north, to an olive ranch near Corning (Tehama County), where he found a nearly 200-year-old Sevillano to his liking — one with an ample trunk and presence. A ranch hand named Manny delivered the tree and planted it between the restaurants, Waterbar and Epic Roasthouse, at Rincon Park.

Kuleto named the tree Manny and patted himself on the back.

"I wasn't going to have a puny tree," said Kuleto.

This is a man who hasn't done things in small ways for the 40 years he has been building and designing restaurants. With his partners in the side-by-side restaurants, JMA Ventures of San Francisco and chefs and co-owners Mark Franz (Waterbar) and Jan Birnbaum (Epic), Kuleto revels in the waterfront real estate.

"They should call this Treasure Island," he said the other day, awaiting delivery of the eels, crabs, oysters, anchovies, Caribaldi and some of the other 30 species of fish bound for the two 1,500-gallon aquariums that rise like pillars at Waterbar.

Waterbar is the seafood house and Epic Roasthouse — the name is intended to send a message this is no pedestrian steakhouse — is a house of

► KULETO: Page E4



Kuleto examines a bottle of Zinfandel in the wine cellar at his Kuleto Estate Winery.

Noted designer shares the credit with his partners

► **KULETO**
From Page E1

chops, steaks, poultry and seafood. Both will seat about 200 and another 100 can drink and dine on the piazza.

The yin and yang restaurants open Jan. 29 at the park they share with "Cupid's Span," the Claes Oldenburg bow-and-arrow, on the Embarcadero between Harrison and Folsom streets. Construction of the two restaurants is costing "north of \$8 million," said Todd Chapman, a principal in JMA Ventures, and \$11 million is being spent on interiors, said Kuleto.

In the restaurant industry, a world of slim profit margins, construction inflation ranging from 15 to 20 percent in the past few years and a high failure rate, Kuleto is the designer of hugely popular establishments in San Francisco where he teams with celebrity chef co-owners: Boulevard, a place with a Belle Epoque aesthetic, with Nancy Oakes; Farallon, the undersea fantasy, with Franz; and Jardiniere, a sophisticated establishment, with Traci Des Jardins.

On Tomales Bay, at Marshall, he and Franz opened Nick's Cove, a restored 100-year-old restaurant and cottages, in July. He and Todd Humphries have Martini House, a restaurant with a 700-bottle wine list, in St. Helena.

Kuleto built countless steakhouses and restaurants before he reached his current place in the restaurant industry hierarchy, but at every turn in his career, including the Rincon Park project, Kuleto and his partners have followed a simple rule: They looked for what is missing in the neighborhood and beyond.

"There is room in San Francisco for a great meat house, and I wanted to do a great, legitimate seafood restaurant on the water," said Kuleto.

The opportunity presented itself in a circuitous way, after the

Port of San Francisco carved out the 2½-acre park after the 1989 earthquake and subsequent freeway demolition. With one 12,000 square-foot restaurant in mind — one that would generate revenue for the city — the port began negotiations in 1999 with famed cook Reed Hearon. Hearon and his architect, Cass Calder Smith of San Francisco, dumped the single restaurant theory as unwieldy and suggested two smaller ones — but then had to drop out of the deal.

The port transferred the negotiating agreement to JMA, and Kuleto came aboard. The first thing Kuleto wanted was control over both restaurants. Since then, one review board after another, including the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, has had its way with Kuleto's design. It's an experience that Kuleto says pales compared with the nine years of hoops he passed through to open Nick's Cove.

For the design of the Rincon restaurants, Kuleto imagined San Franciscans in the wake of the 1906 earthquake and fire, vowing never again to be without sufficient water to fight fires. In his fantasy, the city in about 1910 built a steam-powered pumping station (now the site of Epic Roasthouse) and a distribution center (Waterbar) to deliver water from the bay throughout the city. In the fantasy, the buildings are lovingly restored for fine dining, but tell a story woven with rich San Francisco history.

None of that is true, of course, but fantasies are useful guiding lights for Kuleto. The restaurants were built from scratch on land that only 25 years ago was at the edge of a forlorn piece of San Francisco that extended to what is now AT&T Park.

The review boards threw some water on Kuleto's fantasy in the name of making the exterior of the buildings better fit with the park, but Kuleto has brought his dream to life with the interiors — the limestone at Waterbar and the