

WHAT'S UP: Gondolas to Galway

NEW PUB ON THE PIKE:

Success may sometimes be serendipitous and a matter of luck, but more often it's earned through ambition, vision, entrepreneurial savvy and energy to burn. We (on the other hand) feel like taking a long, long nap just thinking about **Eric Johnson** who, at 30, has already done more than we figure on doing by the time we're 125 years old.

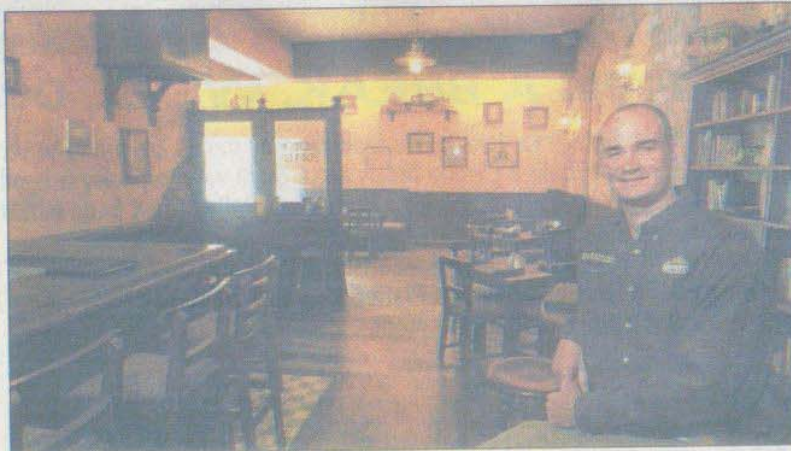
The last time we had any sort of advantage over Johnson, would've been back in the late '80s, when he was only 13.

But then Johnson turned 14, started rowing for **Naples'** nationally acclaimed **Gondola Getaway**, and set off on a life of parlaying one success after another, with no end in sight.

Here's a breezy rundown of Johnson's progress so far:

While gondola-ing for a living, he attended — following his early education at **Naples Elementary School — Rogers, Wilson and Cal State Long Beach**, triple-majoring in sports management, marketing and mass communication.

His oarsmanship took him to **Venice, Italy**, on several occasions between 1994 and 2001 to compete in the annual **Vogalonga** gondola regatta. In 1997, he left Naples and started his own



Eric Johnson of Long Beach is a 30-year-old entrepreneur who has started a gondola company, bought part of Limericks tavern and restaurant in Naples, and is now the co-owner of the **Auld Dubliner** located at the Pike.

Leo Hetzel / Press-Telegram

company called, unfrillingly, the **Gondola Company on Long Island, N.Y.**, and, after two years, moved the company to **San Diego**, where he took locals and tourists out of **Loews Coronado Bay Resort** through the beautiful **Coronado Cays**.

The tall, almost frighteningly friendly and clearly energetic Johnson made a major career change a couple of years ago when he bought into **Naples' Limericks** tavern and restaurant.

"I wanted to get back to Long Beach," he recalls. "And I wanted to get into the restaurant business." Already in the restaurant biz was

Dave Copley, a fellow gondolier, who was half owner of Limericks (Copley was born in Limerick, Ireland).

"Every time I saw Dave, I'd bug him about letting me buy a piece of the place," says Johnson. Eventually, Copley relented and Johnson was in the restaurant business, back in Long Beach and, soon, married to his girlfriend, **Staci**, who he'd known since the Naples school days.

In November, Johnson and Copley sold their shares of Limericks and set about opening a new place, which brings us to right now: the eve of the grand opening

of **The Auld Dubliner**, an authentic and carefully conceived Irish-style pub at the new **Pike at Rainbow Harbor**.

"I wanted to try more of a roll of the dice," says Johnson. And, while there are fewer rolls of the dice as risky as the restaurant business, you'd want crazy long odds to bet against Johnson.

While the grand opening at the pub (you'll find it at **71 S. Pine Ave.**) is set for Saturday evening at 7:30, the place opened "quietly" amid the roar of **Grand Prix** weekend, when it was packed with race fans.

Since then, the pub has been polished off with the finishing touches: It's completely

Irish, with the bar, tables and chairs all crafted to custom specs in Ireland, and the decorative knickknacks — accordions, farm equipment, books — were all purchased in the auld country. It's a warm ambience, not one goofily decorated with merry pipe-smoking leprechauns or dancing shamrocks.

You wonder about the food. How many ways can you prepare cabbage and boiled potatoes? In fact, the chef is one of the most respected in Southern California: **Mike Hewitt**, formerly of **Christy's**.

"We went to high school together,"

says Johnson. "He shared our vision of what we wanted the restaurant to be, so we put him on the payroll almost immediately when we decided to build the place, and he started learning everything about Irish cuisine and how it's changed over the last 20 years." The result is an impressive and eclectic mix of trad (yes, they serve corned beef and cabbage) and haute (try the wilted spinach salad: apples and bacon sauteed with honey mustard dressing over a bed of fresh spinach and topped with goat cheese). And, of course, there's the bar, stocked with Guinness stout, Harp and lots more on tap, eight kinds of Irish whiskey and what we'd call a perfectly serviceable wine selection. Johnson is understandably excited about the opening, and understandably confident about this roll of the dice.

"There's a lot of great places to eat down here. We're wedged between **P.F. Chang's** and the **California Pizza Kitchen**, and more are coming, like **Gladstone's**, but we're the best."

What's next for the 30-year-old? Obviously, it depends to some extent on how the **Auld Dubliner** does.

"I'd like to maybe open some more locations, but who knows?"

One thing you can believe is Johnson's general prediction regarding his future:

"I'm not through yet."