

Copia - the continuing saga

14 Nov 2008 by Linda Murphy

Copia, the downtown Napa food and wine showcase built with \$20 million in seed money from Robert Mondavi, yet now mired in deep debt, will build a second campus in San Francisco in an attempt to draw more tourists to its programmes.

Garry McGuire, president/chief executive officer of non-profit Copia, said a new facility will be constructed in San Francisco, possibly in time for a spring 2009 opening; if it's successful, it could lead to a series of for-profit outlets across the country, offering cooking classes, wine tasting and instruction, and retail shopping.

The San Francisco location has not been identified, though it will most surely be in an area with heavy tourist traffic and in proximity to hotels and restaurants. Possible locations include the Ferry Building on the Embarcadero; the Presidio, a former army installation at the southern base of the Golden Gate Bridge; and the burgeoning SOMA (South of Market) area near AT&T Park, the stadium used by the San Francisco Giants baseball team.

McGuire told writer Paul Franson of *Wines & Vines* that Copia will sell its building on the banks of the Napa River (adjacent to the new Oxbow Market and Westin Verasa hotel) by the end of the year, and either lease back part of the building, or move to a smaller space. Copia's Julia's Kitchen restaurant and Cornucopia gift store will stay in Napa, McGuire told Franson, though not necessarily in the existing building.

Copia got off to a rough start, fashioning itself as a museum for food, wine and the arts (with the least amount of attention, oddly, paid to wine) when it opened in 2001, catering to high-brows and professionals. Tourists and locals stayed away, and attendance never came close to projections. The 2001 terrorist attacks and dot-com bust also cut into Copia's potential draw.

Despite making the space more friendly and useful in recent years, with increased wine tasting opportunities and consumer education, cooking classes, WSET instruction, cinema nights and specials at Julia's Kitchen (named in honor of Julia Child), Copia couldn't get into the black, and McGuire, a former board member, took control in March 08 to turn things around.

His goals for the San Francisco Copia are lofty: wine bar, instructional kitchen, retail store, TV studio for taping syndicated programmes and multimedia content for Copia's web site, perhaps even a small winery. McGuire recently hired Food Network TV chef Tyler Florence as the dean of culinary studies and executive chef of Julia's Kitchen.

To protect Copia's non-profit status. McGuire said the San Francisco campus and other new ventures will be run as a separate company.

Since Copia's opening, Napans have taken a wary 'watch this space' approach to the under-utilised facility. Now eyes are also on San Francisco, to see where the re-invention of Copia convenes next.