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Café Riche closure end of era

Renowned Church Square eatery's lease terminated

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IT IS the end of an era for Pretoria landmark Café Riche.

The internationally renowned eatery on Church Square has been forced to close its doors after the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure terminated its lease agreement.

Café Riche, which has been in operation for 25 years, was the only South African establishment to feature among the British Telegraph's selection of the 50 top cafés in the world. The building in which it was housed is a national heritage site.

In a letter addressed to the owner, the department said the property was considered unfit for occupation. "There is a need to refurbish and restore the property to a habitable state," the letter stated.

It is not yet clear when the Department of Public Works will start with the refurbishments and for what purposes the premises will be used. The department promised to respond later this week regarding enquiries from the Pretoria News on its plans.

It is understood that other business around Café Riche also received notices to vacate for refurbishing purposes.

Dr Tahir Ally, who runs his surgery two doors from the café, said he was happy to move for now if the premises were unsafe. The notice by the department – the landlord – was, however, with his lawyer to enquire about the details, he said.

Ally said he wanted to know what the future held for him and whether he would be able to move back once it had been refurbished.

Meanwhile, he was still operating his surgery until such time as more details were available and he was told exactly when he should be out.

The owner of an adjacent fruit and



The historic Café Riche at Church Square has closed down after the provincial government terminated its lease agreement with the owner. Other businesses in the vicinity have also received notices. | JACQUES NAUDE African News Agency (ANA)

vegetable outlet also said the issue was with her lawyer.

Café Riche owner Lamé Ebersohn, on the other hand, said she would not be back. She said she had fought for the past 10 years for the building to be fixed. "I simply cannot fight any longer."

However, she said she hoped that once the buildings were revived, another Café Riche would see the dawn. Ebersohn, who now lives in Stellenbosch, said her time as owner has come and gone.

"It is with sadness, but at the same time filled with wonderful memo-

ries that we bid farewell to Pretoria's beloved bistro," Ebersohn said.

The department instructed her to vacate the café at the end of December last year, but the notice was only received this month. "It forced us to vacate the premises hastily earlier this month."

This historic building was established in 1905 and has kept the Church Square surroundings hospitable for visitors and guests over the past 25 years.

"The exciting street theatre, Wednesday parades, New Year parties, the celebration of Pretoria's annual birthday as a city and jubilant celebrations of

local sports teams on the old council's balcony were some of the activities that we organised and which will probably be remembered for a long time," Ebersohn said.

"Over the years, Café Riche has become home to many regulars, each with her and his own preferences. It was also a venue for many conversations. Our monthly Philosophy Café, annual celebration of the Beaujolais Nouveau wine and numerous book launches were some of the highlights.

"Passionate discussions took place over glasses of sparkling wine or cups of steaming coffee, next to the silent

figure of Oom Paul.

"This farewell represents an end of an era. However, the spirit of Café Riche will survive and continue to thrive. We won't forget," Ebersohn said.

Sarah Kekana, who had worked at Café Riche for 24 years and Constance Charlie, who had been employed there for 18 years, were devastated.

"We are heartbroken. What are we going to do now? How are we going to pay the bills?" they asked, while sitting outside the premises yesterday afternoon. They added that they were there because they simply did not know where else to go.