

Client: Hello Pasta

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Rendering of a new Hello Pasta restaurant at 649 Lexington Ave.

Pasta Power Play Hits City

By SUMATHI REDDY

Let the pasta wars begin.

Restaurateur Laurent Lesort, who has joined with his brother, Frederick, in the past, is now pairing up with two French friends to launch a new franchise called Hello Pasta.

The first of 10 planned restaurants will open in June on Lexington Avenue between 54th and 55th streets.

A month later the well-established French franchise Nooi, with more than 50 locations across France, will open its first U.S. location, just 13 blocks from Hello Pasta at 370 Lexington Ave.

"It's great to have competition," said Christopher Sanchez, chief operating officer of Nooi North America, which opened its first location in 2006 in France.

Both chains have a similar concept. Think Chipotle, only

made-to-order varieties of pasta with myriad sauces, ready to go in a carton in several minutes.

The high-end, fast-food pasta concept is one that exploded in France, which has three major chains and several smaller operations, some expanding elsewhere in Europe.

The Hello Pasta founders are receiving undisclosed financing from British-born chairman and chief executive officer of GFI Group Inc., Michael Gooch.

"Our goal is to be the Starbucks or Pinkberry of pasta," said Gregory Baratte, partner and chief marketing officer of the operation, in a statement provided by his publicist.

The third partner is Nicolas Barthelemy, who will be the chief operating officer.

Besides locations in Manhattan, the company is also scouting large shopping centers in New Jersey and Long Island, and

airports and train stations.

Mr. Lesort has worked with his brother, well-known restaurateur and nightclub impresario, Frederick Lesort, on several projects—most recently at the hot spots Frederick's Downtown and Frederick's Madison. Frederick's Downtown and Frederick's Madison ran into financial trouble and closed last year.

Hello Pasta's prices will range from \$6.95 and \$12, depending on the sauce and size. Nooi wouldn't disclose prices.

Nooi's Mr. Sanchez did say the restaurant will include different cuts of pasta and 12 to 15 types of sauces, ranging from Indian and Mexican sauces to more traditional ones.

Mr. Sanchez said he expects some of the other big chains in France to come to New York, and said there is room for everyone.

"How many hamburger places are there in the U.S.?" he asked.