THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2009 THE GREENVILLE NEWS

Downtown restaurants buck national trend

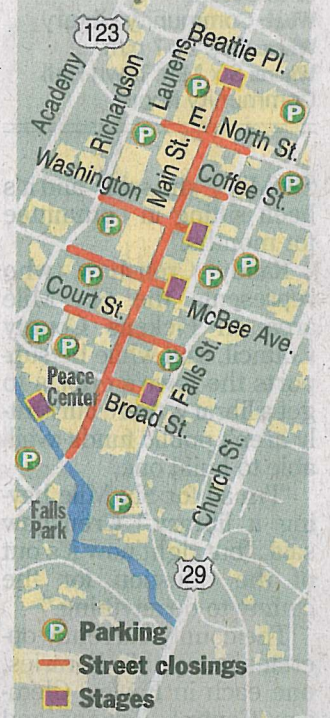


HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Lazy Goat chef Victoria Moore will be recognized in Esquire magazine as one of the nation's top up-and-coming chefs, another honor for the city's thriving restaurant scene.

On festival's eve, leaders say healthy food scene critical to growth

Downtown festival a boost for restaurateurs



- When: 5-11 p.m. Friday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday, noon-7 p.m. Sunday
- Where: Main Street, downtown Greenville
- Cost: Free admission, food tickets are eight for $5

By Ron Barnett and Amy Clarke
STAFF WRITERS

If a city's vitality can be measured by its food, downtown Greenville's heart is beating strong, as this weekend's Fall for Greenville festival seems sure to illustrate.

Even at a time when restaurants across the country are slipping because of the recession, new dining businesses are starting up downtown.

And the multitude of fine dining establishments continues to be a significant drawing card in the city's economic development efforts, as well as a strong attraction for locals and visitors, officials said.

"The restaurant scene is one of the hallmarks of downtown Greenville and our entire city," said Mayor Knox White, who has presided over much of Main Street's transformation from ghost town to boomtown.

In the downtown area's 90 restaurants, you can find everything from barbecue shrimp and grits to Persian kabobs to Caribbean jerk pork to Spanish goat cheese to lobster enchiladas. And plenty to drink with it.

The vibrant restaurant scene is one of the things that sticks in the minds of visiting business travelers, who return home and talk up the city as a good place to consider doing business, said John DeWorken, vice president of public policy and communications for the Greater

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FILE

St. Francis Fall for Greenville draws thousands of festival goers to the streets of downtown.

TOP CHEF

Esquire's honor to boost city's restaurants. Page 5A

Check out hundreds of images online throughout the weekend at: greenvilleonline.com



Clemson plans help for new auto companies

Building planned for ICAR campus

The 60,000-square-foot [illegible] tember when the U.S. Eco-

FOOD

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HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Petra Galicia, who works for Soby's, prepares corn for this weekend's Fall for Greenville.

Greenville Chamber of Commerce.

"They come, they see the leaves changing, they see the beautiful mountain range in the escarpment, they see a beautiful downtown with an incredible quality of life, and they say, my God, I had no idea this was here," he said.

Nationally, the restaurant industry has been contracting for the past year, according to the National Restaurant Association's comprehensive index of restaurant activity, released in August.

Over the same time, the business has been growing in downtown Greenville, where Main Street was named Wednesday one of the Top 10 Great Streets for 2009 by the American Planning Association.

New openings

So far this year, 10 new restaurants and drinking establishments have opened downtown, according to Mary Douglas Hirsch, downtown development manager for the city. Another four are planning to open soon, she said.

"People still see downtown as a great place to come dine," she said. "They see it as a destination."

Greenville occupies a unique place in the state for the restaurant business, said Tom Sponseller, president and chief executive officer of the South Carolina Hospitality Association.

While restaurants along the coast cater to tourists and those in Columbia are styled for lobbyists and customers who do business with the state, many of the visitors to Greenville's restaurants are business travelers, using expense accounts to pay for their food, he said.

"That lends to an opportunity for restaurants that you don't get in many cities its size," he said.

And Greenville, unlike Columbia, which has competing areas vying for the city government's attention, has focused on one area and turned it into a regional destination, he said.

The association doesn't keep statistics by city, but statewide, the recession has actually improved business in some of the fast-food restaurants, while casual dining restaurants have seen some decline and the high-end establishments have taken the biggest hit, he said.

It has been an up-and-down road for downtown's long-term survivors in one of the most fickle of businesses.

When Kay Efstration's grandfather opened Charlie's Steak House in 1921, downtown Greenville was a lively place.

"Anything that was anything was in downtown Greenville," she said.

It didn't stay that way. In the 1960s, business dried up as the big retail stores pulled up their stakes and headed to the suburbs.

"I can remember when we, with the Corner Pocket across the street, were the only thing open after six," Efstration said.

Main renaissance

Things didn't start picking back up until the 1980s when the Hyatt opened at the intersection of Main Street and Beattie Place.

A two-block section of Greenville started coming back to life, thanks primarily to new restaurants setting up shop.

"If you walked from the Hyatt down to Coffee Street, there was a little bit of retail ... but every storefront that wasn't boarded up, for the most part, was a restaurant," said Carl Sobocinski, who opened his first restaurant in 1993 on East North Street.

"They are definitely the first businesses to come into an area," he said.

Sobocinski was part of that trail-blazing movement in downtown Greenville, opening his first restaurant, 858, on East North Street in 1993 and then Soby's at the intersection of Main and East Court in 1997.

It was that second endeavor, he said, that was a real leap of faith because he was moving into a part of town that wasn't yet coming alive. The Poinsett Hotel was still boarded up, The South Financial Group's Poinsett Plaza tower didn't yet exist, and surrounding offices weren't completely occupied.

There were big dreams, though, and Sobocinski wanted in on the front end.

"I believed the city leaders and the people that had these visions, and I said, 'Hey, I want to be a part of that,'" he said. "We can also be a part of the growth and the transformation and the revitalization."

In the years since, downtown Greenville has come alive. Sobocinski's Table 301 group includes Soby's, Soby's on the Side, Devereaux's and The Lazy Goat and is now a dominant force in the downtown dining scene.

He said he's enjoyed watching the growth fill each block along Main Street, stretching beyond those original two blocks to encompass the area all the way to Fluor Field in the West End.

"I would confidently say that we, collectively, as restaurateurs have been one of the major factors in having all this happen," he said.

"We're not the single biggest reason for the transformation, but we're right up there at the top two or three," he said.

"We were the top two or three investors in downtown — people that put money into renovating buildings. We opened our doors before retail or residential. We're the places now that people go for quality of life, for community feeling."