

Local restaurant receives WDDC facade grant

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Guillame Slama and his wife Sokun believe in downtown Whiteville, and the Whiteville Downtown Development Commission believes in them.

The Slamas own the Southern Kitchen, which will soon give way to a larger fine dining restaurant, The Chef and The Frog.

The new restaurant is right across Madison Street from the landmark Southern Kitchen, which the Slamas reopened in 2009. The restaurant has been a fixture downtown since 1947.

For years, Guillame said, he watched the former appliance store across the street from his and his wife's eatery, planning for the future. He and Sokun owned the storefronts at 605 and 607 S. Madison for several years before deciding to expand into a new facility. They had their hands full with the Southern Kitchen and Sophie's Bistro, a popular lunch restaurant and ice creamery next door, but the couple wanted to do even more in the downtown area.

"We love downtown, and feel everyone should," Guillame Slama said. "Whiteville has a lovely downtown, and I cannot understand why more people do not come here. There is so much potential."

The old furniture and department store that will house the new restaurant is undergoing a complete renovation, Slama said. The WDDC provided a \$1,000 facade grant to help with new awnings and the hand-painted sign across the front of the building.

WDDC chair Jackie Steinberg said the commission hadn't used the grant funds for several years before Slama



The WDDC provided a \$1,000 façade grant to help with this new awning and the hand-painted sign.

applied.

"We want to do whatever we can to help a new business open up, especially when it is such a boost to downtown Whiteville," Steinberg said.

Applicants for the grant can receive up to \$500 per building for streetside enhancements. Each application is considered by the entire commission before being approved or turned down.

The Southern Kitchen's impact on downtown continues to be extremely positive, said WDDC Executive Director Gene Merritt.

"People do not expect to find a restaurant of this caliber in downtown Whiteville," Merritt said. "I have people in Wilmington ask me about the Southern Kitchen when they find out I work here. Now I'll be able to tell them we have something just as special with

The Chef and The Frog.

"Businesses that become destinations for visitors enhance the entire downtown area," Merritt said. "Everybody benefits when people come to downtown."

The Chef and The Frog takes its name from a fairy tale, Slama said, laughing.

Sokun Slama escaped the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and became a master chef in France. She and Guillame met through the restaurant industry in his hometown of Paris. After operating a restaurant in Georgia, they came to Whiteville.

"This has been a fairy tale for us from the beginning," he said. "We all know what happened when the princess kissed the frog. In this case, the chef - my Cambodian princess - kissed the frog, and we have a fairy tale com-

ing true. We are living the American dream—we work very hard, of course, but we're living a fairy tale."

The new restaurant will be much larger, but will still feature fine dining as well as family-friendly menu items, Guillame said.

"The new restaurant will be even more democratic, if you will," he said. "We've always had a number of items on the menu to fit any budget, but we want to provide something different for people who are used to having to go out of town for a nice evening out."

In addition to a main dining room, lounge and outdoor patio, Guillame said that The Chef and The Frog will feature two adjoining dining rooms that can be rented for parties, private dinners, reunions and other events. A dance floor will be permanent-

ly installed in the main event room, he said. The rooms will be available to rent separately or as a package, Guillame said. French doors between the two rooms will make the area even larger, he said.

"We will be able to host wedding showers, rehearsal dinners, even bachelor parties here," he said, "and then you could open the doors, and have a wedding."

Arched doors five feet wide will provide easy egress between the dining rooms, lounge and service areas, as well as giving the restaurant a more open feel.

The restaurant has been planned from the ground up, Guillame said - starting with the 1,200-square-foot kitchen designed by Master Chef Sokun.

"Everything will have a dedicated prep station, and there will be no chance of cross-contamination," Guillame explained. Operations in the kitchen will be directed from "The Cage," as he jokingly called the main cooking area.

The main dining room will have dividers with each table, he said, "to give you more of a feeling of intimacy, privacy."

"Part of the reason people

come back to The Southern Kitchen is because they see their friends and neighbors," Guillame said. "We encourage that—we have become distant as a society, but here you can visit, and enjoy a nice meal. Early on, we had people who didn't get to their tables for 20 minutes because they were visiting with people they had not seen in a while. It makes for a wonderful atmosphere, and something lacking in many places today."

"When we open across the street, I expect to see even more of that," he said. "Right now, we are restricted some because of our size. We won't have that problem in The Chef and The Frog."

Guillame said he hopes visitors to the new restaurant will do more than just come to downtown Whiteville for a nice evening out, much closer to home.

"We need quality businesses downtown," he said. "We have fine businesses here, but we need more. We do not try to compete with Walmart — we all have to find the niche that we can fill."

"I tell everyone who will listen, when you shop downtown, you help your community, you help protect your property values," he said. "Small businesses depend on customers, and small business owners are our friends and neighbors. If a businesses closes down, then a family might lose their home. If the home is lost, property values go down in the entire neighborhood. That affects the entire community. If we support each other, we can have a stronger downtown as well as a stronger community overall. Everyone benefits."

An opening date has not been set for The Chef and The Frog, but Guillame said tentative plans call for the restaurant to open by summer. The Southern Kitchen served its last meal in the former location Saturday, but companion café, Sophie's Bistro, is still open "and busy."

"This community really is good to us," Guillame said. "We love Whiteville, and want to see it grow."