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Southern Kitchen tempts the taste buds

By DEUCE NIVEN

Terry and Laurie Marrs took the road less traveled on Friday, venturing into downtown Whiteville as they headed for a visit in Wilmington, far from their northern Michigan home.

Taking in the city, from the

Chamber of Commerce, across the street, and tell them about the seating," Guillaume said. "I don't care what else you tell them, just tell them that."

Some in Whiteville haven't taken to the idea of outdoor dining, at least not downtown,

Fisher gets credit for bringing a new flavor to the restaurant, and to the area.

Guillaume and Sokun Slama have traveled a long way from their home in France, where Guillaume is a native. Sokun Slama was born in Cambodia, but came with

Living Magazine and a Three-Diamond Award by AAA.

Lunch, served from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. each Tuesday through Friday, is lighter fare, including an Angus Beef "Classic Hamburger" topped with some mustard and Swiss cheese that was a delight to smell, and prompted a southern phrase from me as I complimented Guillaume.

"My tongue dern near slapped my brain," I said.

Dinner entrees appear even more delightful, from filet mignon to chicken Florentine, grilled Ahi Tuna to salmon and grits.

Appetizers include a delicious Ahi Tuna with a wasabi and soy sauce glaze that tingles, but doesn't burn the tongue. Then there's a surprising favorite.

"The Escargot is really quite popular," Guillaume said.

There is a wine list with names that might not be familiar, flavors from Chile and elsewhere. Guillaume takes an obvious delight in talking about wine, and says he enjoys making suggestions to compliment each customer's experience.

There's also a martini bar, located adjacent to the Southern Kitchen dining room.

"When we went to move it, it literally began to fall apart."

Guillaume carefully numbered the metal and ceramic parts, disassembled the entire fountain, rebuilt the wooden frame, and put it all back together inside Sophie's.

"We're just waiting on the electrician right now, and we'll have it going soon," Guillaume said.

Soda water already pours from one of the fountains, and Guillaume has Coca Cola syrup ready for the first old-fashioned Cokes to be served from the fountain in more than three decades.

Sophie's also played host an "Open Mic" night on a recent Friday, and plans others, probably monthly, just for teens.

"It was amazing," Guillaume said of the first



Sokun Slama

tors and others come to visit.

Dining at the Southern Kitchen isn't about just satisfying your hunger, it's about the experience, Guillaume said.

"We want you to enjoy the experience, to come back, to want you to come back," Guillaume said.

He won over the Marrs.

"You have a great restau-



Laurie Marrs looks over a Southern Restaurant menu with Guillaume

courthouse to Vineland Station, they spotted a couple of metal tables outside the Southern Kitchen, a Madison Street staple since 1947.

"We drove all through town and the outdoor dining was why we stopped," Laurie said during a more than enthusiastic meeting with the restaurant's owners, Guillaume and Sokun Slama.

That's great news for the owners, who have been working since the fall of 2009 to bring a different flavor to the city and Columbus County.

"Please, I want you to go to



A vintage TV in Sophie's

to Greek and Mexican fare.

Guillaume said. Chamber leaders have been helpful, and can always use ammunition if the city is to attract those the Columbus County Tourism Bureau takes pains to attract.

New southern feast

Businessman Jesse Fisher owns the building that has housed the Southern Kitchen for 64 years. It's seen a wide variety of cuisine in that time, everything from down-home country cooking

her family to France when she was a child, fleeing the oppressive Khmer Rouge regime.

A stay at The Fitzpatrick Hotel near Atlanta found Fisher dining at The Down Under. Guillaume ran the hotel, Sokun Slama the first-floor restaurant. Fisher was enchanted, and invited the couple to visit Whiteville and offer some advice for downtown revitalization.

In Whiteville, Fisher made the couple "an offer we couldn't refuse," Guillaume said with a smile. The couple made the move to Whiteville, and are happy to call Columbus County home.

For Sokun Slama, cooking isn't about how many she can feed, but how well. She's earned a feature in Southern

Sophie's

Just a few doors down is Sophie's, the latest business for this enterprising couple. Sandwiches, ice cream, and other fare with a lighter flavor is available there from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day but Sunday.

Much of the cooking takes place in the Southern Kitchen's kitchen, where locally grown ingredients are featured as often as possible. That includes cheeses made in Bladen County, and ice cream made on-site with milk from a local dairy.

Guillaume beams showing off his latest find and restoration effort, the original soda fountain from McNeill's Pharmacy from about 1940.

"It was in a warehouse for 30 years," Guillaume said.



Terry Marrs and Guillaume look over Sophie's newly refurbished soda fountain with Guillaume

Open Mic. "Some sang, some danced, one just talked."

They will come

Guillaume said he supports Whiteville and the county, and has received good support from a variety of businesses, including Columbus Regional Healthcare as doc-

rant," Laurie Marrs told Guillaume. "We would not go off the beaten track, but we will come back to your restaurant."

(Deuce Niven photos)