

Fish 'N' Loaves Brings Soul Food Back To Downtown Orlando

By Heather McPherson, ORLANDO SENTINEL
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When Fish 'N' Loaves opens today in the space formerly occupied by the iconic Johnson's Diner, the restaurant will bring a new era of soul-food dining to downtown Orlando. Overwhelmed by a burden of debt and mismanagement, Johnson's Diner closed its doors in October.

"We respect the legacy of Earlean Taylor and Johnson's Diner. We are building on that with a new foundation of global soul food and community involvement," said Sharon Johnson Savage, who co-owns the new restaurant with her husband, Earl. Johnson's Diner was founded by Earlean Taylor's mother, Lillian Johnson, in 1983.



Owners Sharon and Earl Savage, left, and chef TC Williams share a laugh outside of their new restaurant after testing out the new open sign on February 24, 2011. The couple are opening their second restaurant Fish 'N' Loaves at 595 W. Church St. Orlando. (JACOB LANGSTON, ORLANDO SENTINEL / February 24, 2011)

With the opening of Amway Center, Church Street has a renewed energy and Fish 'N' Loaves hopes to capitalize on that fresh vitality.

It won't be easy.

"There are no guarantees," said economist Sean Snaith, director of University of Central Florida's Institute for Economic Competitiveness. "The restaurant business is still a bit risky in the current challenging economy. This restaurant's location will certainly give it a boost. It's not like it's out in the middle of nowhere."

Johnson Savage said Fish 'N' Loaves will have servers who speak Spanish and Haitian Creole. Menu items will include traditional soul-food fare such as fried chicken, oxtails and fish, along with Louisiana gumbo and Harlem-style chicken and waffles. She's also aiming for a few healthful menu items.

"Soul food is much broader in scope than most people realize," said Johnson Savage. "And Orlando is much more diverse in 2011. Soul food is about the heart. It's simply home-style cooking from wherever you call home. It doesn't have racial lines."

Thomas Chatmon Jr., executive director of Orlando's Downtown Development Board and Community Redevelopment Agency, calls embracing the neighborhood's diversity with bilingual servers a "master stroke."

"Orlando is a tossed-salad of the world's cultures. If you ignore that dimension of our city, you will miss a lot of clientele," he said.

The Savages, who live in Windermere, are former Lockheed Martin employees and co-founders of Walk by Faith Ministries in Ocoee. They opened the first Fish 'N' Loaves on West Colonial Drive in November 2008. That location will remain open.

The couple were on a mission trip when they heard about Johnson's closing and thought they would be too late to put in an offer on the building just west of the Amway Center when they returned from Kenya in November.

They weren't the only people interested.

"There were over 10 restaurant groups that toured the space, but it came down to two groups that were the best fit, and Fish 'N' Loaves was the final choice," said Kane Morris-Webster of Colliers International, the property's leasing agent.

Chatmon said the Savages "have a solid business reputation and were ready, willing and able to take advantage of the location quickly."

Anticipating crowds during their opening week — the Orlando Magic play the New York Knicks tonight, and the Chicago Bulls are here Friday — the Savages have contingency plans in place.

"The distance between our restaurants is 2.6 miles," said Earl Savage. "One can help the other if need be." And, he said, the Church Street restaurant can convert to buffet service in minutes.

As for slow nights, the Savages are not betting their entire business survival on this one eatery.

"We have subcontracted to feed hundreds of construction workers at the Orlando International Airport through our catering arm," said Earl Savage. "And there are more business opportunities in negotiation."

Just days before the opening, the Savages were admiring the new logos on the doors and entryway. Paint and a new decor have freshened up the spot familiar to many downtown residents and workers.

"We aren't just opening a new restaurant," said Johnson Savage, an Orlando native. "We are opening a new chapter as community partners. Our name is at the core of this mission. In the Bible, Jesus used two fish and five loaves of bread to feed the multitudes. And there were leftovers. We are already talking to the Urban League and other partners about how to get our leftovers to the children who are hungry and the elderly who are forgotten.

"It's more than food. It's leading by example. It's being part of the future of downtown Orlando."

The Magic's new home has not been an overwhelming boon for all.

"Hopefully the new place [restaurant] will bring more traffic," said Maria Radojkovic, owner of Paittini Pizzeria, which is on the same block as Fish 'N' Loaves. "It's hard to get people to this side of town. We have some parking issues. I wish the free bus that circles downtown could add three blocks of Church Street. But a new neighbor is good. Any growth helps everyone."

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Fast facts:

What: Second location of Fish 'N' Loaves

Where: 595 W. Church St., Suite E, Orlando (downtown in Cityview, one block west of Amway Center)

When: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon-6 p.m. Sunday

Call: 407-841-8130

Online: fishnloaves.com

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