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Restaurant launches continue despite economic troubles

BY LAUREN B. COOPER | STAFF

Kevin Witherington and his lender are so confident in his barbecue concept that he closed his seafood restaurant in Lakeview and will reopen as Moe's Original Bar B Que – across the street from a Golden Rule Bar-B-Q and Grill.

But Witherington, former owner of the Lakeview Oyster House and a partner in Moe's, said he's not worried. There's enough room for two barbecue restaurants in the burgeoning Southside neighborhood, he said.

Witherington isn't the only local restaurant owner taking a risk in troubled economic times. At least eight new restaurants are opening over the coming months in the Birmingham area – amidst an ailing economy and historic lows in consumer confidence.

Another Broken Egg Cafe has leased space in Mountain Brook Village and plans to open this summer, said Ron Green, founder and franchise president.

Green said Miller Phillips has purchased the local franchise and plans to open two more locations over the next 36 months, with the Hoover area targeted for the next opening.

Green started the breakfast and lunch eatery 13 years ago in Louisiana and now has 12 locations, including popular locations in Destin, Fla.

A Huntsville location opened last year and a Dallas location opened last week, serving about 600 customers for breakfast and lunch on its first Saturday, he said.

Investment in the franchise ranges from

\$250,000 to \$1.2 million, depending on the real estate for the location, which averages about 3,800 square feet in size, he said.

Average check price at the Mountain Brook cafe will range from \$12 to \$13 per person, he said, and alcohol will be served at the New Orleans-style restaurant.

All the Another Broken Egg restaurants are doing well right now, with each reporting growth last year, despite the troubled national economy, said Green.

"My philosophy is that (in times like these) people go to comfort food and want to get the biggest bang for their buck," he said.

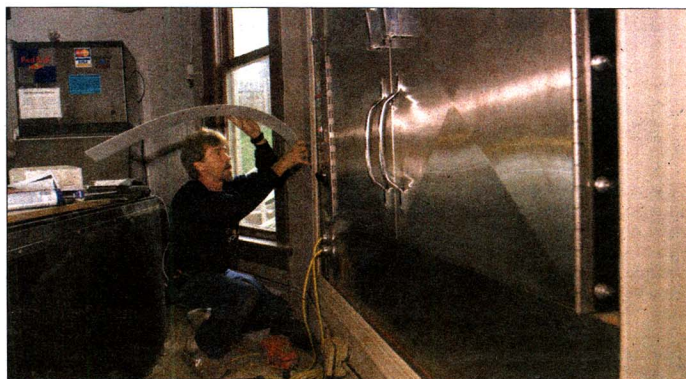
Moe's Witherington agreed.

"Our business with the barbecue was growing anyway," he said. "I truly believe that people are going to eat out. There's the ease of it for people with families and our price point hits that. People perceive value with us."

Witherington said a family of four can eat at Moe's for \$40.

And while the new Hoover location is growing its customer base each week, he said, a draw to the Lakeview location will be putting barbecue together with live blues music.

Obtaining the financing to open the additional locations wasn't a stretch for Witherington. He said after he and his partners paid for their first Birmingham location in Vestavia Hills out of their own pockets, they quickly developed a relationship with a local bank, which got on board with their barbecue and business plan.



Dale Archer installs a wall surface around the smoker at Moe's Original Bar B Que in the former Lakeview Oyster House on Southside. Owners plan to open next week.

Allison Adams, who, along with husband Chad Adams, opened Crestline Seafood Co. in Crestline last week, said business has been good and the market and restaurant have sold out of fresh seafood every day since its opening.

With a small eat-in menu, Adams said most of her customers are picking up food to take home, partly, she believes, because it's health-conscious food.

And Adams said she plans to draw in more customers with special events and items, such as ice cream, fresh sushi, recipe ideas and crawfish and shrimp boils with live music.

Signs and announcements of other restaurants opening up soon or updating in

the area include:

- Kozy Flavor Smoothies and Ice Cream in Five Points South;
- Avo/Dram in Mountain Brook Village;
- The renovation of OT's in Lakeview;
- Dunkin' Donuts plans to open its first Birmingham location in the next 12 months and 142 statewide over the next several years; and
- Four new Bojangles chicken and biscuit restaurants opening in the Birmingham area by the end of the year, with plans to open 25 in Central Alabama over the next several years.

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