

House of Jambalaya finds a home on Southbeach

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Michael and Jennifer Schmidt anticipated a transition from a vending food business to a brick and mortar dine-in restaurant over the last decade.

They had just moved into their ideal location in the former Northcoast Ocean Sport and Grill when “the world shut down” on March 19.

“When this came available, we started crafting our dine-in menu,” Jennifer Schmidt said. “What is Schmidt’s House of Jambalaya going to be as a dine in rather than a food vending? We got that nailed down, and then, the world shut down, two days after we made this transition.”

Luckily, they did not plan to be open during the initial days of the shutdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because their new restaurant hadn’t actually opened yet, the shutdown affected them in a very different way.

“We weren’t shutting down. We were going in the other way, just smaller steps,” Michael Schmidt said.

The couple had offered Cajun cuisine throughout their 15-year marriage, starting with music festivals and street fairs in the Pennsylvania. They leaped at an opportunity to move to Crescent City in 2010 for Michael’s job, as Jennifer was originally from the West Coast.

After taking a break for a couple of years, they started cooking and selling food again on a small scale, beginning with the Rockin’ At Rowdy Del Norte Child Care Council fundraiser, followed by Live from Downtown: It’s Friday Night.

They focused their menu on jambalaya and grilled shrimp skewers.

“I’ve always enjoyed cooking that type of food,” Michael Schmidt said, adding he learned his recipes from a friend back east who trained under renowned New Orleans chef Paul Prudhomme. “He’d sit and explain

using peppers... It was a pretty cool, hand-me-down situation. It stuck. Not a lot of people were doing it, and we were doing it well.”

Jennifer Schmidt said they took a big leap to craft a new, dine-in menu then had to had to make another big switch, and ask themselves, “What’s life going to look like as take-out?”

“We pared down to what we knew we could deliver 100 percent every day,” she said. “After all, our roots were in take-out.”

“The beautiful thing is we’ve been able to grow incrementally as the world opens out,” she added. “(We started) out with much limited menu and limited staff. The next step will be in-house dining, but with only four or five tables. As the next year unfolds, it’ll be nice being able to grow into it. So, it’s a blessing really.”

Jennifer Schmidt said some welcome relief came during the shutdown when the Crescent City Harbor District forgave rent on properties it owns for a couple of months.

“We felt so supported by the Harbor District, the community, and the other restaurants have been great,” she said.

The Schmidts are looking forward to adding to their menu, including a wine list curated to be paired with their food and gumbo and pasta recipes.

“Some things just didn’t translate well to take-out, like Michael’s Cajun cream sauce and grilled crawdads, or grilled polenta,” Jennifer Schmidt said.

“It’s tough to garnish up paper bowls,” her husband added.

They’re also planning to introduce brunch, with an area to drink coffee and enjoy beignets and crepes. They figure the location of Schmidt’s House of Jambalaya on Crescent City’s South Beach area is perfect for dining, indoors or out.

“It’s an amazing spot to have a restaurant. Is there a better spot to have a restaurant? I can’t imagine it,” Michael Schmidt said.

“We love Del Norte County. We love Crescent City. Any location would be a great location. But this location is just exquisite and amazing, truly unbelievable at times. Cooking in kitchen and you can look out at the waves and the osprey,” Jennifer Schmidt added.