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Chef Sokun Slama
presents big city
flavor at The
New Southern
Kitchen

the
FOOD
issue



Eat to live, **Live to eat**

By Alison Lee Satake

Food has long been a means of survival for Whiteville chef **SOKUN SLAMA**. As a child in Cambodia during the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, her father's culinary skill saved her family's lives. And, now her restaurant, The New Southern Kitchen, is not only surviving, but thriving by offering sophisticated global fare in a casual atmosphere in Columbus County's downtown Whiteville.

Although the moderately upscale restaurant has plenty of enticing items, such as steak frites, on its regular menu, the chef's weekly specials are where Slama's culinary savoir-faire takes off sending her patrons' palates around the world.

She has prepared a tajine, an aromatic lamb stew seasoned with cinnamon, dates, ginger and saffron braised in a Moroccan clay pot and served with cous cous.

She treasures her rare ingredients- like saffron and kaffir limes- as she would her most valuable possessions.

"I keep it in a safe because one box has disappeared already," she said laughing. "I do love spice, but I don't put in too much."

Slama first learned how to cook from her father, who was a schoolteacher in Cambodia. But as an intellectual, he

From Paris to Whiteville,
chef Sokun Slama's
comfort food has flare.
photos by Logan Wallace



ABOVE: The Slama's show off their newly refurbished, old-time soda fountain at Sophie's Cafè.



MIDDLE: Chef Slama prepares a Moroccan tajine with lamb and carrots.

FAR RIGHT: The finished tajine.

BELOW: Chocolate tart with yellow raspberries.



was a target of the Khmer Rouge, who massacred the educated as part of its social engineering experiments.

To survive, her father had to downplay his level of education and assumed the role of a cook. He prepared meals for the upper echelons of the Khmer Rouge, who enjoyed his cooking so much that they brought him with them as they traveled from camp to camp throughout the country. One night when they set camp near the Thai border, he fled with his young children and wife into amnesty in Thailand. Slama was six years old and has few clear memories of that time. But, she remembers walking in the dark through the forest to escape the Khmer Rouge.

Shortly after, her family received refugee status in France, where she grew up and where her family lives today. There, she learned to cook from her father, who also loved to host and prepare food for their friends. She remembers every weekend going to various family friends' houses for dinner parties and picking up recipes and cooking techniques while hanging out in the kitchens of the tight-knit French-Cambodian community.

"[My cooking] is self-taught. I learned a lot from my dad and from different people because when we go to a party, I end up always in the kitchen because I love to see how people prepare their food and I always ask them questions," she said.

Years later at a restaurant along Paris' Champs Elysees,

she met the man who would become her husband and restaurant business partner. Guillaume Slama, a Frenchman of Dutch and Tunisian descent, handles the business side of the couple's now three eating establishments in downtown Whiteville – the Madison Lounge, a martini and tapas bar, Sophie's, a French salon de te and The New Southern Kitchen.

The couple previously owned and operated a bed and breakfast and restaurant in a historic manor in Washington, Ga. Until one day, a customer who had enjoyed what he considered the best catfish he had ever eaten, asked to meet the chef. Expecting a big burly man, Whiteville businessman Jesse Fisher was pleasantly surprised when the petite, fashionable Slama came out to meet him.

"It was the best fried catfish I'd ever eaten," said Fisher, who has been working to revitalize downtown Whiteville.

Fisher made the couple a business offer they couldn't resist, Guillaume Slama said. He offered them space for a restaurant in a building he owns, a \$10,000 loan to buy kitchen equipment and introductions to Whiteville's

community leaders, Slama said.

The couple came up with a casual fine dining concept, Fisher admits he was initially skeptical. Southern Kitchen has been a Whiteville eating establishment with various owners since 1947.

"I didn't know there was a demand," Fisher said about the



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moderately upscale menu. “[But] they have brought a new style and level of expertise in food to the community and it has been accepted well.”

Business men and women hold work lunches there, because nothing quite like it exists in Whiteville.

The restaurant also has drawn a following from outside of Whiteville. Members of the international gastronomic society, the Chaine de Rotisseurs' Myrtle Beach chapter made a trip up for a specially prepared tasting at The New Southern Kitchen. The Slama's also host specialty cuisine nights, such as an upcoming Japanese sushi night, that requires reservations in advance.

The New Southern Kitchen is located at 606 S. Madison St. in downtown Whiteville. It is open for lunch Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and dinner from Thursday through Saturday from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Check the Facebook page - New Southern Kitchen - for daily and weekly specials. *W*



Off the menu: Chef Sokun's favorite spring vegetables like the locally grown yellow zucchini flower will be featured on her spring menu. A velvety chocolate mousse cake will also make an appearance this spring, she said. Later in the season, she plans to add heirloom tomatoes topped with fresh mozzarella and drizzled with a balsamic cream sauce, sea salt and cracked black pepper. She also plans to offer a seasonal fruit salad.

ABOVE: Heirloom tomato salad