Where Comfort Food Is the Plat du Jour

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By Pableaux Johnson

New Orleans -- TWO months after Hurricane Katrina ripped through this city, Aaron Wolfson and Peter Menge rolled out a three-prong marketing plan for their new business: a 3,500-person e-mail list, an oversize propane burner and a hand-lettered butcher-paper sign reading "FAT CRABS."

Although not conceived as a restaurant, their business, the Savvy Gourmet, quickly became known after the storm as a place where locals gathered to participate in the city's favorite pastime -- talking about food.

The partners in the operation, Dr. Wolfson and Mr. Menge, both 35, tended customers while a fisherman tended a large boiling pot. Clouds of spicy, fragrant steam drifted on Magazine Street and through the repopulated Uptown neighborhood, luring customers to buy the crabs.

"We sent out e-mails to our list saying that we'd be boiling crabs, but people would smell it and just pull over," Mr. Menge said. "People didn't know what to make of it. It was a snippet of normalcy, at least for here."

In a city known for its culinary traditions, food has played an integral role in New Orleans's recovery. And as the small businesses return to operation, the keys to success seem to be agility, flexibility and the ability to bring people to the table. In the city's current business climate, a cooking school has been transformed into a lunch destination, and a wine shop has become an al fresco nightclub, as the need to congregate over food and drink remains strong.

The Savvy Gourmet was the brainchild of Dr. Wolfson, a local psychologist. After three years of operating the Savvy Gourmet as a cooking school with no fixed location, Dr. Wolfson and Mr. Menge found a building to renovate in 2004. The space, a former carpet-cleaning warehouse, would contain the expanded business's three components: a sales floor for cookware, commercial kitchen for catering and an open classroom area with a demonstration kitchen.

The partners were days from the opening when New Orleans's levees collapsed. Weeks later, they were surprised to discover that the building suffered little structural damage, and after a thorough cleanup could be open for business.

But the pair realized that the Savvy Gourmet as originally planned wasn't practical after the storm, and responded instead to the immediate needs of the returning community. "Who needs expensive pots when the city's under water?" Dr. Wolfson said. "But why don't we serve lunch?"
With the help of a chef, Corbin Evans, Mr. Menge and Dr. Wolfson converted the classroom to a 60-seat dining room with borrowed chairs and tables.

"We'd ask the local farmers and producers, 'What do you have?' " Dr. Wolfson said. "And that became the day's menu."

Making a quick transition from sidewalk seafood boils to midday dining, the Savvy Gourmet's improvised restaurant became a bustling Uptown destination and a post-storm institution. The two kitchens pumped out weekday lunches for construction crews, office workers and laptop-bound diners checking e-mail messages or the status of insurance claims. Soon the Savvy Gourmet added a brunch service and reinstituted cooking classes. With a staff of 14, it has blossomed into a culinary community center and home to New Orleans's "slow food" chapter, while meeting its original economic projections set before the hurricane.

CLOSER to downtown, Jennifer Powell was caulking ceiling joints as Katrina churned in the Gulf of Mexico. She was putting the finishing touches on her new business, Sip Wine Shop, as evacuation orders were issued for the city.

Ms. Powell, 34, and her business partner, Mary Youngblood, 62, had been renovating the small Magazine Street storefront in the Garden District since March. Weeks from the shop's opening and still awaiting final licensing, the pair left their business in limbo as they evacuated.

Spared by geography and located in an exceptionally active commercial zone, Sip seemed workable even during the recovery. The store is aimed at a nontraditional audience: younger drinkers age 25 to 30 who are often put off by the pretensions surrounding wine. Sip stocks 250 kinds, averaging $15 a bottle, and arranges them by dominant flavor (smoky, floral, earthy, herbal) instead of by variety or vineyard. Accessible and informal, the business seemed suited to the recovering city. The biggest obstacles proved to be bureaucratic.

Widespread layoffs in the municipal work force had left the licensing offices in disarray. "All the people we'd been dealing with, the people who knew our history and our case the best, they were gone," Ms. Youngblood said. "It was a month of hair-pulling and determination."

Almost immediately after opening in late October, Sip drew a dedicated following. Daytime customers could buy a bottle with dinner or uncork their purchase at a sidewalk table. Before long, Sip's storefront became an oasis of cafe life, fueled by survivor stories and returnees' need for contact.

The daily gatherings start slowly, as afternoon workers switch from coffee to wine ahead of the happy-hour crowd.
"We didn't expect it to be such a social space, but we're very proud of that," Ms. Powell said.

IN the French Quarter, chaos presented an opportunity for yet another culinary business.

When Philipe LaMancusa returned to his home there after taking refuge in San Francisco, he found that rents had skyrocketed on less damaged buildings, and that some landlords were demanding full rent on properties with collapsed ceilings and no basic utilities.

A lifelong waiter, line cook and pastry chef, Mr. LaMancusa, 62, saw the chance to reopen an earlier sideline, Kitchen Witch Cookbooks.

The small used-bookstore had grown out of Mr. LaMancusa's love of cookery and collection of 5,000 cookbooks. In an earlier incarnation, in a Rampart Street storefront, Mr. LaMancusa had run the shop during the day and worked restaurant jobs at night. In 2003, the Kitchen Witch went into hiatus.

After the storm, however, conditions were right to reopen.

"It was all word of mouth," he said. "I listened to the whisper of the street. And sure enough, I found the perfect place."

It is located within blocks of two of the most recognizable tourist spots, the St. Louis Cathedral and Bourbon Street. The previous tenant, selling used records and CD's, had vacated the premises, leaving wooden crates that became bookshelves. The rent was reasonable, the lease terms fair.

Mr. LaMancusa and his partner, Debbie Lindsey, 52, have revived the Kitchen Witch, holding down night shifts at restaurants.

"We had eight hours to make a decision on a 10-year commitment," Mr. LaMancusa said. "It was like being given a stake in rebuilding the city. It's like a pearl without price."

"Eighty percent of the city was flooded, which means 80 percent of the cookbooks have to be replaced, because the kitchen's always on the first floor."

In New Orleans, people take their food personally. "People are trying to replace their food memories," Mr. LaMancusa said. "They come in and thumb through books to see if that one important recipe is there."

For now, sales are brisk enough to meet the break-even point.

"We're not quitting our night jobs just yet," Mr. LaMancusa said, laughing. "But the store's taking care of itself."