EXPANDING

Denver gluten-free restaurant opens Boulder location

By Lily O'Neill
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Boulder was the first place Jennifer Peters considered opening a gluten-free restaurant before moving from London to Colorado. The owner of Just BE Kitchen strolled down Pearl Street on a scouting trip in 2017 and thought she had found the perfect space. But by the time she flew back overseas, the landlord had already leased it out. So, Peters looked to Denver instead.

Seven years and two restaurants later — one in Denver's Lower Highland and one in the DTC —she has finally returned to Boulder, opening a third location in December, at 2500 30th St., in the former Fresh Thymes Eatery, also a gluten-free restaurant that closed last year.

"Boulder is just so much harder to find a space than Denver, but it's always been a community I felt like our brand serves," Peters said. "Everything happens in its own divine timing, but it was very serendipitous, especially that we went into a space that was already a gluten-free restaurant."

Just BE Kitchen specializes in healthful food that adheres to a variety of dietary restrictions, from gluten and soy allergies to Whole30 and paleo diets. In 2020, Guy Fieri featured the restaurant on "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" for an episode spotlighting downhome cooking.

PROVIDED BY JUST BE KITCHEN

Just BE Kitchen's menu is free of gluten, refined sugars, soy, corn, peanuts and seed oils. It's also 99-percent grain, dairy and legume-free.

But for the Boulder location, Just BE Kitchen chef Jude Romero created a new menu with French Toast Sliders made with almond flour and toasted coconut, and a bacon breakfast quesadilla with a gluten-free tortilla. There are also familiar favorites, like the Food Network-featured chicken and dumplings.

At the DTC location, 5370 Greenwood Plaza Blvd., which Peters opened in 2022 adjoining gluten-free brewery Holidaily Brewing, she also operates a small retail shop called "Mindful Market" inside the restaurant. It offers grab-and-go housemade pickles, ketchup, salad dressings and salsa, all of which follow Just BE Kitchen's allergen-free list.

She hopes to add something similar in Boulder.

"Boulder is a natural food mecca-slash-capital of the U.S.," Peters said. "There are so many dynamic brands here and such a focus on better-for-you food. As a restaurant, I feel we're just an extension of that natural food focus that's here. We're one of the spokes on the wellness wheel."

Peters' goal is to make Just BE Kitchen "the Chipotle of gluten-free dining," and she said she hopes to open 10 more locations across the country, including in Texas and Arizona, in the next five years. She said the company is currently raising capital from private investors to fund the expansion plans.

REGIONAL EATS

Where Southerners go to fill the tank and feed the family

By Kim Severson
The New York Times

INDIANOLA, MISS. » New York City has its bodegas. The South has its gas stations. When you stop for motor oil in Mississippi, you can also grab fried chicken on a stick. In North Carolina, you can buy a steamy bowl of pozole along with batteries and a 5-pound bag of White Lily flour.

There might be shawarma next to the shotgun shells, or wedges of mild hoop cheese and packets of saltines for sale at the counter along with lottery tickets and pecan pie that the owner's sister made.

Documenting these independent Southern temples of commerce and community has become a singular focus for photojournalist Kate Medley, who, like most kids raised in Mississippi, grew up eating at rural gas stations.

Now living in Durham, N.C., Medley, 42, has spent more than a decade collecting images for her book of photographs, "Thank You Please Come Again," which the digital magazine The Bitter Southerner published in December. The book began with a journalist's curiosity, but ended up as a way for a daughter of the Deep South to make sense of the beautiful, brutal, complicated place she came from.

"These places hold great mystery," she said. "You're rolling down the road and they catch your visual attention. Then you wonder what's behind that glass door when you hear that little bell ring. Is it the MAGA South? The welcoming South? Who's at the cash register? Who's at the grill?"

A dozen years ago, Medley discovered a Citgo in Durham that had become a Nicaraguan place called the Latin America Food Restaurant. She developed a theory.

"I thought I could chart the emerging immigrant foodways of the South by way of what was happening in the backs of these gas stations," she said.

Some independent gas stations are fading in the fluorescent light of chains like QuikTrip and RaceTrac, with their cheap gasoline, hot-dog rollers and endless banks of soda machines. Some station owners let the gas pumps run dry or remove them altogether because the local economy is too depressed. Other gas stations have become churches or nightclubs, or have been abandoned altogether.

The book opens with an essay by Southern writer Kiese Laymon, who grew up in a very different part of Jackson, Miss., than Medley. She didn't know him when she reached out, but he understood her project immediately.

"I'd never thought about the fact that my favorite restaurants, as a child, as a teenager, as an adult returning to Mississippi, nearly all served gas," he writes. "And I never, ever, thought of them as gas stations that served food."

He tells the story of childhood trips to Jr. Food Mart in Forest, Miss., on Friday nights. His grandmother's boyfriend, Ofa D, would slip in a Tina Turner tape and drive them in his pickup. They'd order a box of dark-meat chicken, a foam container of fried fish and a brown paper sack filled with the fried potato wedges everyone in Mississippi knows as potato logs.

It dawned on Medley that you could study a region by way of its food in 2005, when she landed at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, where she began a master's program in Southern studies.

Hurricane Katrina hit the day after she started. She spent the next several months traveling the state to cover the devastation for The New York Times, her journeys fueled by rural gas stations.

They often run on a Southern "get 'er done" attitude. If customers want cakes, someone will start baking. A cashier in North Carolina figured out that she could make a little extra money buying some Bojangles sausage biscuits on her way to work, marking them up and selling them to the breakfast crowd.

"It's just this ingenuity and resourcefulness you don't find other places," Medley said.

That's particularly true for some gas stations run by immigrants. Medley shot images of Nina Patel and her samosas at Tasty Tikka, inside a Shell station in Irmo, South Carolina, and Gina Nguyen holding a garlic butter shrimp banh mi at Banh Mi Boys, which opened in a family-owned Texaco in Metairie, La.

Two weeks ago, Medley took me to a place in the middle of Mississippi Delta farmland that also sprang from an immigrant story.

Mark Fratesi's father opened Fratesi Grocery and Service Center in 1941 in Leland. It's a wonderland of homemade pork rinds, pantry staples and bait, with a freezer full of frozen steaks and bags of unshelled pecans. It runs on the honor system. You tell the cashier what you had for lunch. If you're local, you can put your groceries or gas on a tab.

The restaurant takes up about half the building, and the family's Italian immigration roots are all over the menu. There are grits and burgers, but also a rigatoni plate lunch and a po' boy (their own invention) made with deep-fried balls of chopped black olives, shredded mozzarella and seasoned breadcrumbs bound together with a little mayonnaise and ranch dressing. Canvas-wrapped logs of seasoned, salted pork loin called lonza cure in the beer cooler.

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