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[destination downtown]

Bistro, Cuban Cafe Opening in Downtown Lakeland

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THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | Downtown Lakeland diners have two more options coming their way.

On Monday, Fresco's Bakery & Bistro opened at 132 S. Kentucky Ave., and Pipo's of Lakeland, a Cuban restaurant, is slated to open at 115 S. Kentucky Ave. in June.

Fresco's, owned by Tina Calhoon, will be open from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday. Menu items will range from \$5.95 to \$8.99.

"The menu is more bistro style with fresh chicken sandwiches, pan-seared tilapia, chicken quesadillas," Calhoon said.

Calhoon will also sell baked goods including gourmet and wedding cakes. She also offers catering.

Across the street from Fresco's will be Pipo's of Lakeland.

Pipo's, which has several locations in Tampa, will be open for lunch Monday through Saturday and dinner on Fridays and Saturdays. The menu will include Cuban sandwiches, roast pork and daily specials. Prices range from \$5 to \$9 and ready-made dinners for four will be sold for about \$25.

While their menus and concepts may be different, what the restaurant owners have in common is optimism that they'll be successful even in an economy that hasn't been kind to restaurants. In 2008 alone, for example, the area saw the closing of Sonic Drive-In, Sam Seltzer's Steakhouse, Bennigan's, Steak & Ale, Roadhouse Grill and Picadilly Cafeteria.

"The (Pipo's) restaurants are doing very well. The economy has not stopped people from buying a good product at a good price," said Wayne Harrison, owner of Pipo's of Lakeland.

"If I had any (concerns about the economy), I would have taken my money somewhere else."

Calhoon said she thinks the concept behind her restaurant will help her weather the economic slump.

"There isn't a bakery in downtown Lakeland. It's a market that's very open," she said.

Restaurant consultant Larry Ross said he thinks Pipo's has a lot of positives in its favor, but he sees a rougher road for Fresco's.

Calhoon "is going to have a tough challenge to distinguish herself from others (restaurants that sell sandwiches)," Ross said.

Ross, also a professor at Florida Southern College, said he thinks a bakery for special occasion cakes would be more successful in a shopping center closer to where people live, rather than work, because customers won't necessarily have the time to pick out a cake on their lunch breaks.

"What supports downtown Lakeland businesses is an 8,000-strong downtown work force that's a captive audience. But they all go home at night," he said.

"You can't just be a 'me too.' You can't just serve food. You have to be unique," he said.

Pipo's, Ross said, has a strong niche that will help make it a destination eatery.

"When you look at what's here, we have a lot of Cuban sandwich places but there's not much in the way of Cuban cafes. Some would say there is no demand, but I would say we just haven't had a strong operator," he said.

Downtown Lakeland does already have a Cuban restaurant - Silver Ring Cafe on North Tennessee Avenue - but Ross said he doesn't see a problem.

"The Silver Ring that we have in Lakeland is a very stripped-down version with the sandwich, chicken and yellow rice, and



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Tina Calhoon, proprietor, at Fresco's bakery & bistro under construction in downtown Lakeland, Florida, on May 15, 2009.

soup. It's essentially a three-item menu," he said.

Black & Brew owner Chris McArthur agreed a unique niche is key.

"I think if the concepts are strong enough to draw new customers, they'll be good for all of us and downtown could become a destination for dining," he said.

But if the new restaurants don't draw in new customers, the downtown market may become oversaturated.

"And someone's going to pay for it," McArthur said.

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