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Pair go from apprentice to experts

Residents offer new tastes at Savor the Flavor in Smyrna

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The closure of Opryland Hotel's culinary apprenticeship program in Nashville could have derailed the future careers of two local women wanting to work in the food service industry.

But La Vergne residents Eleni Vavouris and Joelle Upton have persevered, forming Savor the Flavor Catering four years ago and recently moving into a commercial kitchen at 1334-B Hazelwood Drive in Smyrna.

Upton knew as a young girl she wanted to be in the industry, while Vavouris was finishing up a master's degree in counseling when friends encouraged her to look at a new career.

"My grandparents lived down the road, so I was there every day after school and every summer cooking with them," said Upton, who comes from a large family in Sweetwater, near Knoxville. "I just loved to eat. I wanted to be in food but didn't know exactly how. I got my food service degree from Campbell University in North Carolina. I decided to come to Nashville because Opryland does so many conventions. You'll never see volume like that anywhere else."

When the apprenticeship program ended in 2001, the two headed to Sullivan University in Louisville, where they took advantage of classical culinary training.

"At Opryland we really worked and there wasn't much room for error. It was hard work and I loved it, but in culinary school we got to play around with things and learn," Upton said.

As they continue to build their clientele, the duo has tried to encourage others to try new things. Vavouris, a Memphis native, has a background in Greek and Mediterranean cooking.

"We're both professionally trained, so we can do any kind of cuisine. Nashville, in my opinion, is a little bit behind the times on the food scene. We try to get people to try new things, thus the name Savor the Flavor, but some people like what they like," Vavouris said.

"Some clients don't mind that we try new things. Vanderbilt Law School has a lot of vegetarians, so they pretty much put the menu in our hands," she continued. "They appreciate the different things that we do."

Vavouris described the food they cook as "upscale, classic with a twist."

"Just because we say upscale doesn't mean it's expensive. We can work with any budget. Just about everything we do is from scratch. You can tell the difference when you see it," she said.

Additional Facts

What to know



Chefs Joelle Upton, left, and Eleni Vavouris

What: Savor the Flavor Catering

Who: Executive Chef Eleni Vavouris and Chef Joelle Upton

How long in business: Since 2004

Training: Opryland Hotel culinary apprenticeship, Campbell University and Sullivan University

Specialties: Greek and Mediterranean, Southern

Signature dish: "We do a Chicken Corn Cake. It's like a crab cake, except it's made with chicken and creamed corn and topped with a cilantro cream sauce," Upton said.

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