

What Our Readers are **BUILDING, BUYING & REMODELING**

A Flexible Approach

Chef Eddie's Magnolia Café, Apalachicola Florida

In two decades of doing business on Florida's Gulf Coast, including riding out hurricanes and economic roller coasters, Eddie Cass has learned one thing about surviving in the restaurant business: flexibility.

The change in vacation and business patterns that came to Franklin County, a quiet community in the crook of the elbow of Florida's panhandle, after the twin blasts of hurricanes Dennis and Katrina in 2005, was one of the reasons Eddie moved his well-established Magnolia Grill from St. George Island to the mainland community of Apalachicola. Along with the move, he changed the name to Magnolia Café.

"This is one of those old working seafood towns with lots of personality and lots of foot traffic on the downtown streets," Cass says. "It's just a great location I couldn't pass up."

Much of downtown and the building that is now home to Eddie's Magnolia Café dates to the 1870s. Its most recent occupant had been an unsuccessful Mexican restaurant. In addition to simple cosmetic changes in décor, which took about five weeks, Cass had to completely remodel the 700-square-foot kitchen. The needs of the Mexican kitchen and his French-style seafood cuisine were not compatible.

Some of the equipment he moved from the former location on St. George Island, a 22-mile-long barrier island accessed across a four-mile-long causeway bridge. However, because he uses that location as a commissary kitchen for his catering operation and baking for the location in town, he needed to buy additional equipment.

"I never buy new and I never buy used from a used equipment dealer," he says. "I've been in this business long enough that I have plenty of contacts and save myself a lot of money going directly to the source." So Cass bought additional refrigeration units, a fryer, six-burner stove and other odds and ends, spending about \$40,000 for the entire remodel.

Two additions to the front of the house are both conversation pieces and marketing tools. An 8-foot walnut bar, a family heirloom on his wife's side, is a focal point of the dining room. Using the skills of a local craftsman, Cass designed an additional component to the bar that allows for storage and display of the restaurant's extensive wine collection. Although a couple of bar stools are available, Cass has learned over the years that few people really like sitting at a bar looking at a wall. So he places tables adjacent to the bar in a few key spots and regales guests with stories about his wife's family and the craftsman who built the pieces.

The major change in the front of the house was more structural and didn't work out exactly as planned. A master baker, Cass had intended to enlarge a window and create a demonstration area for cake decorating and his chocolate creations. The Magnolia Café is legendary for creative ice cream desserts. He anticipated it becoming an attraction for the foot traffic that passed along the downtown streets.

The old building wouldn't support as large a window as Cass considered necessary, but he had become fascinated with the idea of marketing to the passers-by on the street. Instead, in one of those instances requiring flexibility, Cass

STARTUPSTATS

Chef Eddie's Magnolia Café

www.chefeddiesmagnoliacafe.com

Number of seats: 65.

Smoking allowed: No.

Number of staff: 12.

Square feet of kitchen: 700.

Square feet of restaurant: 2,000.

Signature items: shrimp and scallop bisque for \$8.95, ice cream cakes/pies.

Total project cost: \$40,000.

installed a window that allows for ice cream sales by the cup or cone.

“It’s worked out real well,” he says. “We give out lots of samples and talk about other menu items. Usually, in the next day or two, we’ll see those people inside for dinner.”

Cass used such marketing tactics when his restaurant was on St. George Island. He struck a deal with a local condominium rental company that allowed him to offer samples from a mobile truck in their parking lot. He would then give out gift certificates of varying sizes based on the size of the party checking in at the condos.

Other vacation communities in Florida have been hard-hit by the economy in the last two years or so, and Cass had already made his move to the mainland prior to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Although the beaches of St. George Island and Apalachicola Bay, considered one of the country’s most pristine oyster-producing regions, have remained untouched by the flow of oil, he has recognized a shift in his customer base to include fewer vacationers and more blue-collar workers in the region working on the cleanup efforts.

“So far, I’ve not had any problems getting fresh seafood, so no changes in my menu at this time, but I’m prepared to be flexible with that,” Cass said. He has also lowered his prices just a fraction and only on Sundays to appeal more to the shift in customer base in the recent weeks and months.

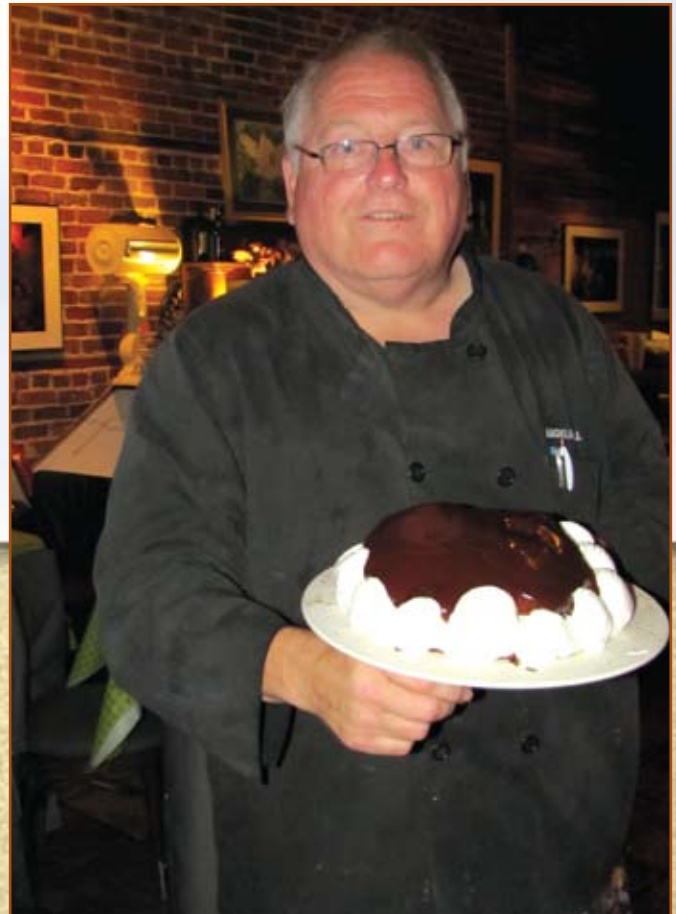
“I’m keeping an eye on it every day and prepared to make changes,” he said. “That’s what success in a place like this is all about — flexibility.”

RS&G

Top: Chilorio’s décor includes the rich colors of the owner Diego Cortes’ homeland, such as terra cotta, orange and cactus green.

Bottom: Becoming an expert at the local real estate market helped Cortes secure good deals in prime locations.

Photos by Diana Lambdin Meyer



Source of your financing: Personal.

Are you leasing or do you own the property?

Lease to purchase.

Catering/banquet service offered? Yes.

Average check: \$35 per person.

What do you consider your best decision?

Moving to downtown Apalachicola.