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How Swehat it is: Deli dish named to list of Featured top 100 in Georgia

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30 Jul 2015 | Written by Brandon Davis | Published in News |

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It's been said that love conquers all. And, after 10 years in the restaurant business, Kari Hodge will tell you there is truth in that. "Sometimes I don't know how I'm still here," she said with a laugh while sitting at a table inside Swehat Market Deli at 5 E. Main St. in downtown Cartersville. Hodge and her father, Tim Thompson, are co-owners of the restaurant.

While any number of local residents might attest to its unique atmosphere and distinctly flavored menu items, Swehat Market recently received widespread recognition when the Georgia Department of Economic Development named the restaurant's black bean burger to its list of "100 Plates Locals Love." Now, according to a



SKIP BUTLER/The Daily Tribune News The Swheat Market black bean burger is served with chipotle sour cream and mango salsa on a whole wheat bun.

letter from GDEcD, Swheat Market's name will appear in the Georgia Eats official culinary guide; on the state's consumer tourism website, ExploreGeorgia.org; and on each of ExploreGeorgia.org's 14 social media channels.

That kind of recognition doesn't come overnight. Swheat Market has consistently impressed both locals and visitors over the past decade with its hot sandwiches, cold salads, steaming soups and distinct hometown feel. But, as Hodge explained, it was never actually intended to offer any of those. In fact, it was envisioned as more of a grocery store, and the idea came about during a trip to the big city. "My husband and I were sitting in Atlanta, in a little place called Eatzi's. It's no longer in business, but it was one our favorite places to go. ... I had been working for a doctor's office for quite some time in the billing end of things, and it's a monotonous job. And I was ready to do something different. And I said, 'Hey, I'd like to own or open a business.' And I said, 'I really love Eatzi's.' And it was kind of a mix between an organic grocery store and a[n] eatery," she said.

In 2005, Swheat Market opened its doors as a "natural food store." But the concept didn't quite fit the market, Hodge said. Fresh food wasn't trendy enough yet, and competition with local grocers made for a

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difficult business. When the recession came along roughly 2 1/2 years later, Swheat Market had to adapt to stay alive. Utilizing a small prepping area, employees began making chicken salad, tuna salad and pasta salad, selling the items by the pound. Before long, the “by-the-pound’ items were flying out the door quicker than the fresh groceries. And Hodge knew she was onto something good.

Over the course of the next several years, Swheat Market was fully converted into a restaurant. Thompson joined his daughter in 2009, and since then, the pair have managed to establish one of the most well-known culinary hot spots in town.

The one thing Hodge said has kept them going? Authenticity. That means using fresh ingredients to make dishes that are originally theirs. “Quality has always been at the tip-top of my list,” she said. “So, whereas some outlets have a lot of prepared items, we are hands-on. So we are cooking meat from a fresh state in an oven; we are making some of our cheeses; we are utilizing dressings we make from recipes that are mine or other staff members’. So I really feel like the fresh end of my business. ... It keeps people coming.”

Indeed, the customers keep coming. Step into the dining area on any given day around lunchtime, and you’re likely to see the expansive wooden floor covered with occupied tables. But it was still a surprise when Hodge opened a letter from GDEcD to find these words:

“Congratulations! The Black Bean Burger at your restaurant has been designated as one of Georgia’s 100 Plates that Locals Love!”

“I read it like five times because, in the state of Georgia, to be listed [as] one of a hundred established restaurants, and being a restaurateur, for me, that’s probably one of the best accolades I could have gotten,” she said. “It still brings chill bumps on my arms. Ten years [in business] — the restaurant business is a beast. I mean, you seriously have to give everything you have to it. Otherwise, you can’t stand above water. And to have a little bit of recognition with so many [people] who have stood the test of time with me, I can’t tell you how proud I was.”

The black bean burger, one of Swheat Market’s vegetarian options,

features a variety of spices, egg whites, yellow squash, zucchini, onions, poblano, cilantro and panko, piled onto a whole-wheat bun. The beans used in the dish are soaked overnight and dried before use.

According to GDEcD Communications Specialist Emily Murray, each dish selected for the list was carefully picked via a lengthy process requiring input from multiple people and platforms.

“The tourism team selected the dishes utilizing a combination of personal references, and those could come from engagement on Explore Georgia’s social media platforms [or] word-of-mouth,” she explained.

Murray said some of the selections were suggestions by food and travel writer Kate Parham Kordsmeier, whose work has been featured in publications such as USA Today and The Washington Post. Others dishes were recommended by tourism project managers in each one Georgia’ nine different travel regions. Once this input was collected, GDEcD further examined each potential selection by searching for customer feedback. The organization utilized platforms such as Yelp, an application that allows consumers to provide reviews of local businesses.

GDEcD Deputy Commissioner Kevin Langston said in a statement that each restaurant on the list represents the state’s most exceptional locally renowned cuisine.

“It’s Georgia’s outstanding local restaurants that truly showcase the state’s rich flavors that locals and visitors love,” Langston noted. “Each dish on our list of ‘100 Plates that Locals Love’ epitomize Georgia’s culinary scene with locally made and grown ingredients. These are the best of the best in Georgia, and we can’t wait to share them with our visitors.”

As for Swheat Market, Hodge made it clear the Cartersville favorite won’t be lowering its standards any time soon.

“I’m grateful, and I’m in awe every day that we have as many people walk in the door as we do,” she said. “And it inspires me to make sure that we still offer our best. And my employees walk in the door every

morning, and I say, ‘Good morning! I’m glad you’re here. Let’s give ‘em the best today.’ It’s a standard statement from me.”

To view the list of “100 Plates Locals Love” in its entirety, visit <http://www.exploregeorgia.org/article/100-plates-locals-love>.

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