

TASTE

'Classic' seafood's freshest players

By **CYNTHIA LESCALLEET**
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If the residents of Sunset Terrace are looking especially well-fed, it might be due to the part their taste buds played in launching Danton's Gulf Coast Seafood Kitchen.

While seeking a site for the restaurant, veteran chef Danton Nix informally tested his recipes in the neighborhood home of Kyle Teas, his lifelong friend and new restaurant partner.

If the Teas family and their friends are suffering withdrawal from easy access to Nix's seafood dishes, they need not go too far to find them.

Danton's dining room and shucker-staffed oyster bar opened on Oct. 18 in Chelsea Market.

Nix said his evolving menu "celebrates classic, old school Gulf Coast seafood. It's simple. It's straightforward."

He thinks fish found in the Gulf of Mexico

have unique flavors that "stand on their own," with or without the toppings offered.

Nix is no newcomer to serving seafood with attitude. He opened and managed such Houston institutions as Goode Company Seafood, Willie G's and Landry's in Galveston. He also created the menus at the original Joe's Crab Shack and Joyce's Oyster Resort.

"I was talking to him for years about doing this," said Teas, who is in commercial real estate. "He has always been working for others. I asked him, 'Why not work for yourself?'"

Timing and opportunity finally merged earlier this year, Teas said.

Reflecting on reaching a dream decades old, Nix said, "It feels great. It's exciting. It's tiring."

Houston is a seafood-eating town, he observed.

Existing restaurants that cater to that hankering are crowded, he said. Danton's location in the Museum District brings a new player to the

area's lineup of eclectic, chef-driven restaurants.

Inside the restaurant, the decor is an understated but inviting backdrop to the energy diners provide. The walls are as interesting to read as the menu since they hold antique maps and sketches of coastal areas, mounted trophies and treasured vintage photographs of the proprietors and their extended, interwoven families.

Friends since their boyhood in West University Place, Nix and Teas weathered together West U's elementary school, Pershing Middle School, St. Vincent de Paul, Strake Jesuit and University of Texas at Austin.

Teas said they're brothers in all but name and they well understand the boundaries of their business specialties.

"We both know what the other does and have no interest in doing it ourselves," he said.

"He's the chef. I am not going to go into the kitchen except to get something to eat."



Submitted photo

Wilson and Colgan's eatery offers healthful food fast alternatives.

Fresh food, fast service

By **CYNTHIA LESCALLEET**
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Healthy eating could be a healthy business niche for John Wilson and J.C. Colgan, entrepreneurial friends from West University Place. They recently opened a Zoe's Kitchen, 3701 S. Shepherd Drive, and hope to add more locations in town with time.

With its fresh food made from scratch and quick service, Colgan said, Zoe's taps into two trends in the food industry: nutritious food and no time to prepare a home-made meal.

"I'm a healthy eater myself," he said.

Armed with business degrees and restaurant business experience, Colgan, 25, and Wilson, 28, jumped at the opportunity to bring Alabama-based Zoe's Kitchen to Houston.

"People like to eat out," Colgan observed. "They're busier and busier every day."

Located in what used to be a video store, Zoe's has a casual, homey feel and seating for 92 diners. An outdoor dining area wraps around the north side of the building.

Inside, the walls currently display artwork by West University Elementary School pupils. Their creations are the first collection of what will be a rotating exhibition. Zoe's provides the canvasses and

art supplies, the children their creativity. Eventually, the art will be sold (probably to the artists' parents) and the proceeds given to the school.

"We'd like to be involved in the community," Colgan said.

At the moment, however, they're involved 24/7 in starting up their venture.

"Everyone here is doing everything," he said.

Sometimes that means stepping into the kitchen to help prepare made-from-scratch items inspired by Mediterranean cuisine.

Colgan is a fan of the chicken salad sandwich on the lunch menu. For dinner, it's the chicken kabobs.

Zoe's entire menu is available for catering and take-out.

While not targeting a particular diner market, the venture seems to attract a cross-section of people from nearby neighborhoods, Rice University and the cars that back up on Shepherd Drive just north of U.S. 59.

With ongoing redevelopment in the area and more planned, Zoe's location was a carefully chosen one to benefit from future growth, Colgan said.

"We'd like to get four or five open in Greater Houston," he said.

Founded in 1995 in Birmingham by Zoë and Marcus Cassimus, the company is now owned by son John Cassimus.

Keeping an eye on Houston's appetite

By **CYNTHIA LESCALLEET**
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Franchise developer Mike Lassiter is back in Houston to launch a pair of dining concepts that tap continuing demand for healthy food delivered quickly.

"People are starting to realize that even though food is fresh it could be hiding calories," said Lassiter, who previously grew the Schlotzsky's Deli chain here.

As chief executive officer of Atlanta-based Franchising Concepts, Lassiter now represents the Rising Roll Gourmet brand and is a partner in the start-up venture Justix.

Rising Roll targets the breakfast and lunch crowd and offers 50 options of sandwiches, salads and daily soup specials. Preservative-free and made from scratch fresh daily, "you can taste the difference," in the food, he said.

The company's pilot Houston location is in the Texas Medical Center, which is a year old and "doing extremely well," he said. Its warm environment comes in part from the

signature color palette of pumpkin and gold with tile flooring.

Justix, meanwhile, has an edgier motif, with steel and "color explosions" of lime green and purple. The eatery offers fresh-grilled skewers of protein and veggies with extensive side dish and sauce accompaniments. Plus, there's a wine and beer component.

For the generation raised on nuggets and sushi, the finger-food format will seem familiar, he said.

Both concepts fall under the so-called "fast and casual" category of restaurants. The format typically includes a service counter where patrons order their meals and servers deliver it to the tables.

Regardless of menu, these restaurants make the most of the "get-in, get-out" mentality of diners pressed for time, said Rene Zamore, executive director of the Greater Houston Restaurant Association. GHRA members represent the full spectrum of dining categories.

Fast-and-casual dining has been around awhile, she said.

The quick-dining format took a bite out of both the fast food and the



Submitted photo

Franchise developer Mike Lassiter is at it again in Houston, with two new concepts in healthy dining.

casual dining market, Lassiter said, because patrons don't have to wait for a table or service and there's no wait staff to tip.

Just as price and quantity of food were dining issues raised by the eating public, healthy options are now driving demand, he said.

Zamore agreed. "With people dining out as much as they do, they're putting more demands on the operators to provide more

healthy options," she said.

Similarly, "environmental consciousness has penetrated the food industry," she said. Diners are thinking green. They want more greens on their plates, for example, and having them grown closer to home.

She's not surprised that another player is hoping to capitalize on the trend.

Most restaurants, regardless of dining category, are making changes to keep up with evolving customer preferences, Zamore said. And since people eat out often and frequent the same restaurants several times a month, they might feel a little "ownership" of what's on the menu and how it's prepared, she said.

Lassiter grew up in Alief and resides in Atlanta but still has family here. Having already grown one dining empire here, he said he knows the nuances of the city's demographics. While he has targeted 16 "ideal" corridors compatible with his two-pronged business plan, he declined to list them.



Southampton.....\$835,000
Tastefully updated, 5 bedrooms, 3.5 baths, large rooms, library, formals, family room, large deck and pool.



Memorial.....\$1,595,000
Spectacular Tuscan home, 4 bedrooms, 5.5 baths, gated compound, three story entry, luxurious master with fireplace and balcony.



Hyde Park\$519,900
New construction, 3 bedrooms, 3.5 baths, turret style staircase, dome ceiling, stainless appliances.

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- Hyde Park.....\$1,250,000**
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- Memorial.....\$1,100,000**
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Hyde Park.....\$729,000
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