

ENTERTAINMENT

Tropical Grille is bringing Cuban cuisine to Greenville

Amanda Shaw Contributor;

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When Shadid Montoto was eight months pregnant with her third child, she craved food from back home in Miami. Cuban food, rich with creole, garlic, cumin, the spices of the tropics.

That yearning led her and her husband, Lazaro, to realize Greenville was not overrun with Cuban restaurants. They decided to open their own.

Their first, Tropical Chicken Grill, opened on Pelham Road in March 2010. The next year came a new name, Tropical Grille, and a second location, this one on Highway 14 in Greer. Tropical Grille #2 is run by Jimmy and Susie Zabala, Lazaro's mother and stepfather.

Now comes the third restaurant. Tropical Grille #3 will open in Greenville within the next three weeks on Woodruff Road.

The Miami natives moved to Greenville seven years ago. They had visited an aunt in Greenville and attended Brookwood Church. The experience caused them to feel that God wanted them to leave Miami to raise their three children in Greenville, Lazaro Montoto said.

Shadid Montoto left her job managing a chiropractic office. Lazaro left his job managing a steakhouse. After training with a five-star chef in Miami, Lazaro Montoto had set aside his aspiration to be in law enforcement for the kitchen. Cuban food came naturally since his grandparents are from Cuba.

"We saved a little bit of money and took a shot," he said. "It worked out beyond anything we ever imagined."

The most popular item at the restaurant is the Cuban chop, a chopped chicken breast served with black beans and rice. The chicken is all-natural and hormone-free, he said. The average meal costs less than \$10.

They offer many gluten-free and vegetarian meals. Since nearly everything on their menu is made from scratch, they can accommodate customers with food allergies.

With the exception of a few dessert items and sodas they get from Miami, Tropical Grille uses almost exclusively local products — from ingredients to T-shirts.

“We buy local because that’s who supports us,” Montoto said.

He said the key to their success has been their values.

“We try to be a little different. We really care about our customers,” he said.

Montoto knows most of his regulars by name. He offers a VIP card so after buying five chops, the sixth is free. He brings in employees and makes them feel like family, “so they can return that feeling to their customers.”

He has opened and closed two restaurants since the original Tropical Grille opened, one in Columbia, which proved too difficult to manage long-distance and a fine dining restaurant he opened with a partner, Lazaro’s Bar and Grill. He said the location was not suitable for the restaurant.

But the Tropical Grille concept has caught on. It is one of the highest-rated restaurants in Greenville on Urbanspoon. There is a line out the door during lunch seven days a week. At the Pelham Road location, they serve 400 pounds of chicken a day.

“It’s such a blessing,” Montoto said. “And we’re excited to continue adding to Greenville.”